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Exploring the role of family ties on life satisfaction in later life in Europe

Abstract:

We analyzed the relationship between family ties and the life satisfaction of people between the ages of 50 and 85 years in 13 European countries. We aim at determining the effects of partnership (being currently in a partnership) and parenthood (having remained childless). We use individual-level data from the sixth wave of the Survey of Health, Ageing and Retirement in Europe (SHARE). The analyses are restricted to respondents who are partnered or who have ever been married. We apply a multivariate analysis to examine the association of life satisfaction with family ties for men and for women. We add controls for age groups and education level, and we pay special attention to the role of individuals' network size. Our findings indicate that in all countries, having no partner has the strongest and most negative association with life satisfaction. However, there was no clear association between not having children and life satisfaction across countries. We also find an important role of some protector variables, such as having a strong network which, in most countries, significantly increase one's life satisfaction. We find that there is a relationship between individuals' family situation and life satisfaction, but it is restricted to being in a partnership. The protection factor of having a partner improves one's life satisfaction at older ages much more than protection by having children. This finding can reduce the concern about the long run implications of increasing childlessness among younger cohorts as it is not necessarily associated to a higher risk of low life satisfaction.

Key words: family ties, life satisfaction, Europe, old people

Introduction

Family life and family history play an important role in health conditions and in mortality differentials in later life. The relationship between family life and subjective indicators of well-being (i.e. life satisfaction) is an increasingly interesting issue in a context in which new family arrangements along with an aging population are undergoing important changes that could have an impact on people in their advanced stages, according to the life-course perspective. The implications of childlessness on social isolation and lack of support in their later life has already been explored and might imply an increasing demand for the public provision of long-term care services (Albertini/Mencarini 2014).

In this article we analyse the relationship between family ties and life satisfaction for people 50 years of age and older in 13 European countries. We are specifically interested in distinguishing between partnership and parenthood ties: whether people have remained childless or have had any children and how far away they live, as well as whether they are currently in a partnership. We restricted our analysis to a sample of people who have ever been married in order to overcome the association between not having children and never having had a partner.

The importance of this investigation is to establish how quality of life is shaped by the family situation. Our aim is to understand whether the presence of a co-residing partner and/or the presence of children living in proximity, interact with other components of elderly people's social life. Therefore, we explore the role of mediator factors offering protection at older ages, such as the size of the social network. Finally, we explore gender differences in order to understand to what extent the relationship of the family constellation and social networks and support work differently for men versus for women.

The article is structured as follows: First, we review the latest findings on life satisfaction and subjective wellbeing indicators. Second, we present the key elements of new family trends in Europe in the last decades. Third, we formulate our main research hypotheses based on the theoretically complex relationship between family life and life satisfaction. After presenting the data and methods used, we report the findings of our analyses and we discuss their implications.

Life satisfaction: The importance of subjective well-being indicators

Concerns about quality of life, particularly in old age, have been investigated during the last decades in the social and behavioral sciences (George 2006; Solé-Auró/Lozano 2019). Population well-being has been largely examined by computing trends in healthy life expectancy. Particularly, at the population level, healthy life expectancy is more than a measure of health. It is an indicator of an important dimension of well-being as quality of life. Today, subjective indicators such as life satisfaction are commonly used by quantitative social scientists to better understand our societies' well-being.

Health is always a dimension of well-being and quality of life. High levels of happiness might influence longevity by reducing mortality through several direct and indirect mechanisms. Koopmans et al. (2010) found that increased levels of happiness predicted a lower mortality rate, and therefore happier people live longer. Being happy has been associated with having lower incidence of chronic conditions (Siahpush et al. 2008). Some empirical analyses have indicated that happier people have lower levels of hypertension (Blanchflower/Oswald 2008) and are able to manage stress better than their unhappier counterparts (Papousek et al. 2010). On opposite side, low levels of life satisfaction, or dissatisfaction, are associated with increased morbidity and mortality (Mojon-Azzi/Sousa-Poza 2011; Koivumaa-Honkanen et al. 2000). Individuals with low levels of happiness are also more likely to have poor self-rated health, physical disabilities, depressive symptoms, and other common health conditions (Strine et al. 2008).