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Is it just a matter of personality? On the role of subjective well-being in childbearing behavior



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ABSTRACT

This paper analyses the role played by individual subjective well-being (SWB) in childbearing behavior. We use the German Socio Economic Panel (GSOEP) survey, which contains repeated information about SWB, childbearing events and, importantly, also measures of respondents' personality, to estimate the way SWB matters for having a(nother) child, controlling for personality traits (PTs). We find that SWB positively predicts childbearing for women and men, with the effect significant (and sizeable) for both genders only for the second child. Furthermore, we assure that – although PTs are a strong component of SWB variability – the effect of SWB on fertility is not determined by PTs.

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1. Introduction

A burgeoning recent literature is focusing on the way SWB associates with childbearing (e.g., Aassve et al., 2012; Billari and Kohler, 2009; Kohler et al., 2005; Margolis and Myrskylä, 2011; Myrskylä and Margolis, 2014). At the same time, on one hand, several studies have suggested that personality matters for childbearing behavior (e.g., Dijkstra and Barelds, 2009; Jokela et al., 2009, 2011), on the other hand, a key finding from psychology is that subjective well-being (SWB henceforth) is strongly mediated by the respondents' personality (e.g., Costa and McCrae, 1980). So far, however, there has not been any systematic joint analysis of the relationship of these dimensions. Aiming at bridging the gap between these research strands, this paper tackles the issue of the effect of SWB on fertility controlling for the role of personality traits (PTs hereafter).

There are many important reasons for considering the relationship among SWB, personality and fertility behavior. From the demographic side, the key interest lies in the fact that most developed countries are now facing fertility levels well below the replacement rate, but with stark differences across countries. The recent trends have sparked a very lively debate, not only in terms of policy perspectives, but also for the theoretical understanding of fertility behavior: existing theories of

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fertility dynamics no longer adequately respond to why people still have children in contemporary advanced societies, and also why, in some societies, fertility is even rebounding, as appears to be the case in Nordic and Anglo-Saxon countries as well as in France (Goldstein et al., 2009).

Nevertheless, the interest in how fertility behavior links with SWB stems from the fact that childbearing in modern societies is very much viewed as part of a series of choices aimed at the self-realization of the individual. As Van de Kaa (1987) pointed out already more than three decades ago, one side of new demographic behavior is that individuals put stronger importance to their own realization and their psychological well-being. Consequently strong emphasis has been given to the way SWB plays a role in how individuals make decisions about childbearing. The cornerstone in this literature, although not always expressed explicitly, is that individuals' decision-making process derives from the quest for happiness, of which offspring presumably make up an important component. A corollary of this argument is that fertility is higher in those societies where couples derive a higher level of SWB from childbearing (Aassve et al., 2015). An important weakness of this literature, however, is the implicit assumption that SWB is a function of childbearing. The analysis is consequently based on regressions where the dependent variable is the standard overall measure of SWB, typically measured by self-reported happiness or satisfaction. But this approach appears to have come about more as an empirical bandwagon rather than being derived from strong theoretical arguments. Quite on the contrary, there are compelling arguments for taking the opposite approach: childbearing is a decision that couples make in which their mental well-being might very well play an important role. Intuitively, it would make sense if optimistic and satisfied people feel they are better prepared to start the monumental task of forming a family, in which case the level of satisfaction should be positively related to the likelihood of childbearing.

However, as the recent literature exploiting panel data has pointed out, any relationship and causal effect between childbearing and SWB would critically depend on the moment in which SWB is compared. One frequently observed pattern is that SWB increases prior to childbearing, whereas following the childbearing event there is a great deal of adaptation, and then, in many instances, any increase in SWB is neutralized after some time. In other words, there is ample evidence suggesting that there is an anticipation effect, in the sense that SWB may increase as a result of the anticipation of the childbearing event (Balbo and Arpino, 2014; Clark et al., 2008; Myrskylä and Margolis, 2014). For instance, if one measures SWB at the moment of childbearing and one or two years after, it is most likely a negative trend. In any case, the fact that one often observes an anticipation effect rises the interesting issue to what extent increased SWB associates with a higher likelihood of childbearing. Here, we tackle this issue head on, by considering the impact of SWB on the likelihood of experiencing childbearing in the consequent time period. The past literature, indicating the presence of an anticipation effect, also suggests that SWB is potentially endogenous with respect to childbearing event. The vast majority of studies considers however, the impact of childbearing on SWB, and does not consider directly how any change in SWB may lead to a higher likelihood of childbearing.

In the present paper, performed with the German Socio-Economic Panel Survey (GSOEP), the dependent variable is derived from observed childbearing events. More precisely, we run separate models by child parity, since low overall fertility is driven both by high rates of voluntary childlessness and low progression from the first to the second birth (Frejka, 2008). Our main explanatory variable is the SWB before the pregnancy. We also embed PTs into our analysis by using the standard "Big-five" construct (Costa and McCrae, 1980), being consequently able to assess to what extent SWB matters for childbearing, but explicitly elaborating on the role played by personality. Differently from Myrskylä and Margolis (2014) and Clark et al. (2008), we are interested on the effect of the SWB on the decision of having a child, and not on the consequences of this event on the parental SWB.

Other than being a longitudinal survey of very high quality, the German case serves as a particularly interesting example when considering fertility behavior. Despite being the economic locomotive of Europe, the country also suffers from a long lasting very low fertility, and, with the current Total Fertility Rate (TFR) of less than 1.4 children per woman (Eurostat data for 2012), it is joining the club of lowest-low fertility countries, such as those of the Southern and Eastern Europe (Billari and Kohler, 2004).

2. Literature review

2.1. Subjective well-being and fertility

From a purely theoretical perspective, the effect of SWB on reproductive behavior does not provide unambiguous predictions: higher SWB may predict either higher or lower fertility (Parr, 2010). Since depression and stress, two important negative aspects of lower SWB, have been found to contribute to reduced fecundity, and also trigger miscarriages and still births, they should also reduce subsequent fertility (Zemishlany and Weizman, 2008). On the contrary, fertility may come about because having a partner contributes to a person's satisfaction with life, which would naturally affect fertility positively if the relationship is a good one (Zimmermann and Easterlin, 2006). However, higher satisfaction may on the contrary lower fertility because of aversion to lifestyle changes. This is typically used as a justification for voluntary childlessness (Mencarini and Tanturri, 2007; Tanturri and Mencarini, 2008).

The empirical literature dealing explicitly with the interplay between SWB and fertility is rather limited, although there is now a strong sense that the relationship between SWB and demographic behavior (and in particular childbearing) deserves attention (Billari, 2009; Hobcraft, 2006). Only very recently have demographers begun to appreciate the potential importance of SWB in childbearing behavior (Aassve et al., 2012; Billari, 2009; Baranowska and Matysiak, 2011; Billari and Kohler, 2009;

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