Accepted Manuscript

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Pierluigi Conzo, Arnstein Aassve, Giulia Fuochi, Letizia Mencarini

PII: S0167-4870(17)30228-3
DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.joep.2017.08.001
Reference: JOEP 2036

To appear in: Journal of Economic Psychology

Received Date: 18 April 2017
Revised Date: 27 June 2017
Accepted Date: 2 August 2017


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The Cultural Foundations of Happiness

Pierluigi Conzo†
University of Turin & Collegio Carlo Alberto

Arnstein Aassve
Bocconi University, Dondena Centre for Research on Social Dynamics and Public Policy

Giulia Fuochi
University of Padua

Letizia Mencarini
Bocconi University, Dondena Centre for Research on Social Dynamics and Public Policy

This version: June 2017

Abstract
The paper provides a framework for how culture affects happiness. According to self-determination theory, well-being is driven by the satisfaction of three basic psychological needs: autonomy, relatedness and competence. We assess if, and to what extent, trust and the values of obedience and respect influence Europeans’ satisfaction of these needs, controlling for income and education. We find a positive and significant impact for generalized morality (high trust and respect, low obedience), which is robust to different checks for endogeneity, including instrumental variable regressions at country, regional and individual level. Results suggest that lack of trust, high obedience and low respect not only reduce the wealth of nations, but also constrain the satisfaction of basic psychological needs, thereby hindering the individuals’ fulfilment of happiness.

Keywords: self-determination; culture; trust; subjective well-being; happiness; life satisfaction.

JEL Codes: A13, E02, P48, I31, Z13
PsycINFO Codes: 2960, 2930, 2010

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* We thank Toke Aidt, Bruno Arpino, Sergio Beraldo, Reto Odermatt, Marco Pagano, Francesco Russo, Fabrizio Zilibotti, the CSEF, Collegio Carlo Alberto and EST fellows and participants to the 2016 European Public Choice Society Workshop (Friburg) and to the 48th scientific meeting of Italian Statistical Society (Salerno) for their useful comments and suggestions.
The authors gratefully acknowledge financial support from the European Research Council under the European ERC Grant Agreement no StG-313617 (SWELL-FER: Subjective Well-being and Fertility, P.I. Letizia Mencarini) and under the European Union’s H2020 Programme ERC Grant agreement nº 694145 (IFAMID: Institutional Family Demography, P.I. Arnstein Aassve).
† Address correspondence to Pierluigi Conzo, Dept. of Economics and Statistics “Cognetti de Martis”, University of Turin – Campus Luigi Einaudi, Lungo Dora Siena 100A. Email: pierluigi.conzo@unito.it
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