



## Family fortunes: Gender-based differences in the impact of employment and home characteristics on satisfaction levels

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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received 31 August 2010

Received in revised form

19 December 2010

Accepted 31 January 2011

#### JEL classification:

I30

J1

R2

#### Keywords:

Family satisfaction

Well-being

Gender

### ABSTRACT

The preponderance of subjective well-being analysis investigates the peripheral impact of objective measures such as income. By shifting the focus towards family satisfaction, this paper offers an alternative perspective. Through the incorporation of both employment and home characteristics, it provides an opportunity to integrate the analysis of work–life balance with the expansive wider literature of job satisfaction. Our estimates generate two key findings. First, as is frequently found in the employment literature, we confirm the existence of significant gender differences in family satisfaction. Second, the belief that home ownership is necessarily a significant source of well-being is rejected.

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### 1. Introduction

The economic study of happiness has now achieved the proportions of a juggernaut. The area is characterized by a proliferating, and arguably congested, literature that is constantly swollen by an annual glut of papers. However, the deluge is frequently staid in methodology. The most significant proportion of these studies prioritize and revisit the same territory. Through the examination of the low correlation between objective life circumstances and subjective wellbeing, they stake the same claim.<sup>1</sup> This paper seeks to shift the emphasis away from the standard stance, and to interrogate the topic from a slightly different perspective. By adjusting the focus to examine family satisfaction, as opposed to either job or life satisfaction, and decomposing the implications of the gender differences within it, a newer territory is claimed, one that contests existing boundaries and beliefs.

The existent work that has explored the impact of gender upon the perceptions of happiness, does not offer any real consensus. This alone indicates the need for more innovative and supplementary investigation. The situation is currently governed by impossible divergences which can be exemplified by the fact that Wood et al. (1989) are able to conclude greater happiness and life satisfaction for US females than men, whilst Myers (1993), Doyle and Forehand (1984) can disregard the impact of gender effects completely. Such extreme findings, and lack of general consensus, can only expose the uncertainty of the field, and necessitate the onset of a more profound interrogation of the available resources.

There is evidence to suggest that these ambiguous conclusions could be the product of family interaction and therefore may reflect converging perceptions of satisfaction. Such a convergence would inevitably obscure and distort measurements of individual gender responses. This phenomenon has been explored before by Powdthavee (2009), who proves a significant spillover effect of life satisfaction between partners. It is thus plausible that only a more decomposed analysis could be sufficient to isolate the genders and fully examine the variations in response. Psychology has already prepared the ground through the study of how gendered expressions of emotions diverge. Fujita et al. (1991) describe how females are more inclined towards the extremes of emotional expression – joy and sadness – than their male counterparts. Economic analysis, has also laid its own foundations, albeit by taking a very different approach. Here the focus resides in the decomposition of overall

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<sup>1</sup> In support of this claim, see the extensive analysis into the so-called “Easterlin Paradox” in which it is shown that, whilst there is a relationship between income and happiness at any one time, there is no relationship over time.

lifetime satisfaction into the various domains of financial situation, family life, health, and work.<sup>2</sup> It is via the exploration of these sub-domains, that evidence of gendered variations in response can be located. This discovery has provoked a literature which exposes an apparent ‘job satisfaction’ paradox, and it is this that is of particular relevance to this paper. Despite controlling for a number of factors, job satisfaction is typically found to be significantly higher for females. Embracing this gender distinction has inspired much subsequent research in the field of psychology (see the seminal study of Mueller and Wallace, 1996). However, in contrast, economic inquiry has gravitated towards the attempt to explain away the gender distinction. Ward and Sloane (2000) concentrate their efforts on providing a more detailed account of job compensation. Whilst Sousa-Poza and Sousa-Poza (2003) argue that the apparently paradoxical situation is in fact a temporary phenomenon. They postulate that the elevated levels of female job satisfaction reflect a coincidental expectation of better work conditions, rather than reveal a gender distinction.

This paper parts company with such measures of job satisfaction, adequately detailed by others, and considers the gender disparities that function in the realm of “family satisfaction”. Such a modification recommends the opportunity to supplement and enhance the field of job satisfaction, without re-treading old ground. It facilitates the exploration of how perceived negative employment traits can impinge on the quality of home life. Thus, the paper establishes a direct connection between the literature of general happiness and that literature which prioritizes the “work–life balance”. It is anticipated that this stance will complement the existing study of family satisfaction, an analysis that has typically focused on detailing cross-domain links. For example, Frone et al. (1994) present an enquiry that assesses the hypothetical spillover effects that operate between job and family satisfaction. Their study locates issues of simultaneity, where key variables influence both job and life satisfaction. Augmenting this conclusion, Ford et al. (2007) explore the way in which family and job satisfaction are dependent on work-specific variables and family-specific variables, respectively. This sanctions the derivation of key policy implications such as “organizations cannot optimize employee satisfaction without considering non-work influences”. However, the analysis of the family domain undertaken in this paper presents an opportunity to advance the adopted empirical specification in order to explain the traits that increase family satisfaction levels. It is through the combined consideration of both work and home characteristics that this paper distinguishes itself from the previous evaluations of job satisfaction. In addition, by providing an incisive mechanism to more fully explore any distinction in gender attitudes, it also stakes a small claim beyond the existing frontier.

## 2. Data and method

Our data is derived from the British Social Attitudes (BSA) Surveys. The survey, conducted annually by the National Centre for Social Research, provides a cross-sectional sample of individuals aged 18 and over, living in private households and whose addresses are on the electoral register. The sampling is governed by the selection of 114 Parliamentary constituencies from their entirety, as defined by the Registrar General’s standard regions of Great Britain (Brown et al., 2007). Supplementing core questions such as income, a wide range of social, economic, political and moral questions are asked. As a primary motive for the series is to facilitate the research into political attitudes, a number of attitudinal variables are included, and these are of particular interest for this paper.

<sup>2</sup> Refer to Easterlin (2006) for an analysis into these domains (including family satisfaction).

A defining feature of the 2004 BSA survey is that employees are asked a series of questions about the impact of their work and housing conditions on their family satisfaction and overall well-being. Family satisfaction levels are derived from the following question: *All things considered, how satisfied are you with your family life?* Respondents are given a choice of seven ordered responses, ranging from completely unsatisfied to completely satisfied.

Whilst it would have been illuminating to consider the whole sample and investigate other features of the data (the repercussions of unemployment for instance), the sample is innately restricted by the fact that the family satisfaction variable is only considered within an employee questionnaire. This necessarily generates a form of incidental truncation where data is only observed through the outcome of the employment variable. It is this that governed the decision to adopt an ordered probit with selection approach, as discussed in Greene (2008). The selection specification adopted is a simple employment equation, where age and education variables are controlled for. Further investigation of the importance of these variables for well-being yielded surprising results. Whilst it was expected that both age and education would be pertinent determinants of well-being, that education is found to have an insignificant impact upon males and that age is found to be of no consequence to females is perplexing. However, due to the fragility of the overall effects, it proved essential that the variables be discarded from the outcome equation and utilised only within the ‘selection’ employment equation.

To control for basic household characteristics, we distinguish between the following broad types: a single person household; a single parent household; a couple with no children; a couple with children (with at least one under the age of 18); and a couple with adult children. The inclusion of employment and household characteristics then reflect the specific hypothesis that we test, as discussed below.

### 2.1. Employment characteristics

To consider how employment impacts on family satisfaction, we look at both income and labour supply effects.

#### 2.1.1. Income

BSA income data is implicitly disadvantaged by its use of banding. Imitating the approach adopted by Blanchflower (1991) and taking UK General Household Survey statistics as a guide, a continuous variable can be constructed by the conversion of the original open-ended groupings into band midpoints. With such a continuous income measure we can hypothetically explore the contested ground between the economic approach of ‘more is always better’ and the psychology ‘set-point of happiness’. The latter suggests that we should focus on how quickly we adapt to changes in lifetime circumstances. Thus, the testing of the importance of income provides a test of whether we gravitate around a ‘usual’ level of happiness. However, we instead consider the impact of ‘conspicuous consumption’. Here, we can focus on the individual’s status-seeking behaviour where goods are consumed to improve the relative position of the consumer in his/her reference group.<sup>3</sup> Whilst we are hampered by the lack of consumer data and cannot look at these effects directly, we can test for status effects within the income measure. More precisely, we hypothesize that status increases as the individual out-performs the income achieved amongst their reference group; in this case these groups are determined by the respondent’s occupational class.

<sup>3</sup> For a test of the importance of inter-personal comparisons see Chao and Schor (1998).

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