Well-being over the life course
Progress and prospects

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Eight life course papers: UK, US, France, Germany, Australia, Norway, Denmark and Sweden

- Half based on cohort surveys: US, France, UK (in part), Sweden.
- Admin files supplemented by population-wide surveys: Norway, Denmark
- Longitudinal panels: UK (in part), Australia, Germany

- Some use combinations: multiple surveys, using surveys to augment admin files (DK), using admin records and large-scale surveys to measure community context
US studies the Fonz cohort from high school on, from Carol Ryff’s home turf, hence the selection of well-being variables.

Why not study mortality experience? Wisconsin was the home of the Mother House of the order of nuns who all wrote autobiographies; those in the bottom quartile of use of positive terms had death rates 2.5 times higher than the top quartile in positivity (Danner, Snowdon & Friesen 2001).
Discussion of US paper

- Steve Jenkins on US: siblings ignored. Long shadow of family background, with different patterns across outcome measures. Men and women might have different coefficients. IQ is not exactly that.
- Why not look at longevity?
- Paul: early life predictors contribute limited explanatory power
German paper analyzes qualitative supplementary answers to SOEP

• German study of supplemental qualitative answers provides a way to see the differences for supporters of the new AfD.
• AfD supporters 3 times more likely to have worries,
• Why not echo the Wisconsin nun study, to see if use of positive words is associated with subsequent better health and longer life? (also done for psychologists)
Conal Smith on Germany.

• Do the free text answers help to predict other variables?
• Advocates using this to possibly generate quasi-SWB data over the longer term.
Norway: birth order effects on adult health, health behaviour, and happiness

• Norwegians look for birth-order effects, with smoking rising, blood pressure dropping, height falling, and obesity falling with later children. Mostly ordering rather than primacy.

• First study of the effects of birth order and well-being. Later-born are less happy, by 0.09 between 1st and fifth child
Steve Machin on the Norwegian paper

• Method is within-family. Health is from surveys at age 42- might include large gaps in time of the surveys used for earlier and later kids. (but the smoking and obesity results strong do not suggest that)

• What theories might underlie the differences?
Swedish Family and Childhood correlates of adult outcomes

• Cohort study follows the female half (n>500) from age 10, in 1965, to 49 with unusually good selection of covariates. Very important to have even regular GP checkups.

• Does the child predict the adult? Mother working -0.2 to -0.3 worse for SWL
Discussion of Swedish paper

• Paul asks how accumulated stress affects health outcomes.
France: a cohort study of effects of alternative forms of child care

• French study’s SDQ measure is a compound of 4 negative and one positive outcome. Would be useful to treat pro-social behaviour separately.

• They did, and center-based training led to significantly higher prosocial behaviour.

• Benefits biggest for better-off and healthier mothers
Comments on France by Liam Delaney

• Can you get centre-based qualities or other guides to quality differences
• Get Swedes studying unemployment in Grece instead of Greeks studying unemployment in Sweden.
• Estimate the cost implications
• Follow subsequent school careers
Danish study uses admin data to create contextual background for each respondent

• Danes match admin and survey data, showing a flatter U-shape for age for those who have lived more than 15 years, by about 0.2 points at age 50
Comments on Denmark by Steve Gibbons
Australia: The effect of childhood circumstances on later life well-being variability

• ‘sharper definition’ event impact, and then the area under the curve.
• Individuals are divided into resiliency groups.
• Good health, high control, and low neurotocism are all supports for resilience
Comments on Australia by Andrew Steptoe

• What are the touchstone characteristics of the different resilience classes?
• Likes the idea of having many events.
• Poor and good adapters face similar shock patterns,
• Maybe early experience helps to provide resilience. True here?
• Lab experiments also show a range of responses- is this genetic?
• Perhaps non-responders may just be flat
Some surprises

• How long it is taking to get standardized subjective well-being questions into cohort studies, mainline social surveys, and intervention studies.

• Survey and policy interest still predominantly on finding and treating pathologies, not on creating happiness.

• As noted in the policy session: still too much top-down policy design and delivery. Alternatives need testing.
Roads yet to be fully explored

• Going beyond the correlations to unpack heterogeneity and causal channels.
• Using multiple sources and samples to check robustness.
• Understand better the reasons why events and circumstances at one stage of the life course have particular echoes later: without that knowledge, policy implications are either weak or absent.
• Building the size and breadth of population level sources to enable disaggregation by geography, community characteristics, and to test the representativeness of cohort and panel studies.
Some possibilities

• Since longitudinal panels expensive and possibly special, consider alternatives:
• Some big data applications use the emotional valence of twitter feed
  add SB questions to regular online surveys run at high frequency for other purposes
Why not synthetic panels from large-scale repeated cross sections? Representative plus large samples possible
Eurobarometer Happiness: each line represents a birth cohort
Eurobarometer Happiness: each line represents a survey period
Notes

• The figure shows averages (weighted by survey weights) of life satisfaction recoded into an ascending order from 1-4 with 4 being the most satisfied.

• Only counties that entered the Eurobarometer surveys before 1975 are included. This excludes, for example, Austria that entered the surveys in 1994. The included countries are the UK, France, Belgium, Netherlands, West Germany, Italy, Luxembourg, Denmark, and Ireland.

• Standard errors are not reported, but all averages have at least 100 survey respondents. Cells with fewer than 100 observations were dropped. This primarily affects population in the oldest age groups. By and large, one can consider the following plots as focusing solely on age span from 15 to 79 (higher for some countries), while leaving out those with more senior ages because of (relative) lack of observations.
From the BHPS. Drawn from “How’s Life at Home?”
Cantril Ladder by Age and Perception of Immediate Supervisor

- **Mean Ladder Score**
- **Age Groups**: Age<30, 45-54, Age>65
- **Perception**:
  - View Immediate Superior as Boss
  - All
  - View Immediate Superior as Partner

The chart shows a comparison of mean ladder scores across different age groups and perceptions of the immediate supervisor. The scores range from 6.2 to 7.6.
Observed satisfaction with life among immigrants in Canada (0 to 40 years since arrival) and predicted SWL in their source countries

Note: Survey controls included for Canadian data.
People are more trustworthy than you think

Likelihood of lost wallet being returned

survey: neighbour  survey: stranger  actual: stranger