



## The impact of life events on job satisfaction

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### ABSTRACT

Employing fixed effects regression techniques on longitudinal data, we investigate how life events affect employees' job satisfaction. Unlike previous work–life research, exploring mostly contemporaneous correlations, we look for evidence of adaptation in the years following major life events. We find evidence of adaptation following the first marriage event, but we find that the birth of the first child has a long-lasting impact on employees' job satisfaction. Our findings also suggest that there is a general boost in job satisfaction prior to first marriage and to a lesser extent prior to the birth of the first child, consistent with evidence of anticipation. Accordingly, our study provides some of the first evidence on the dynamic effect of non-work related factors on job satisfaction and it introduces a novel methodology and a new perspective for investigating the dynamic interaction between the work and life domains.

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### 1. Introduction

A large literature in social sciences and management has linked employees' job satisfaction to observable workplace behaviors, including absenteeism, organizational commitment, productivity, and quits (Clark, Georgellis, & Sanfey, 1998; Judge, Thoresen, Bono, & Patton, 2001; Schleicher, Watt, & Greguras, 2004; Scott & Taylor, 1985). It is thus not surprising that numerous studies emphasize the importance of identifying the determinants of job satisfaction, exploring both work and non-work related factors. Earnings, working hours, working environment, workplace socialization, autonomy, organizational control, and participation in training schemes are all work-related factors shown to be affecting job satisfaction (Agho, Mueller, & Price, 1993; Arthur, Edens, Bell, & Bennett, 2003; Georgellis & Lange, 2007). Studies exploring non-work related factors affecting well-being at work focus mainly on personality, disposition, and work–life conflict arguments (Dormann & Zapf, 2001; Eby, Casper, Lockwood, Bordeaux, & Brinley, 2005; Eby, Maher, & Butts, 2010). Largely, these studies rely on small samples, indirect comparisons, and data of a contemporaneous nature rather than direct, causal examinations over time (Lambert, 1991; Tenbrunsel, Brett, Maoz, Stroh, & Reilly, 1995). Evidence on the direct, dynamic impact of life events on workers' well-being is virtually non-existent, partially because of a lack of suitable longitudinal data.

In another strand of the literature, empirical studies have recently utilized large-scale longitudinal data to test psychological theories of adaptation and have generated a resurgent interest in dynamic aspects of human behavior and well-being (Clark, Diener, Georgellis, & Lucas, 2008; Lucas, Clark, Georgellis, & Diener, 2003). By tracking individuals' self-reported life satisfaction scores before and after important events, Clark et al. (2008) find evidence of rapid adaptation to a baseline level of well-being, which is predetermined by fixed personality traits. More specifically, their findings offer support for the adaptation hypothesis for most events par unemployment. Regarding adaptation to marriage, their evidence suggests a positive, yet transitory effect on well-being around the time of the event, with evidence of a rapid adaptation back to baseline, within 2 years after the event. Regarding the birth of the first child, they also find evidence of a negative well-being effect, which, for women at least, takes longer than 2 years to return to its baseline level.

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Motivated by these recent developments in the empirical literature on testing psychological theories of adaptation, our aim in this study is to investigate how major life events, such as first marriage and the birth of the first child, affect employees' job satisfaction. Although these events are likely to be contemporaneously correlated with job satisfaction, whether their effect on job satisfaction is positive or negative remains an empirical question. One possible scenario is that these events shift individuals' priorities from achieving career goals towards a more fulfilling family life, often resulting in a specialization and a reallocation of spouses' time and other household resources from market work towards home production. Such a diversion of resources away from work could have a negative impact on job satisfaction. If, on the other hand, marriage and children enhance individuals' time management skills or facilitate the efficient use of resources, then their effect on job satisfaction will be a positive one. However, should employees be predisposed to adapt to changing circumstances, the research question arises as to whether job satisfaction in the years following the event returns rapidly back towards baseline levels. Similarly, as the shift in priorities and the process of reallocation of household resources is often initiated prior to marriage and childbirth, a related question is whether employees anticipate the effect that such major life events will have on their job satisfaction.

To offer some answers to these questions, we test for evidence of adaptation and anticipation in job satisfaction employing fixed effects regression techniques on data from the British Household Panel Survey (BHPS). The BHPS is a large-scale longitudinal survey, which allows us to track employees' job satisfaction before and after the events. Unlike previous studies, which focus mostly on contemporaneous correlations, the use of the BHPS data and the longitudinal design in this study allows us to tease out the causal relationship between life events and job satisfaction. Following Clark et al. (2008), we test for adaptation to first marriage by including a set of dummy variables in the job satisfaction regressions capturing the elapsed duration of marriage at each interview point since the time that the event occurred. If all the estimated coefficients of the elapsed duration dummy variables are roughly the same then there is no evidence of adaptation. If on the other hand the coefficients of more distant marriage in the past are smaller than the coefficients of more recent marriage then this is evidence of adaptation. To test for anticipation, we include a series of lead dummy variables capturing the time until the event occurs (will marry in the next 12 months, in the next 1–2 years etc.), as in Clark et al. (2008). Controlling for a fixed effect in this case ensures that the leads dummy variables pick up anticipation effects instead of selection effects, whereby fixed unobserved individual characteristics (e.g. personality or ability) are associated with higher job satisfaction and a higher probability of getting married. We apply the same procedure to examine how employees' job satisfaction reacts to the birth of the first child and to test for adaptation and anticipation effects. Accordingly, the study offers some of the first evidence on the dynamic effect of non-work related factors on job satisfaction and on the link between the work and life domains. Taken together with previous findings on the effect of marriage and children on life satisfaction, our study introduces a novel perspective on the work–life conflict and work–life enrichment debates.

## 2. Theoretical background

The interaction between the work and life domains has been the subject of a large literature across the social sciences and the subject of a debate among policy makers and human resource professionals. Central to this debate is the issue of whether there is a clear segmentation between the work and life domains. Segmentation implies that work and life experiences display no related properties, with feelings and behaviors in one domain not affecting behavior and productivity in the other domain (Gupta & Beehr, 1981; Judge & Watanabe, 1994; Lambert, 1990). In contrast, non-segmentation implies that emotions, attitudes, and practices in one domain spillover to the other domain or that dissatisfaction in one domain spurs individuals to seek compensatory rewards in the other domain (Lambert, 1990). By and large, empirical studies reject the segmentation hypothesis, showing that the work and life domains are strongly correlated, attributing such a correlation mostly to *spillover* rather than *compensation* effects (Georgellis & Lange, 2012).

Theoretical explanations for the correlation between work and family life draw upon work–life conflict as well as work–life enrichment arguments. Building on Scarcity Theory, the literature on work–life conflict argues that time demands from either the work or the life domain result in lower well-being in the workplace (Allen, Herst, Bruck, & Sutton, 2000; Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). Indeed, work–life conflict has been associated with lower job satisfaction, higher rates of absenteeism, and lower productivity (White, Hill, McGovern, Mills, & Smeaton, 2003). Explanations based on work–life enrichment arguments stress the positive synergies between work and family life, as family events or experiences positively influence well-being in the workplace. As Greenhaus and Powell (2006) argue, work and family experiences can have additive effects on an individual's overall well-being and it is likely that participation in both work and family life offers a buffer for the negative effects in either role. Other studies find that work–family enrichment leads to improvements in areas such as leadership abilities, psychological functioning, and multi-tasking, which in turn lead to increased job satisfaction (Carlson, Kacmer, Wayne, & Grzywacz, 2006; Hanson, Hammer, & Colton, 2006; Hunter, Perry, Carlson, & Smith, 2010; Masuda, McNall, Allen, & Nicklin, 2011; Ruderman, Ohlott, Panzer, & King, 2002; Van Steenbergen, Ellemers, & Mooijaart, 2007). Nevertheless, the evidence on whether the positive impact of work–family enrichment outweighs the negative impact of work–life conflict is rather mixed.

To assess the strength of the interaction between the work and life domains, empirical studies have commonly relied on cross-sectional data and on self-reported job and life satisfaction scores. However, a drawback of these studies is that although they have been successful in documenting and establishing the strong contemporaneous correlation between job and life satisfaction, they have offered rather mixed evidence on the causal relationship between the two variables (Tail, Padgett, & Baldwin, 1989). For instance, while Chacko (1983) finds that job satisfaction causes life satisfaction, Schmitt and Mellon's (1980) find that the opposite is true, with life satisfaction causing job satisfaction. Judge and Watanabe (1993) find that job and life satisfaction are positively and reciprocally related, acknowledging nevertheless the limitations of small, contemporaneous samples, or even longitudinal samples with

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