



Subjective well-being among preadolescents and their parents – Evidence of intergenerational transmission of well-being from urban China



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ABSTRACT

This paper examines whether intergenerational transmission of happiness exists in China between preadolescents and their parents, and what factors are correlated with subjective well-being among them. We find that parents' and their children's levels of subjective well-being are indeed significantly correlated, yet the factors that affect their well-being differ. Higher income, being a female, higher education, good health, and not being divorced result in higher well-being among the parents. Preadolescents' well-being is instead determined by different kinds of interactions with peers and parents, where being bullied or not is one of the most important factors.

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1. Introduction

The amount of research on subjective well-being and what influences people's well-being beyond the contribution of income is increasing (e.g., MacKerron, 2011). However, most of this research is exclusively related to adults. In this paper, we focus on well-being among preadolescents in an area undergoing rapid transition, i.e., Shenzhen, China. Shenzhen was the first special economic zone for economic reform¹ in China and has experienced massive growth in wealth over the last three decades (e.g., Chubarov and Brooker, 2013; Liu et al., 2007). However, this development has resulted in a more uneven income distribution, as well as privatization of social services. The objective of the present paper is to use a tailor-made survey to investigate what explains subjective well-being among Chinese preadolescents and the relationship between parents' and their children's subjective well-being in Shenzhen.

Most studies on subjective well-being have focused on Western European countries and North America, and hence it is of interest to investigate what affects subjective well-being in other cultures. Studying China is of particular interest for many reasons besides the obvious one, that one in five persons in the world lives in China. China is undergoing rapid changes – changes that are occurring much faster than in the previously studied Western countries – and this may affect people and society in many ways. The rapidly growing number of subjective well-being studies in China using adult respondents is an indication of the importance of understanding what factors affect well-being (e.g., Akay et al., 2012; Appleton and Song, 2008; Brown and Tierney, 2009; Cheung and Leung, 2004; Knight and Gunatilaka, 2009a, 2009b, 2010; Knight et al., 2009; Nielsen et al., 2010; Smyth et al., 2008). The findings in these studies have been similar to what has generally been found in Western countries: higher absolute income, and being healthy, married, and employed, all have a positive and significant impact on subjective well-being. At the same time, there is evidence that the average stated happiness level has declined despite the massive increase in material living standard (Brockmann et al., 2009). China's industrialization and urbanization processes have generated families with both parents working and neighborhoods and communities with residents who have migrated from somewhere else and who may not even greet each other. This has transformed the environments

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¹ Special economic zones were created for developing export-oriented industries and for attracting foreign direct investments.

in which children grow up, including the nature of interactions between adults and children. From a policy perspective, happiness has become an important issue in China. At the opening of the National People's Congress in 2011, former premier Wen Jiabao announced that happiness, in addition to GDP, is a yardstick to measure growth. Thus, China is following other countries, such as France² and the UK, in showing an emerging interest in happiness.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows: Section 2 describes the previous studies on subjective well-being of children and our model framework, Section 3 presents the sample characteristics and results, and Section 4 concludes the paper.

2. Subjective well-being of children and model framework

2.1. Subjective well-being of children

Subjective well-being is normally measured by asking respondents a question related to their degree of happiness or life satisfaction (for an example of questions asked in different surveys see, e.g., Dolan et al., 2008). This has resulted in insights, such as that being healthy, being employed, having a higher income, and being married are all of statistical and economic importance when explaining higher levels of subjective well-being among adults (see overviews in, e.g., Dolan et al., 2008; Frey and Stutzer, 2002; Van Praag and Ferrer-i-Carbonell, 2008). There is more or less a consensus in the subjective well-being literature on including basic socio-economic variables, which we refer to in the paper as standard variables.

However, many of the factors found to influence adults are not relevant for children (e.g., Proctor et al., 2009). There is also empirical evidence that family conditions during childhood have profound long-term effects on educational attainment, for example, and thus on the economic situation and well-being of children as adults (see, e.g., Ermisch and Francesconi, 2001; Jonsson and Gähler, 1997).³ An excellent overview of life satisfaction among young people is found in Proctor et al. (2009).

Because parents and children share the same environment and are, in most cases, genetically related, we might expect transmission of preferences. At the same time, for children, both genetics and living environment are largely correlated with the characteristics of the parents, especially prior to adolescence, which makes it more difficult to disentangle the role of genetics and the living environment. Previous studies have confirmed intergenerational transmission of IQ scores (Black et al., 2010), preferences for risk and trust (Dohmen et al., 2012), and income levels (Björklund and Chadwick, 2003; Chadwick and Solon, 2002). Other studies have found that parents' resources and backgrounds influence their children's educational attainment (Conley, 2001; Ferguson, 2006; Steelman and Powell, 1989). There are also a number of studies investigating the influence of parents' subjective well-being on their children. Winkelmann (2005) found a correlation of 0.44 in subjective well-being between parents and children using the German Socio-Economic Panel study. In a Spanish sample, Casas et al. (2008) found a correlation between parents and their children using a subjective well-being index. Schwarze and Winkelmann (2011) showed, in a German sample, that there was a strong positive association between the happiness of adult children and the happiness of their parents. In a British sample, moreover, Powdthavee and

Vignoles (2008) found that the mental health of the parents influences the children's subjective well-being, but the transmission from fathers is found to be stronger. Clair (2012) also found, in a British sample, a significant positive relationship between parents and their children's well-being, with mothers having more influencing, compared with fathers, on children whose well-being was not too low.

It is not straightforward to compare the findings of previous studies because they have focused on children of different ages, and age has been shown to be an important determinant of happiness (Csikszentmihalyi and Hunter, 2003).⁴ Winkelmann (2006) focused on the effect of parental separation among 16–18 year olds in Germany using the German Socio-economic Panel and found a negative but insignificant effect on children's subjective well-being.⁵ Cheng and Furnham (2002), Csikszentmihalyi and Hunter (2003), and Van de Wetering et al. (2010) all found that having friends is positively correlated with adolescents' subjective well-being.⁶ Suldo and Huebner (2004) showed that both emotional and practical support from parents greatly increase the well-being of 11–19 year olds, and Van de Wetering et al. (2010) found that having strict parents decreases the experienced well-being of adolescents at home. Terry and Huebner (1995) found the relationship with parents to be the strongest predictor of elementary school children's life satisfaction. Similarly, Park (2004) found a strong positive correlation between good family relations and adolescents' well-being.

2.2. Model framework

We will analyze which factors affect happiness among preadolescents and their parents. More importantly, we will also investigate whether there is a significant relationship between the parents' happiness and their children's happiness. This is an interesting issue since genetic factors have been found to explain correlations in happiness between people (e.g., Tellegen et al., 1988; Diener, 1996; Winkelmann, 2005), but also because parents and their children are exposed to the same environment (e.g., Casas et al., 2008). To begin with, we estimate the following two models:

$$y_i^P = \beta^P \chi_i + \delta^P z_i + \varepsilon_i$$

$$y_i^C = \beta^C \chi_i + \delta^C w_i + \theta_i$$

where y is the stated happiness of the parent and child in household i , x is a set of characteristics that can be hypothesized to affect the happiness of both parent and child, and z and w are specific for the parent and child, respectively. These are estimated with standard ordinary least squares. From these two models, we can compare the effects of the various factors on the happiness of the parent and child. We will then estimate three additional models for the child. In the first model, we add variables describing peer interactions, leisure-time activity, and school performance. Next, we add the stated happiness of the parent and, with this model, we can test whether there is a remaining correlation after controlling for the set of factors that might explain happiness. In the last model, we add a set of non-standard explanatory variables intended to measure the relationship between the parent and the child.

² In France, the report "Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress" was the result of a commission set up by the French president Stiglitz et al. (2009). The commission ("the Stiglitz Commission") was led by the Nobel Prize laureates Joseph Stiglitz and Amartya Sen.

³ It should be noted that the causal effects of family structure and child outcomes, for example, have been questioned; see, e.g., Björklund et al. (2007).

⁴ According to Csikszentmihalyi and Hunter (2003), the level of happiness decreases during the teenage years and has its lowest value at age 16.

⁵ Winkelmann (2006) found only 3 out of 25 explanatory variables to be significant, leaving most effects unexplained.

⁶ Cheng and Furnham (2002) studied 16–18 year old students in the U.K., Csikszentmihalyi and Hunter (2003) investigated a sample of 12–18 year olds in the U.S., and Van de Wetering et al. (2010) studied 12–14 year olds in the Netherlands.

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