

Parental happiness and the welfare state ^[1]

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Source: Washington Post

Format: Article

Publication Date: 5 Jul 2010

AVAILABILITY

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EXCERPTS

One hates to invoke Scandinavia in stories about child-rearing, but it can't be an accident that the one superbly designed study that said, unambiguously, that having kids makes you happier was done with Danish subjects. The researcher, Hans-Peter Kohler, a sociology professor at the University of Pennsylvania, says he originally studied this question because he was intrigued by the declining fertility rates in Europe. One of the things he noticed is that countries with stronger welfare systems produce more children - and happier parents.

This got me wondering: Is there actual social science backing up Kohler's inkling that strong welfare states improve parental happiness? It turns out that there is, and quite a bit of it, too. Arnstein Aassve, Stefano Mazzucco and Letizia Mencarini's "Childbearing and Well-Being" from 2005 (abstract [here](#); full text behind a paywall) classified a sampling of countries into four categories based on the size of their welfare states. Social democratic welfare systems (Denmark, Finland, Netherlands) have generous, universal benefits to families; conservative ones (Belgium, France, Austria) tied benefits to occupation and earnings; liberal ones (Great Britain, Ireland) have highly means-tested benefits and rely more on market mechanisms; and Mediterranean ones (Greece, Italy, Spain, Portugal) have limited public support and rely on families for social assistance.

The researchers then used a measure they call the "deprivation index" to measure well-being. The index takes into account various kinds of hardship (high crime, housing unaffordability, ability to pay bills) that a family can face.

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Demographers Rachel Margolis and Mikko Myrskylä, in their new paper, "A Global Perspective on Happiness and Fertility", take a different tack. They used reported happiness, relying on surveys asking parents in each country whether, "Taking all things together, would you say you are very happy, quite happy, somewhat happy or not at all happy?" They use the same welfare regime classifiers as Aassve et. al, adding on developing countries and former Soviet states; their sample size is also much larger (86 countries, with the U.S. classified as a "liberal" regime). They then looked at how each additional child affects parental reported happiness in each regime type, controlling for sex, marital status, income, socioeconomic status, etc.

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Note that having children (as Senior's article goes into at great length) consistently reduces reported happiness with new parents, but, as the researchers state, "the negative association ... is weakest in social democratic and conservative welfare regimes." That is, having a kid will hurt your happiness the least if you're in a country with a social democratic or conservative welfare regime. However, this changes with parents older than 40.

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At that age, kids start to make parents happier, but primarily in countries with weak (post-Soviet, Southern European/Mediterranean, developing) welfare states. What's going on here? Margolis and Myrskylä hazard a guess:

"Older respondents in both former socialist states and in southern European states were significantly happier with children than those without. These countries have much weaker welfare states than continental or Nordic countries and rely much more on familial support. We did not however, find a significantly positive relationship for developing countries which also have lower state support than social democratic or conservative countries. However, the unrepresentative nature of the samples in developing countries might oversample wealthy and urban respondents and therefore underestimate the degree to which parents need to rely on children for old age support."

In short: It appears likely that parents are getting happier because their children take the place of the welfare state in old age. Parents in social democratic countries always have that support, so having kids does not make much difference.

- reprinted from the Washington Post

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