

Parenthood is one key stage within the lifecourse ‘quest for happiness’ that has a relationship with an individual's wellbeing (Billari, in Kohler, 2016, p.334). Existing scholarship is primarily qualitative in factors contributing to and resulting from parenthood– whether family planning, how the birth of a first child affects the choice to have a second, demographic reasonings for childbirth, and satisfaction following childbirth (Margolis, 2015). These four papers seek to contribute to these subjective findings by quantifying changes in self-reported wellbeing– for Glass et al (2016) this originates in parental welfare policy practices, for Margolis (2015) this is an exploration of how the initial transition to parenthood affects later births, for Matysiak (2016) this is the bidirectional conflict between family and work, and for Myrskylä (2014) this is how the broader process of childbearing is a determining factor on wellbeing. These papers notably converge in highlighting fertility behaviour as a seminal moment for both short and long term parental wellbeing yet diverge in their heterogeneous reasonings and justification of influences at different scales. This essay aims to explore areas of consensus and disagreement amongst these articles and concluding with the application of empirical evidence.

In exploring these papers, it is important to address their spatiality. Glass (2016) draws from both European Social Surveys (ESS), International Social Survey Programme (ISSP), and uses the United States as reference. This paper is unique in its scale of 22 countries but also in coding two different surveys into one dataset– the authors mitigate the impact on analysis by comparing difference between parent and non-parent happiness in situ as opposed to two difference between different datasets (Glass, 2016, p.10). The Margolis (2015) paper uses data from the German Socio-Economic Panel Study (SOEP) with the justification that the longitudinal dataset is of high quality. Matysiak (2016) uses the Household, Income, and Labour Dynamics in Australia

(HILDA) panel due to unique its inclusion of subjective questions alongside wellbeing surveying. The Myrskylä (2014) paper uses the British Household Panel Survey (BHPS) and the SOEP but does not concatenate and recode as Glass (2016) does. The macro country context is crucial in discussing the extents of these datasets but also how parental wellbeing is influenced due to social norms— Matysiak (2016) argues there is a culture of having two children in Australia whereas both Myrskylä (2014) and Margolis (2015) highlight divisions in East and West Germany as having cultural influences on family planning. For these papers drawing on SOEP, cultural differences for children born out of wedlock and stigma of negatively speaking on new childbirth perhaps influence the sample frames, especially in exploring post-childbirth happiness (Myrskylä) and determinants for successive childbirth (Margolis). Furthermore, all papers argue that fertility is a choice, following the second demographic transition, yet all use datasets from the Global North (including the 22 countries in the Glass paper) (Myrskylä, 2014). The review article highlights this as a need for credible, rich datasets for understanding influences on fertility and suggests subjective wellbeing as a ‘lens’ for Ethiopia and Malawi— although quantitative, this further scholarship should aim to be constructive and with the aim of relationship building as opposed to being, as implied, extractive (Kohler et al, 2016, p.336).

Beyond the second demographic transition theory, the resultant wellbeing of parents can be explored through their reasonings for childbirth. Matysiak (2016) presents several theories for entering this life course stage as a goal, social recognition, and societal integration (social learning). Myrskylä (2014) also presents a temporal aspect in discussing the rate at which parents have children and the spacing inbetween childbirths (p.1844). Alternatively, Margolis (2015) stresses the perceptions of previous childrearing influencing later childbirth decisions. The

aspirational reasonings for entering this life course stage are contrasted by the quality of experience of having the first child (Margolis, 2015, p.1159). If the initial transition to parenthood is difficult, parents are less likely to have a subsequent child. Margolis (2015) suggests policymakers should draw attention to welfare support packages to raise fertility, which Glass (2016) categorises as the 'proximate' and the ignored 'distal' (p.4). Proximate factors are common across different settings, such as access to childcare, or Matysiak's work-family bidirectional conflict (Glass, 2016, p.4). Distal factors here are the behavioural, gendered norms that influence choice, experience, and are determinants in subsequent fertility choices. Where Margolis would suggest that parental pre-planning is mutable as a result of experience, Glass and Matysiak suggest the strength of policy intervention that can improve this experience. Myrskylä (2014) alternatively proposes that educational and financial resource acquisition by parents is a greater influential factor than policy (p.1862).

The 'hedonic treadmill' acts as a point of comparison for all papers except Margolis (2015). The metaphor of the treadmill suggests that individuals return to a fixed level of happiness and the positive effects of childbearing are only temporary (Brickman and Campbell, 1971, in Matysiak, 2016, p.358). Glass (2016) applies this distal effect to a macro scale when considering fertility rates for parental happiness— countries with lower fertility have a selection bias where parents will have greater happiness. In place of this, Myrskylä (2014) highlights how trajectories for wellbeing can return to pre-childbirth levels except in the case of young parents (where it becomes negative) or older parents (where it becomes positive) linking to the acquisition of resources at a micro scale. Applying the treadmill to Margolis would perhaps be beneficial in understanding why parents choose to not have another child— parents who feel parenting was

harder than expected or would add further strain to their employment make choices to ‘correct’ their life course and return to a fixed level of happiness (Margolis, 2015, p.1163). This experience of the initial transition to parenthood acts as the arbiter for successive pregnancies either directly or indirectly (Myrskylä, 2014, p.1844). Agency is hence a notable variable in other life course literature.

A point of contention for these papers and their findings is the interpretation of relationships. The change in traditional family structure towards the individual is a crucial element of the second demographic transition but also in interpreting fertility rates (Myrskylä, p.1862). With all four papers asking individuals for their self-reported happiness, the role of the couple is neglected here. Margolis (2015) does however mention how under difficult circumstances, fathers concern for the health of their spouses can be a determinant for a successive pregnancy (p.1149). The Myrskylä (2014) paper describes that unobserved factors (like relationship quality) are a weakness here and this can be applied to the other studies. For example, Margolis (2015) measures whether respondents were ‘married, cohabiting, or unpartnered’ yet could ask how long they have been in the relationship, the self-reported ‘quality’ of relationship, and if they are fulfilled with their relationship despite children. Matysiak (2016) highlights ‘time conflict, leisure, and emotional distress’ as further areas individuals could be asked to respond to (p.358)

This problem of reporting on the individual as opposed to the couple is continued when considering that the wellbeing of parents is compared with those without children. Although the papers have different objectives (in proving effectiveness of policy, determinant parity, work-family conflicts, and happiness), they take different approaches to constructing their samples.

Glass (2016) actually demonstrates that all women benefit from supportive family policy due to their gendered roles— notably Myrskylä (2014) finds for the same reason that women are more susceptible to exhaustion and negative changes in wellbeing from the supportive parental role. Where gendered roles are important in understanding the roles of maternal figures, these papers struggle with female employment. Glass (2016) presents gender inequalities ‘in the home and the workplace’ but does not acknowledge what Matysiak presents as an example of these— how conflict may have removed the prospect of children or returning to paid work (p.6) (p.373)

The methodological approaches by the other authors are well-judged as Margolis (2015) excludes those without children, or who already had a child, and those with stepchildren or who had adopted were also excluded. This is appropriate for exploring determinants of further parity. Matysiak (2016) suggests that this limits the sample size yet the work-family conflict framework is more amenable to those with potential ‘spillover of responsibilities’ (p.357). Myrskylä (2014) establishes three age categories of young (18-22), adult (23-34), and mature (35+) for self reported wellbeing. These choices are contextualised when considering sample size, Glass (2016) accounts for this with a combination of datasets, Margolis (2015) follows 2016 individuals with a first birth with 1170 with a second, Matysiak (2016) has a sample size of 7136 but acknowledges a limit of response leading to an assumption that conflict affects children proportionally (so regression analysis could be performed), and Myrskylä (2014) with 10291 individuals from both Britain and Germany. Where repeating these studies with larger sample sizes or aiming to reduce attrition would improve robustness, or considering additional variables (like type of relationship) could suggest greater psychosocial mechanisms, an improvement

would be to supplement these findings with qualitative data on these unobservable variables (Myrskylä, 2014).

When considering the findings of these papers, there are some notable findings amidst these criticisms. For Glass (2016), work flexibility is the only outlier as it is not as important for parental wellbeing than nonparents. Yet, it forms part of their comprehensive policy index (CPI) that has a statistical significance of less than 0.001 indicating a strong reliable association between happiness of respondents and policy effectiveness (p.38). For Margolis (2015), wellbeing at first birth had statistical significance of less than 0.001 for those who were women, not in employment, with low income, and with less education (p.1160). For Matysiak (2016), there conflict is interchangeable in both directions as a result of similar results between family and employment. There are three levels of statistical significance for strong conflicts and weak conflicts following second births (p.374). In both German and British datasets of Myrskylä (2014), the wellbeing of expectant and postpartum mothers are less than 0.05 meaning we can reject the null hypothesis and accept that they gain more happiness (p.1852). This increase perhaps follows the treadmill as subsequent children lead to a smaller increase in happiness. These findings are indicative of what Matysiak (2016) describes as an ‘open door’ for policy intervention– these findings can inform decisions to improve proximate factors like employment, education level, and parental support (p.373).

In conclusion, parenthood as a stage in the life course is not homogenous but with complexities. These four articles present differing explorations of how parenthood is navigated, and how individuals as part of couples choose to choose to continue parenthood. Conflict and

employment, age, postponement of births, and welfare policy further complicate the wellbeing of parents, especially when considering children born in succession. It is incorrect to assume that these variables operate in isolation when there are both near and distant societal impacts on parental decision making. These papers draw conclusions that must be read together with qualitative scholarship for a holistic understanding of parental life course, yet, that does not suggest understanding parenthood could further unveil psychosocial mechanisms, especially regarding gendered roles.

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