

And You Think Having Children Will Make You Happy!

A Case of Focusing Illusion

Like many other young couples our age, my long-term girlfriend and I are thinking about starting a family of our own. Two things are currently on our to-do list. First is to get married. And second is to have two children, hopefully one boy and one girl. So far the case for marriage looks good: There is a huge hit in happiness for both husband and wife in the year of marriage that tends to last for many years afterwards (see, e.g., Lucas, Clark, Georgellis, and Diener, 2003). The case for having children, on the other hand, does not look so wonderful.

Over the past few decades, social scientists like me have found consistent evidence that there is an almost zero association between having children and happiness. See an analysis by Powdthavee (2008) for a recent British example of parents and non-parents reporting the same levels of life satisfaction, on average. Using data sets from Europe and America, numerous scholars have even found some evidence that, on aggregate, parents often report statistically significantly lower levels of happiness (Alesina, Di Tella, and MacCulloch, 2004), life satisfaction (Di Tella, MacCulloch, and Oswald, 2003), marital satisfaction (Twenge, Campbell, and Foster, 2003), and mental well-being (Clark and Oswald, 2002) compared to non-parents. There is also evidence that the strains associated with parenthood are not only limited to the period during which children are physically and economically dependent. For example, Glenn and McLanahan (1981) found those older parents whose children have left home report the same or slightly less happiness than non-parents of similar age and status. Thus, what these results are suggesting is something very controversial: It

basically says that having children does not bring any obvious joy to our life whatsoever.

Focusing illusion

However, the most surprising thing about the whole “children = happiness?” story is not the fact that we keep finding a negative or a statistically insignificant association between having children and different measures of well-being. For over two decades, we have been able to explain why parenthood can be especially stressful as well as rewarding. McLanahan and Adams (1989), for instance, have found parents with children at home to spend, on average, a significant amount of time worrying about their children and feeling less efficacious as an adult – something which non-parents do not have to experience. None of these should surprise us – we all know that being a parent is really hard work – but they do. And that is perhaps the most surprising thing about the above findings: it is the fact that most of us would find the “children ≠ happiness” results surprising in the first place.

There is a wide spread belief in every human culture that children bring happiness. When people are asked to think about parenthood – either imagining future offspring or thinking about their current ones – they tend to conjure up pictures of healthy babies, handsome boys or gorgeous-looking girls who are flawless in every way. This is the case even when the prospective parents know that raising a child will be painstakingly difficult; they tend to think quite happily about parenthood, which is why most of them eventually leap into it.

Why do we have such a rosy view about parenthood? One possible explanation for this, according to Daniel Gilbert (2006), is that the belief of “children bring happiness” transmits itself much more successfully from generation to generation than the belief of “children bring misery”. The phenomena, which Gilbert coins it “super-replicator”, can be explained further by the fact that people who believe that there is no joy in parenthood – and who thus stop having them – are unlikely to be able to pass on their belief much further beyond their own generation. It is a little bit like Darwin’s theory of the survival of the fittest: Only the belief that has the best chance of transmission – even if it is a faulty one – will be passed on.

Gilbert’s evolutionary theory of super-replicator is not only wonderfully crafted but also powerfully convincing. Its only flaw comes in the form of testability. How do we go about testing his idea when it is unlikely to show up in the well-being data?

Although we may not be able to test Gilbert’s theory directly, we may however be able to test its implications on another theory that is empirically testable. According to Daniel Kahneman and David Schkade, part of the problem with stated preferences, or any judgement requiring the comparison of two or more alternatives, is that they suffer from inherent focusing illusion, best captured in the maxim “Nothing in life is quite as important as you think it is while you are thinking about it.” When asked to predict whether Californians or Mid-Westerners would be happiest, respondents in California and the Mid-West both forecast that the former would be happiest when, in fact, there was no difference (Schkade and Kahneman, 1998). The reason for this discrepancy appears obvious: California and the Mid-West differ mostly in terms of their

weather, which is salient in a joint evaluation of both places but not salient in a separate evaluation of living in one place.

To imagine what it might be like to be a mother or a father to our children is not much different to imagining what it might be like to live in California: We are likely to focus more of our attention on the good things about being a parent and less so on the bad things about being a parent, perhaps because of the belief that children bring happiness. What this theory is implying is that we are likely to become happier with our life – and this will be much more so than usual because of the focusing illusion – the moment we find out we are about to become a parent, which could be up to nine months before the birth of our child. Reality (e.g. more time spent changing dirty nappies than seeing them smile for the first time) will likely kick in, however, almost as soon as we or our partner give birth to our child, which will lead to a considerable drop in well-being afterwards.

Although not originally written with aim to test for the effects of focusing illusion on happiness in mind, Clark, Diener, Georgellis, and Lucas (2008) did just that. In their seminal paper that examines the long-run dynamics of life satisfaction across changes in different life events, they have found that there is a significant increase in life satisfaction for both males and females one year before the birth of their child – which is also present at the year of child's birth ($T=0$) – before dropping beyond zero within one year of he or she being born (see Figures A and B). Both males and females then go on to experience significant unhappiness for the next four years before being 'just' content about parenthood, i.e. they become no less happier than when they were childless all those years ago.

It is then natural to ask from the above findings: Why do negative experiences of being somebody's parent outweigh that of the positives? Yes – you might find yourself thinking – being a parent is really hard work but, surely, there must be some positive experiences that come with it to offset all those negative ones as well! And so, yes, I would buy the results that showed statistically insignificant association between happiness and parenthood but not the findings that children only bring overall misery. This is simply because I, and I'm sure as do most people, believe that all parents do experience a 50-50 ratio of positive and negative things about raising a child. My seeing my first born child smile for the first time would do more than enough to compensate any stress he or she brings me in the form of dirty nappies and constant whining – even if the former experience is rarer than the latter. In other words, shouldn't the well-being hit from a higher but less frequent quality experience with our children be larger than – or, at the very least, equal to – the small but more frequent misery that raising children can bring?

Again, the idea of focusing illusion and how we normally allocate our attention to different things in life can help explain that. For example, we tend believe that the rare but meaningful experiences – such as seeing our children smile for the first time or graduate from a university or getting married – would give us massive increases in our happiness. And indeed they do, but these boosts in well-being, often to our surprises, tend not to last for very long. One explanation for this lies in the nature of these experiences. How often do we think about these rare but meaning experiences on a day-to-day basis, that is, if we are not prompted to think about them? It is, if you like, winning a lottery. We may be incredibly happy at first if we win, say, £1,000,000

from the National Lottery. But soon enough that money will go into our bank account or into our other extravagant spending sprees in the forms of nice cars or a big house in the country, most of which, after having gotten them, we do not spend a lot of time thinking about everyday (see, for example, Kahneman, Krueger, Schkade, Schwarz, and Stone, 2004). However, because the experience of winning the lottery is so salient to us – perhaps partly because it is such a rare event – that, if we are asked to think about it again, we are likely to exaggerate the values that it brings.

It is, on the other hand, much more likely that we as parents will end up spending a large chunk of our time attending to the very core process of child care such as “Am I going to be able to pick up David from his school in time?” or “How do I stop Sarah from crying!” Most of these negative experiences are probably a lot less salient than our other positive experiences we have with our kids, which is probably why we tend not think about them when prompted with a question of whether or not children bring us happiness. Nevertheless, it is these small but more frequent negative experiences, rather than the less frequent but meaningful experiences, that take up most of our attention that we are allowed to have in a day. It should therefore come to no surprise to us that these negative experiences that come with parenthood will show up much more often in our subjective experiences, including happiness and life satisfaction, than activities that are, although rewarding, relatively rare.

These findings are, of course, extremely depressing. Yet perhaps they represent something we know deep down to be true: Raising children is probably the toughest and the dullest job in the world. But what if we do not give into this comfortable illusion? What if all of us decided one day – for the sake of our own personal

happiness – not to have children anymore? Then chances are that the future will stop at our generation, which is perhaps worse beyond our comprehension. There are also many questions remained. For instance, given that the above findings are based on data sets taken from developed countries with a fairly homogenous culture, could it be possible that the dynamics of well-being observed before and after having a child – as shown in Clark et al. (2008) – will be different in other cultures such as that of the Chinese and Latin Americans? Will the dynamics vary significantly according to the gender and the order of birth of the child, e.g., will the focusing illusion still be there if the parents know the gender of their baby beforehand, or if it is their second or third child? What happens if the child is not of the parents' preferred sex? What is the optimal number of children that would maximise parents' well-being? A lot more research is required in this area.

At the moment, however, I am quite comfortable with having such an illusion. But that is only because I have yet another concern that, although much more unorthodox than whether children bring happiness, requires my attention all the same. And that is, what would be the best way to ask my girlfriend's father for his daughter's hand in marriage without the possibility of him saying no. Everything else, at this very moment, is just second-order to me.

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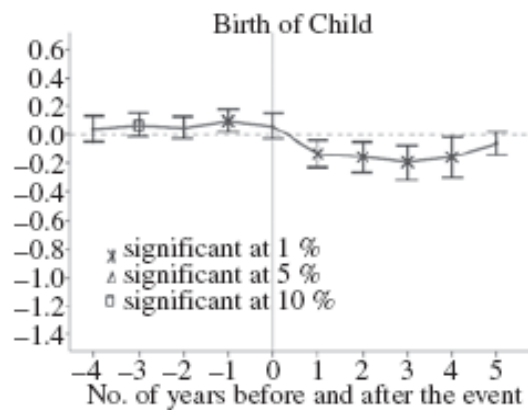
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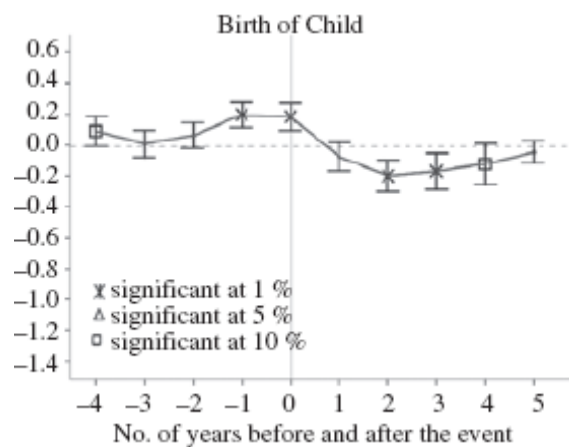
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Figures A and B: The Dynamic of Life Satisfaction and Birth of Child (Males and Females)

A) Males



B) Females



Source: Clark, Diener, Georgellis, and Lucas (2008).