



The role of interviewer encounters in panel responses on life satisfaction



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HIGHLIGHTS

- The study sheds light on the panel effect of declining life satisfaction responses.
- Unfamiliarity with an interviewer can affect people's response behavior.
- Interviewer changes trigger increases in reported life satisfaction.
- The negative trend is mostly determined by the overall time spent in the panel.
- The findings help to answer the question of how to deal with such response artifacts.

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ABSTRACT

This note examines a common explanation why participants of panel surveys may report declining life satisfaction over time. In line with the argument of developing trust relationships between interviewers and interviewees, the analysis reveals positive effects in reported life satisfaction when the person conducting the interview changes to an unfamiliar individual. Yet, the evidence also shows that the overall decline is determined by years in the panel, rather than by number of encounters with one specific interviewer.

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1. Introduction

Panel data is the preferred type of data for empirical researchers of life satisfaction. Among other things, it allows researchers to consider personality-related baseline levels of happiness for each individual which, due to the seminal work by Ferrer-i-Carbonell and Frijters (2004), has become a standard requirement in research on the determinants of subjective well-being. While longitudinal data permits analyses that are impossible to perform with cross-sectional data, it also reveals potential flaws in the information coming from survey participants. One phenomenon that receives increased attention is the so-called “panel effect” in life satisfaction responses (see e.g. D'Ambrosio and Frick (2012), Frijters and Beaton (2012), Kassenboehmer and Haisken-DeNew (2012), Wunder

et al. (2013)). Also known by the term “panel conditioning” it is simply defined as an effect resulting from answering the same question several times. For life satisfaction, the common finding is a negative trend in the data (e.g. Van Landeghem (2012)). Yet, due to a lack of research on the actual causes of this phenomenon, researchers often give rather ad hoc explanations, and they do not apply a uniform solution to this problem.¹

One explanation for the panel effect of declining life satisfaction responses is the so-called “learning effect” (see e.g. Frick et al.

¹ The standard approach is to expand empirical models with a linear counter variable, which increases by one with every year of participation (see e.g. Frijters et al. (2004); Headey et al. (2010)). Kassenboehmer and Haisken-DeNew (2012) additionally include years in panel squared. Wunder et al. (2013) exclude all information from first and second interviews of each person. As a mixed approach, D'Ambrosio and Frick (2012) drop all first interviews and include dummies for number of interviews in their dynamic analysis of well-being and income.

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(2006), Wooden and Li (forthcoming)).² Another argument often given by researchers relates to people's desire to not report honestly on their unhappiness when there is a lack of trust. In this vein, Frijters and Beaton (2012) point to increased honesty as driving force behind the negative time-in-panel trend, which they consider an important factor in revealing the true relationship between well-being and age. Like Baetschmann (forthcoming), they conclude that previous findings in the literature may be biased when such response artifacts are ignored. Kassenboehmer and Haisken-DeNew (2012) also point out the significance of considering years in the panel and argue that, over time, there is a growing trust relationship between interviewee and interviewer.

The motivation for this note builds specifically upon this argument. On closer inspection, the idea of developing trust in an interviewer requires interviewees to be confronted with the same person each year. However, for many panel participants, this assumption may not be true. While survey organizers typically aim to reduce respondent attrition by fostering personal relationships between interviewees and interviewers, they cannot prevent attrition of the latter, for instance, when interviewers decide to quit their job. In such cases, interviewees necessarily experience an exogenous change of person conducting the interview. Besides, participants may not be confronted with a person at all, if a visit-free interview mode is allowed by survey organizers. Having such variation allows for a deeper analysis of the trust-in-interviewer argument by comparing the effects of being visited by a specific interviewer with the potential effects of overall time in the panel. In addition to this, a specific phenomenon can be expected to emerge in the data if interviewer encounters play a significant role in people's response behavior. If survey participants report more positively about their lives when being visited by an interviewer for the first time, the trust-in-interviewer hypothesis would suggest that, in cases of interviewer changes, satisfaction responses go up again. As all previous studies have only considered overall panel participation time, the present study is the first to test whether this is true and how significant such an effect may be.

Following a brief description of the panel data used, some graphical illustrations prior to the multiple regression analyses help to clarify the main points of this investigation. The final section discusses results and draws conclusions for future empirical research.

2. Empirical application

This note exploits data from the German Socio-Economic Panel Study (SOEP), a large representative survey of households in Germany (see Wagner et al. (2007)).³ The availability of identification numbers in the SOEP allows interviewer identification in all interview modes with interviewer presence.⁴ To determine the number of times an interviewee encounters a specific interviewer, identifiers must be available for all interviews during an interviewee's panel career, which leads to a different sample than in previous

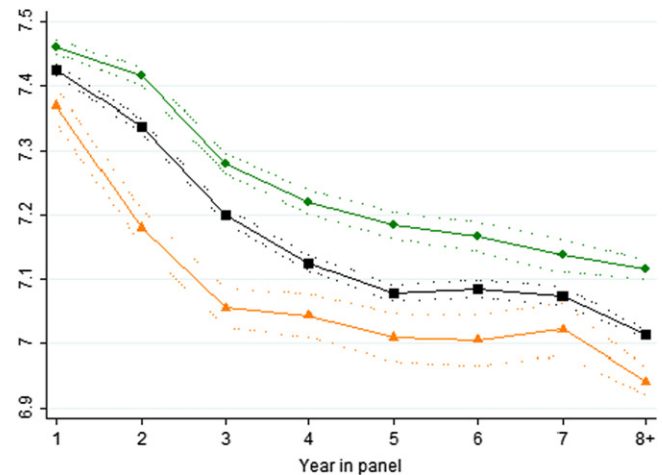


Fig. 1. Average life satisfaction and years in panel. Figure shows unweighted life satisfaction averages of all participants (black squares), of those who only respond to the same interviewer who conducted the first interview (green circles) and of those who only fill out questionnaires without interviewer presence (yellow triangles) by year of participation. Note: The dotted lines always label 95% confidence intervals. Source: SOEP data from 1985 to 2011.

studies using SOEP data.⁵ Nevertheless, the application of the same methodological approach as in Frijters and Beaton (2012) as well as in Kassenboehmer and Haisken-DeNew (2012) allows the comparison of results regarding the panel effect. Accordingly, the analyses here also make use of pooled ordinary least squares (OLS) and OLS with fixed individual effects.

Fig. 1 shows the standard pattern of declining life satisfaction responses by year in panel. To examine the interviewee–interviewer relationship more closely, the decline is also shown for those who only respond to the same interviewer who conducted the first interview. Yet, apart from an almost constant difference in life satisfaction levels, the picture is similar when examining the quasi control group of interviewees who solely fill out questionnaires on their own, i.e. without interviewers. This comparison suggests that it is overall participation in the panel that determines the decline in reported well-being. To examine what happens when an interviewee meets a different interviewer than before, Fig. 2 shows life satisfaction averages for those participants in the sample who are visited at least four times in a row by one interviewer but prior to that four times in a row by a different person. The finding of a remarkable shift in the trend of declining life satisfaction substantiates the above expectation.

Multiple regression analyses verify whether the findings remain significant when potentially relevant factors are considered as controls. In particular, there is a good reason for interviewer changes, which is when SOEP participants move to a different location. Thus, the standard control variables commonly used in previous studies are expanded with variables for recent moves. Also included are many variables capturing potential differences in standard of living.

The first step is to reproduce the standard finding in the literature. Table 1 does that by showing a linear years-in-panel effect, yet, with one important objection. As soon as year effects are considered, the negative effect disappears in fixed-effects models. The explanation for this is closely related to the discussion of why linear age cannot be used in such models (see Ferrer-i-Carbonell and Frijters (2004)). Only the fact that some interviewees refuse to participate every year allows use of a linear variable for years in panel

² This idea implies that data quality generally increases over time, as participants make use of the life satisfaction scale in a way that they do not in the first few times. Resulting from a learning process, participant answers become more accurate year by year while, initially, they report too high levels of life satisfaction.

³ Life satisfaction is obtained in the SOEP on a scale ranging from 0 to 10, with higher scores indicating greater well-being. The wording is: "How satisfied are you with your life, all things considered?"

⁴ These modes are oral and partly oral interviews (either with paper and pencil or with computer assistance) as well as self-completed questionnaires with an interviewer present. In roughly one third of all cases, participants fill out questionnaires without an interviewer present. This happens when a household member is not at home during the visit or when there is contact via mail only. Note that there are also a few atypical modes, such as telephone interviews. These are dropped from the analysis, just like interviews in the presence of interpreters.

⁵ Note that there are no interviewer identification numbers available for the first SOEP wave of 1984.

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