



A clue to the paradox of happiness

Charlotte D. Phelps*

Department of Economics, Temple University, Ritter Annex 879, Philadelphia, PA 19122, USA

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Abstract

This paper presents evidence from the 1976 survey of Americans' mental health that married altruists are more likely to report themselves very happy than people with other personality dispositions, if family income and family size are held constant. Altruistic husbands exhibit diminishing marginal utility from children, as do all wives, regardless of personality. Data on the allocation of time for child-care account for the gender and personality differences in happiness. It is hypothesized that the paradox of happiness in the US is attributable to a decline in the percentage of altruists in the population. © 2001 Elsevier Science B.V. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

A fundamental assumption of economic theory is that more is better. Repeated tests of the validity of this assumption have produced paradoxical results. Nation wide cross-section surveys have shown a positive correlation between income and subjective measures of overall well being, but time series have shown that well being does not increase with income.

In this paper, I present evidence that a factor restraining an improvement in macro measures of happiness in the US is a constant or possibly declining percentage of altruists in the population. The measure of altruism is derived from a Thematic Apperception Test¹ that was administered in the 1957 and 1976 nation wide surveys of Americans' mental health

* Tel.: +1-215-204-1677; fax: +1-215-204-8173.

E-mail address: cdphelps@astro.temple.edu (C.D. Phelps).

¹ A Thematic Apperception Test is a personality test based on imaginative stories that subjects write in response to word or picture cues. The stories are scored for themes of achievement, power, and affiliation. Altruistic motivation is defined by affiliation themes.

(Gurin et al. (1975) and Veroff et al. (1982)). The percent of married altruists remained constant at 20 percent over the 20 years spanned by the surveys. An analysis of the total population, unmarried as well as married, suggests there will be a decline in the percentage of altruists in the future (Phelps, 1998).

Becker's (1981) theory of altruism in the family frames the analysis. His fundamental hypothesis is that an altruist derives satisfaction from the well-being of the members of the family. If the altruist is effective², he (or she) induces cooperation among family members by transfers of money or time that reward behavior beneficial to the family and punish harmful behavior. The altruist decides what is beneficial and what is harmful. In other words, the altruist maximizes his or her own satisfaction.

Previous tests of the maximization hypothesis (Phelps, 1988, 1991) used family income as a money measure of utility and Thematic Apperception Test scores for measures of the head of household's motivation. In both 1957 and 1976, the maximization hypothesis was rejected for married men. In 1957, estimates of occupational differences in family income reported by husbands showed that altruists were at the top and the bottom of the distribution, given human capital control variables. In 1976, power motivated husbands were at the top of the distribution.

A study of fertility based on the wives in the 1976 survey (Phelps, 1995) yielded a distribution of family income with respect to the same personality attributes used in the studies of the male samples. However, the analysis of family income did not control for age and education, as did the analysis of the male data. Instead, personality differences in family income were related to family size. Wives with the trait of "persuasive affiliation" had more children than wives with other motivation.

Now I return to the 1976 nation wide survey to test the maximization hypothesis again, this time with a subjective measure of utility, rather than a money measure. The results show that if the independent variables in the happiness equation include family income and family size as well as motivation, married altruists of both genders report the highest subjective levels of happiness. In their analysis of Americans' happiness in 1976, Veroff et al. (1981) found that married people were happier than other people. My analysis provides additional information about differences in happiness within the married group that are attributable to motivation.

The body of the paper is presented in three sections. The first reviews how the altruistic personality disposition is measured. The second specifies a married decision-maker's utility function. The third discusses the logistic regressions from which the inferences are derived. A concluding section summarizes the findings.

2. Measurement of the altruistic personality

The Thematic Apperception Test that was given in 1976 contained a picture of a man and woman facing the viewer. The man was smoking a cigar. Survey respondents who were married usually wrote stories about this picture that cast the man and woman in the roles of husband and wife. A categorical classification of the stories about this "root" picture,

² An effective altruist is the source of more than half the family income.

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