

Report on PAA side meeting as part of the activities of the SWELL_FER ERC project and IUSSP Scientific Panel on Subjective Well-being and Demography – “Integrating Subjective Wellbeing in the demographic research agenda”.

Date: April 26, 2017 from 1:30 PM to 5:30 PM

Place: Chicago, Hilton hotel, conference room 4J

People: The meeting has been organized and headed by Letizia Mencarini. For the participants, see the list of presentations. There was a public of about 20 people (among them, professors A. Aassve, A. Liefbroer, W. Lutz and Anna Matysiak).

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This was a side-meeting of the PAA conference, held on the day before the kick-off of the 2017 PAA conference. It was held on April 26, 2017 from 1:30 PM to 5:30 PM in conference room 4J.

The side meeting was an informal workshop for scientists interested in integrating subjective well-being into the analysis of demographic process. As was also clear from the background of the participants, the workshop had a clear interdisciplinary agenda, capturing insights from demography, economics, sociology and psychology.

The aim of the workshop was bring together scientists from various disciplines so that one can learn and assess the role of subjective wellbeing for demographic process. The venue of Chicago was specially chosen, since the PAA conference attracts the leading population scientists from across the World - independent of their discipline.

The workshop was well advertised in advance, and was also listed as part of the PAA program. The workshop was based on an initial call for paper contributions. We received very high quality papers. Whereas the workshop consisted of two sessions (with a coffee break in between), it was not possible to fit all contributions into the workshop. The selection of the papers included in the program was done by the members of the IUSSP scientific panel, and it was done so with no major disagreement in terms of which papers merited to be included in the program.

The event was introduced by Letizia Mencarini (the head of the IUSSP scientific group), who gave an overview of the literature, with a focus on areas in which the concept of SWB is being used in conjunction with studying demographic events and processes. She then moved on to give an overview of the gaps of this literature and potential weaknesses, to which the research community may want to address. As such she gave several suggestions as to new lines of research.

In the first session Kelsey O'Connor from University of Southern California presented a paper in which he analysed the impact of the Great Recession across different demographic groups in the US. He reported that the Recession's far-reaching consequences were not equally felt. The foreign-born fared the worst, men worse than women, and non-youth worse than youth, where declining income and rising unemployment best explain the effects. This analysis is based on data from the General Social Survey (1972 to 2014). The analysis was based on individuals' level regressions, including macro control variables as a means to estimate group-specific trends and deviations from trend occurring in 2008 and 2010.

The second paper was presented by Daniele Vignoli (co-authored by Gianmario Alderotti) and focussed on the impact of term-limited working contracts on fertility intentions, bringing in the role of subjective well-being. The analysis is novel in the sense that the population on limited contracts is heterogeneous. It ranges from those in precarious situations, who move from one short-term contract to another to high career achievers where movements across contracts are part of their career progression. These two types of workers will most likely report strong differences in subjective wellbeing, and indeed the analysis indicates how controlling for SWB enables the analysts to distinguish these groups - and show that the effect on fertility intentions indeed differ.

The third paper, entitled "Son Preference, Parental Satisfaction, and Sex Ratio Transition", was presented by Kageyama Junji of Meikai University (co-authors Risa Hagiwara, Kazuma Sato and Eriko Teramura). This paper considered to what extent whether reported SWB is affected differently depending on the gender of the children born. The focus is put on societies with strong gender preferences for children. They perform the analysis for different SWB domains.

The fourth paper was presented by Nicolò Cavalli (university of Oxford), with the title "Assortative mating in subjective wellbeing and fertility outcomes. This paper tackles a highly interesting issue not often dealt with in the literature - though as also pointed out by Mr Cavalli, is hard to resolve from an empirical point of view. The idea is that individuals may systematically form partnership - in part - driven by their subjective wellbeing. Using the Understanding Society survey (i.e. the former BHPS) he presented various strategies for identifying whether this is indeed the case. His preliminary analysis suggests that there is potentially an important effect in that not only may SWB itself increase your chances for finding a partner, but they tend to have a systematic matching based on their SWB.

The fifth paper was presented by Wang Jia of University of Wisconsin (co-author: Shu Cai - Jinan University). The title of the paper was "Less Advantaged, More Optimistic? Subjective Well-Being among Rural, Migrant and Urban Populations in Contemporary China". Apart from presenting analysis from the recent national data set from China Family Panel Studies, for which the panel was not very familiar with, the study provided new evidence regarding the subjective well-being puzzle across multiple indicators among rural, migrant and urban populations in contemporary China. The results show that rural people on average have higher level of life satisfaction and are more confident about the future than migrants or urban residents, despite their disadvantaged economic situation. The decomposition analyses reveal subjective social status plays a substantial role in accounting for the group disparities in life satisfaction and confidence, whereas objective social status and experiences of social mobility have less explanatory power. These findings suggest the importance of within-group comparison in shaping individuals' well-being in segregated societies such as China.

The final paper was presented by Letizia Mencarini of Bocconi University (Co-authors: Pierluigi Conzo (University of Torino) and Giulia Fuochi (University of Padua)) and concerned the impact of childbearing on subjective wellbeing for men and women of different ages (i.e. different life stages) in rural Ethiopia. This is an important contribution because it is among the very few studies of fertility and SWB in low income settings. They show that fertility has a detrimental effect on SWB for women in the short run (i.e. when children are born and are young), whereas there is a positive effect of fertility for men's SWB in order age. The study is useful as it explains the fertility & poverty puzzle so often high-lighted for low income countries. Essentially it confirms anthropological studies that social status (and hence SWB) is increased for men in old age if they have a large number of children (which is otherwise counter-productive in terms of poverty).

The workshop was wrapped up by Hans-Peter Kohler who discussed the contributions and discussed further directions for research - incorporating the findings presented in the side-meeting.

One important contribution was made by Art Liefbroer who argued that one weakness of most existing surveys is that questions concerning SWB tend to be too broad. Generally questions are framed either as a general 10 point scale measure about Happiness or life satisfaction. However, as family life, childbearing included, consists of a range of elements and domains, one needs to consider expanding existing surveys to better captures those particularities. This concerned was confirmed by panel members, but they also pointed out (e.g. Letizia Mencarini) that some surveys do indeed ask SWB questions for different domains, and there is indication that indeed SWB domains react differently to demographic events.

At the end the panel members convened a short meeting discussing the contributions of the papers in the session. There was broad agreement that the side-meeting was highly successful. It answered to the aim set out initially in that it brought forward several avenues of research not currently explored well in the demographic literature.

Milan, 6 June 17

Letizia Mencarini