Sex and happiness

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ABSTRACT

We examine the relationship between sexual activities and happiness using a sample of 3800 adults from China. We provide some results about the relationship between sexual activities and happiness for an important country other than the United States. We find that those who have more sex and better quality sex, proxied by emotional and physical satisfaction with one's primary sex partner, are happier. We find that the happiness maximizing number of sexual partners is one and that engaging in extramarital sex is negatively related to happiness. A third important finding is that having unwanted sex is associated with lower happiness for both men and women.

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1. Introduction

A large, and emerging, economics literature exists that examines the determinants of happiness. One activity that has received little examination in this literature is the relationship between sexual activity and happiness. There is only one published article in the economics literature on the relationship between sex and happiness (Blanchflower and Oswald, 2004). That study examines the relationship between various measures of sexual activity and happiness using a dataset on approximately 16,000 Americans. It found a strong positive correlation between sexual activity and happiness. In this study, we confirm many of Blanchflower and Oswald's (2004) main findings using a dataset of 3800 adults in China. Consistent with the method in Blanchflower and Oswald (2004) also use ordinary least squares (OLS). A limitation of so doing is that one cannot establish causality. The problem, though, as Blanchflower and Oswald (2004) note, is that it is difficult to think of convincing instrumental variables that are correlated with sexual activity, but not happiness.

Among our major findings are that having more frequent sex with a primary partner in the past 12 months is positively correlated with happiness. Similarly, having better quality sex, reflected in higher emotional and physical satisfaction with one's primary partner, is positively related to happiness. Consistent with Blanchflower and Oswald (2004), we find that the optimal number of sexual partners to maximize happiness in the previous 12 months is one and that engaging in extramarital sex is negatively correlated with happiness. We also find that having unwanted sex or having sex simply to satisfy one's partner is associated with lower happiness.

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2. Data

We use data from the China Health and Family Life Survey (CHFLS), which is a national probability survey of sexual behaviour, collected from mainland China's adult population (aged 20–60) in 1999–2000 in 18 provinces, municipalities and autonomous regions.[1] Respondents were selected from 14 strata, 48 primary sampling units and 60 neighbourhoods with probabilities proportional to their respective populations. Large cities and coastal areas with high rates of sexually transmitted diseases were oversampled. Altogether, 5000 people were identified to be in the sample. Of these, 3821 people (76.4%) completed the survey. This response rate compares favourably with the response rate in large-scale surveys of sexual behaviour in other countries, such as France, the UK and the US (see Parish et al., 2007a,b).

To measure happiness, we use responses to the question: 'Taken all together, how would you say things are these days – would you say that you are very happy, happy, unhappy or very unhappy?' This is similar to the single item indicator used in Blanchflower and Oswald (2004) and in other studies in the economics of happiness literature. It is generally accepted that in questions with the same, or similar wording to this, the proportion of people providing wellbeing scores are fairly stable with most people responding that they are 'happy'. This was the case in this survey, with the mean value for the dependent variable being just over 3 (on a 1–4 scale).

To measure sexual activity we explore a range of indicators including frequency of sexual intercourse, number of concurrent partners and sexual satisfaction. These are obviously sensitive issues to ask about in surveys. For this reason one might be concerned about the reliability of the data. Theoretically, there could be upward or downward biases in the data. On the one hand, a respondent might want to appear boastful about sexual conquests and report more sexual partners than one has really had, leading to over reporting. On the other hand, a respondent might feel awkward discussing sex or want to conceal extramarital affairs leading to under reporting. It is arguable that perceived social desirability of answers has influenced respondents' answers. Some of the results could reflect a social-desirability response-pattern, in which happy people pretend to have socially desirable lives and that ability to pretend is partly the reason that they are happy. These unobservable response biases can be related to other (observed or unobserved) characteristics.

To ensure the privacy of respondents, respondents in the CHFLS were not interviewed at home, but were asked to attend secure neighbourhood facilities. The neighbourhood facilities were typically either a private room in a local hotel in larger locales or local meeting place in smaller locales, such as villages. The first half of the interview involved a series of questions administered by the interviewer. In the second half of the interview, the respondent entered responses to the questions about sexual activities in a laptop containing the questionnaire. In most cases this was done without any involvement from the interviewer. There were only 13% of respondents, who were primarily older women in rural locales, who needed assistance entering their responses. The use of computer-assisted self-administered interviews for the sensitive questions dealing with sexual activities should minimize the biases associated with answering these questions. In any case, like Blanchflower and Oswald (2004), we take the responses at face value in the analysis below. Table 1 provides descriptive statistics for the sample as a whole, as well as broken down by gender.

3. Method

We estimate the following happiness equation:

$$happiness_i = f(X_i, S, \varepsilon_i) \tag{1}$$

where *happiness* is the happiness of the *i*th respondent; *X* is a vector of personal characteristics; *S* is a vector of sexual activity variables; and ε is the error term. Eq. (1) can be estimated using ordered logit or OLS. The former is often more popular among economists, while psychologists tend to favour using OLS. Ferrer-i-Carbonell and Frijters (2004) suggest that results are not sensitive to the choice of OLS, that treats the dependent variable as cardinal, or ordered probit/logit methods that treats it as ordinal. While economists typically treat the happiness variable as ordinal, on theoretical grounds Ng (1997) advocates treating subjective wellbeing as cardinal. We estimate Eq. (1) using OLS. However, in robustness checks, which are not reported, we also treat happiness as ordinal and the sign and significance of the sexual activity variables are similar to when we use OLS.

4. Results

In each of the tables we present results from the happiness equation above. For the sake of brevity, we just report the results for the sexual activity variable(s). However, all happiness equations included a full set of controls. Table 2 presents estimates for frequency of sexual intercourse. Panel A presents the results for frequency of sexual intercourse with one's primary partner in the past 12 months. Compared to the reference case (sexual intercourse at least once a day), having

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[1] The CHFLS is a collaborative project of the University of Chicago, Renmin University, Peking Union Medical College and the University of North Carolina. See http://popcenter.uchicago.edu/data/chfls.shtml. Previous studies to use the CHFLS are in the sexual psychology and literature (see e.g. Bogaert and Liu, 2013; Parish et al., 2007a, 2007b; South and Trent, 2010). These studies consider the CHFLS to be at least as reliable as similar surveys in France, the UK and US.