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

Louise Parker\textsuperscript{a}, Duncan Watson\textsuperscript{a,}\textsuperscript{*,} Robert Webb\textsuperscript{b}

\textsuperscript{a} Swansea University, UK
\textsuperscript{b} Glasgow Caledonian University, UK

\textbf{A B S T R A C T}

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.

\textsuperscript{*} Corresponding author at: School of Business & Economics, Richard Price Building, Singleton Park, Swansea, UK SA2 8PP. Tel.: +44 01792 602109; fax: +44 01792 295872.

1 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.

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lifetime satisfaction into the various domains of financial situation, family life, health, and work. 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 disparities that function in the realm of “family satisfaction”. For example, 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 detailed cross-domain links. For example, Fronen 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.

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. 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.

Refer to Easterlin (2006) for an analysis into these domains (including family satisfaction).

For a test of the importance of inter-personal comparisons see Chao and Schor (1998).
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