

Family Constellations and Life Satisfaction in Europe

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Submission for the 2012 meetings of the Population Association of America

Extended abstract

1 Introduction and objective of the study

Empirical research on life satisfaction and its correlates has a long history (Sirgy et al., 2006). Overall, whilst a wide range of institutional, economic and social factors have been suggested as important determinants (e.g., Bjørnskov et al., 2008), the impact of family status on life satisfaction has not been widely tested. Nevertheless, during the second half of the 20th century, European countries witnessed remarkable changes in family formation, dissolution and reconstitution processes. These changes can be labeled as a declining propensity for marriage and parenthood, postponement of marriage and childbearing, as well as the deinstitutionalization of marriage and destabilization of the family. Living as a family in Europe today means living longer in smaller (with fewer siblings), more often deinstitutionalized (non-marital) and non-co-resident families (Hantrais, 2006), with kinship networks becoming “tall and lean”. Altogether these processes have led to the formation of a family constellation of different types of living arrangements. In the New Member States (NMS12), these changes started to emerge in the 1990s, whereas in the EU15 they have been observed since the 1960s. The Candidate Countries (CC3) are currently at the initial stage of the main shifts in household structures, and these processes are starting to appear in national statistics. Living as a couple with children and other household members is considerably more frequent for both men and women in the NMS12 countries and especially in the CC3 countries than in the EU15.

It is trivial to imagine that these kinds of family changes should have necessarily influenced peoples’ satisfaction with life. In this research we aim at filling the knowledge-gap related to correlates of individual satisfaction with life testing the impact of different types of family living arrangements on life satisfaction, and whether this relationship is mediated by country context (family policy regime, labor market structures, gender norms).

2 Perspectives on life satisfaction: definition, traditional determinants, and the role of family status

The quality of life of individuals has acquired a pivotal role in policy-oriented research. From a micro perspective, it can be considered as the ultimate goal of one’s life: everybody wants a good quality of life. From a macro perspective, it represents a standard of reference by which political decisions may be judged. For these reasons, psychologists, sociologists, and, more recently, also economists and demographers, have been paid more and more attention on quality of life research.

In order to measure quality of life both objective and subjective measures have been proposed in the literature. “Objective” quality of life refers to the extent to which individual’s

resources meet observable criteria of a good life. The proponents of this approach advocate that resources virtually offer to everybody the chances of approaching the kind of life one wishes (Ringen, 1995). Conversely, many scientists tend to recommend subjective assessment of quality of life (Naess, 1999). “Subjective” quality of life acknowledges that everybody has their own ideas about happiness and the good life and that observed behavior is an incomplete indicator for individual well-being. In this respect, the wording “happiness” or “life satisfaction” has started to be used to indicate the degree to which one judges the quality of one’s life favorably. Generally, the main use of life satisfaction measure is not to compare levels in absolute or relative terms, but rather to search for its crucial determinants.

Among the traditional factors correlated with happiness and life satisfaction we find age and gender (Andrews and Withey, 1976). Most recent literature in this field indicates that satisfaction with life is generally U-shaped in age and that it is generally higher for women (e.g., Easterlin, 2003), although with exceptions (e.g., Boye, 2009). Considering socio-economic factors, theoretical and empirical literature converge in suggesting that although the rich are typically more satisfied with their financial situation than the poor, this happens only up to a point (e.g., Seghieri et al. 2006). Employment status matters too (Clark and Oswald 2002) in the sense of a strong negative gradient between subjective satisfaction with life and unemployment. Moreover, also forms of insecure employment, which have been rising all over Europe in recent decades, clearly lower happiness (e.g., Scherer, 2009). Finally, higher educated people are generally more satisfied with life, but education displays lower predictive power on life satisfaction than employment does (e.g., Bjørnskov et al., 2008).

Beside the traditional demographic and socio-economic determinants of life satisfaction, research findings on the relationship between family status and life satisfaction in Europe are rather scarce. As it regards family status, married people tend to be characterized by a higher level of life satisfaction compared to that of singles (Clark and Oswald, 2002). Interestingly, the influence of the presence of children on life satisfaction sends conflicting messages, ranging from negative effects (e.g., Nomaguchi and Milkie, 2003), up to positive effects (e.g., Kotowska et al., 2010). The latter study also proved the appropriateness of considering in the analysis not only the number of children, but also the age of the youngest child. Overall, women’s life satisfaction displays a U-shaped trend: the arrival of children seems to amplify happiness, then satisfaction with life starts to decline up to the teenage years, and finally it rises again after children leave the parental home.

A crucial key-stone in this area of research is the paper by Kohler and colleagues (2005). The authors found at least two crucial results. First, their outcomes show that men and women who are currently in a partnership are definitely happier than those who are not; second, first-born children are an important source of happiness for women and men; second- and higher-born children seem to reduce women’s happiness and leave men’s one unaffected.

Some attempt to test the role played by family status on life satisfaction can be found on two reports based on European Quality of Life (EQLS) data. Using the 2003 EQLS, Saraceno et al. (2005) concluded that although individuals with young children perceive the greatest difficulties in combining paid employment and childrearing, these difficulties do not result in any clear differences in satisfaction with one’s own family life. Using 2007 EQLS data, Kotowska et al. (2010) clearly illustrate that living in a couple is related to higher life satisfaction. Partnered women and men are about twice as satisfied with life as people living alone. Life satisfaction is particularly high for couples with children, and it increases with a rise in the number of children in the household. Particularly high life satisfaction is observed among parents of very young children, under the age of two years. It is notable, however, that the difference in life satisfaction between parents of three or more children or parents with young children compared with people without children is much larger for men than women.

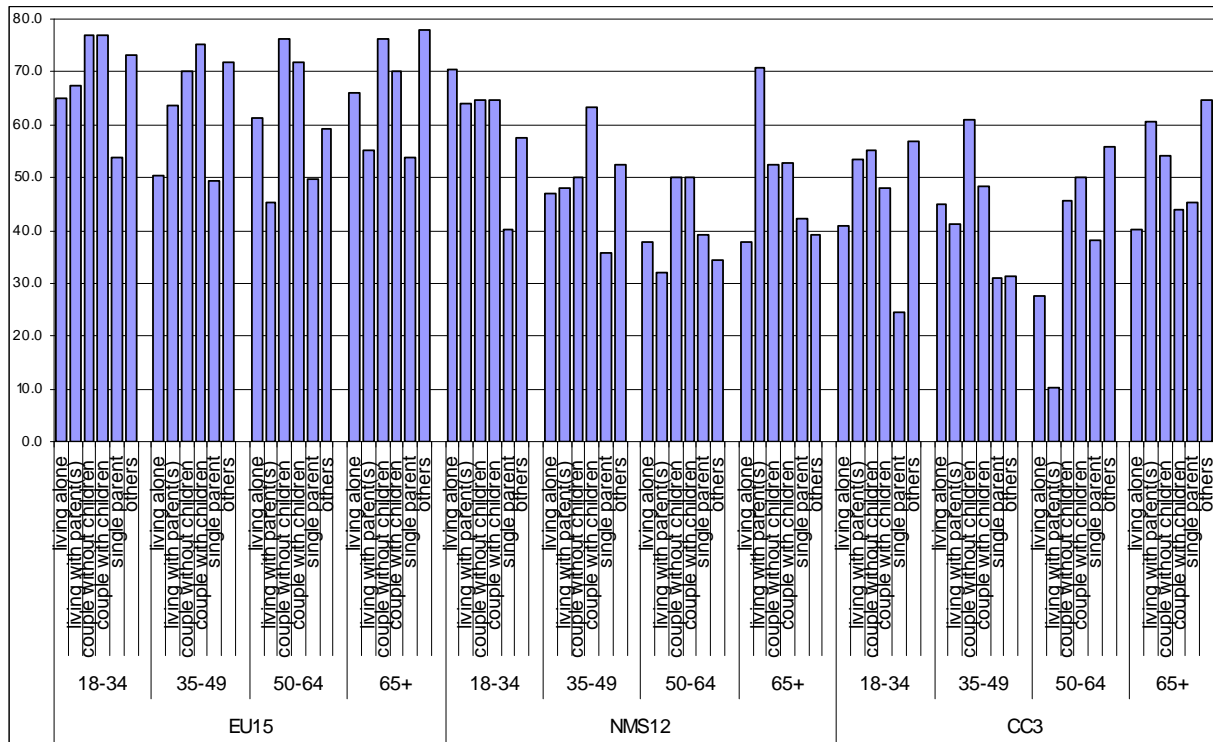
3 Data

The data used come from the Second European Quality of Live Survey, carried out in September 2007-February 2008 by the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions. The 2007 EQLS comprises the 15 countries that became Member States before 2004, the 12 countries that joined the EU in 2004 and 2007, and the 3 candidate countries, with samples ranging from about 1,000 to 2,000 persons aged 18 years and over.

Life satisfaction (“*All things considered, how satisfied would you say you are with your life these days?*”) is the dependent variable that allows a 1-10 scale-response. Our main explanatory covariate is one’s own family status that has been defined as it follows: living alone; living with parent(s); living as a couple without children or other household members; living as a couple without children in an extended household (with other household members); living as a couple with children and without other household members; living as a couple with children in an extended household; living as a single parent without other extended household members; living as a single parent in an extended household.

Figure 1 shows, at least at descriptive level, that a good evaluation in life satisfaction (from 7 to 10) changes depending on the living arrangement and country of residence. Overall, people from the original 15 European Union member countries tend to express a higher level of life satisfaction with respect to the other countries. In every European area, living in couple seems to be the family typology which gives the highest satisfaction, regardless the age, whereas to be a single parent involves low levels of satisfaction. Living alone is differently correlated to one’s own life satisfaction, depending both on age and on the place of residence. These findings may depend also on the different distribution of the various living arrangement forms across European country groups (EU15, NMS12, CC3). Moreover, it has to be noted that large differences linger on also at country level, within the identified European areas, that calls for an analysis that properly account for the territorial context.

Figure 1: People declaring high life satisfaction (ranging from 7 to 10) by living arrangements over the life course, by age group, and country group



4 Towards a deeper analysis

In order to test and properly measure the role played by family constellations on life satisfaction we apply an ordinal multi-level regression model. This model allows for the grouping of observations into countries, where clustering is not an occasional nuisance, but an intrinsic characteristic of the population explicitly considered in the model. In fact, not only our data are naturally hierarchically structured (individuals living in different countries), but we also explicitly hypothesize that the context matters in life satisfaction assessment and in the relationship between life satisfaction and living arrangement. This procedure enables to measure the existence of a certain degree of territorial variation, to better see to what extent individual variables act and, finally, to interpret the variability associated with the context.

The model includes quite a few individual-level independent variables: age; education; perception of financial situation; housing status; perception of health condition; frequency of attending religious ceremonies; place of residence; immigration status; index of trust in people and institutions; perception of work uncertainty; partner's employment status. The analysis will be stratified by gender.

As it regards the macro-level, information from Eurostat data will be exploited. The country context, which could directly or indirectly affect individual satisfaction, is accounted for recurring to national-level indicators about social protection expenditures – in particular in family and children domains – country childcare arrangements and labor market indicators.

Based on preliminary findings, we expect that both individual and context variables may explain differences in life satisfaction. Moreover, we believe that the evidenced relationships may change depending on the country context of residence, in particular the role of living arrangement may be reinforced or reduced.

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