

## **Are Married with Children Happy? A Study on the Relationship between Subjective Well-being and Fertility in Turkey**

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### **Introduction**

Fertility has declined to a large extent in Turkey in last 30 years. During 1990s, total fertility rate (TFR) decreased to three births, then stabilized at around 2.6 births in 2003. Then, it started to decline again and the level of fertility decreased to 2.16 in 2008. The last TDHS 2013 survey shows that TFR for Turkey is 2.26 births which is slightly higher than the replacement level of 2.10 per woman (HÜNEE, 2014). Recently, promoting fertility has become the focus target of the population policy in Tenth Five Year Development Plan (2014-2018) of Turkey. The birth support programs started with third-child campaigns, initiated by the former Prime Minister, then it is followed by incentive packages for mothers including regulations to improve work-family life balance of women.

Leave the debate on whether minimum number of children should be three or five in the public aside, the majority of the people believe that marriage without kids are not successful, and think that having kids within marriage is the recipe for happiness. The results of Life Satisfaction Survey (2014) show that family (73 %), children (13 %), partner (5 %) are as the sources of happiness for respondents (TUIK, 2015). Similarly, according to the findings of ISSP Family and Changing Gender Roles IV survey, 91 % of the respondents state that biggest happiness for them is to watch their children grow up (Çarkoğlu and Kalaycıoğlu, 2013).

This study aims to contribute to growing area of research by investigating the nature of the relationship between childbearing and happiness in Turkey through focusing on its trends and determinants in the last twenty years which, to the best of our knowledge, has not been studied before. Nevertheless, there have been too few studies questioning the empirical relationships between partnership, having children and subjective well-being in much of the demographic research and happiness studies up to now. Moreover, much studies in this field have only focused on western developed societies, thus is much less is known about the influence of childbearing on people's satisfaction with their lives in other countries.

### **Theoretical background and Literature:**

Subjective well-being (SWB) tends to be used to refer to people's evaluation of all the spheres of their lives and it has two fundamental components. These components are: personal assessment of life at the cognitive level i.e. satisfaction with life and emotional reaction to life events at affective or hedonic level i.e. happiness (Andrews and Withey, 2005; Campbell, Converse, and Rodgers, 1976; Diener, 1994; Michalos, 1980)<sup>1</sup>. In this study, happiness is understood in the frame of 'liveability approach' which stresses the importance of the institutional settings in which life chances, i.e. external sources and opportunities to have a decent life such as income, education, health services and political liberties, are shaped and distributed among individuals (Veenhoven, 2000). Happiness research has benefited from the immense data and claimed that the recipe of happiness for the people around the

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<sup>1</sup> The discussion and identifying clear-cut boundaries between happiness and life satisfaction is beyond this study and we will use the terms subjective well-being, happiness and life satisfaction as interchangeably.

globe has been formulated at a basic level. Thus, the factors, which are health, marital status, and employment status, explaining subjective well-being across different nations are more or less stable despite the variation in cultural backgrounds among them (Helliwell et al., 2009; Powdthavee, 2007; Becchetti and Pelloni (2010).

Even though the children are the invaluable for their parents, previous evidence suggest that the existence and direction of the relationship between having children and people's subjective well-being is mixed and inconclusive (Aasver et al. 2014; Billari and Kohler, 2009; Dolan et al. 2008). While some studies do find significant positive effect of kids on the parents' happiness, some other studies show negative, even no effect. In addition to having children, number of children is significant to understand the nature of the relationship, because the well-being outcomes of the first children differ significantly from having second or third child for both mother and fathers (Kohler, et al., 2005). The subjective well-being and fertility association is two sided, that that there is empirical evidence for not only "partner + children = happiness" but also "partner + happiness = children" (Parr, 2010). However, in this study, we focus on the only one direction denoting the effect of having children on people's subjective well-being.

The nature of the relationship between childbearing and happiness can be explained by referring to the Second Demographic Transition theory since it underlines the significance of the couple's calculation of the benefits of having child based on utility maximization principle (Kohler, 2012). Thus if couples think that having children would increase their satisfaction with their marriages and their lives in general they engage in fertility behavior. More traditional approaches to family also emphasize the necessity of children in leading to marital satisfaction and well-being of the parents. Giving birth to a healthy baby as a fruit of successful marriage does bring satisfaction and happiness for the married couples according to Value of Children Approach (Billari & Kohler, 2009; Hansen, 2012; Myrskylä & Margolis, 2014). In parallel to this approach, needs theory, which is mostly used in quality of life studies, suggest that having children contributes to individual well-being because it resulted in feeling pride and success due to sense of having accomplished one of the important life goals particularly for women (Hansen, 2012).

Thus far, several studies have indicated that child parity, timing of the children, adoption, people's age, sex, partnership status, socio-economic status influence the association between having child and subjective well-being (Aassve, Goisis, & Sironi, 2012; Hansen, 2012; Kohler, et al., 2005; Kohler, 2012; Margolis & Myrskylä, 2011; Baranowska and Matysiak, 2011; Myrskylä & Margolis, 2014; Stanca, 2012). Furthermore, to what degree kids affects their parents well-being is dependent on their preferences for family life, attitudes towards gender roles, career choices, and expectations on child raising (Kravdal, 2014). At macro level, how children do impact subjective well-being differs across countries because of the dissimilarities in the degree of flexibility in labor market, social security systems, levels of gender equality, the strength of human capital, family and population policies (Aassve et al., 2012; Aassve, Mencarini, & Sironi, 2014; Aassve, Mazzuco, & Mencarini, 2005; Margolis & Myrskylä, 2011; Dolan, Peasgood, and White, 2008).

Against this background, we expect to find that there is significant differentiation of the relationship between subjective well-being and fertility in Turkey according to people's socio-demographic characteristics (age, gender), socio-economic status (employment status, income level).

**Data and Methods:** We use a pooled country data from the last five waves of World Values Survey (WVS) (1996, 2001, 2007, and 2011) that provides unique opportunity to observe child parity and subjective well-being variables. The data also has various attitude questions on marriage, children and gender roles for Turkey. WVS consist of representative samples of the population 18+, based on a multistage stratified random sampling design. We selected ever married people because the case number of people having kids without marriage is too few to be included into data analysis. Subjective well-being, our dependent variable, is measured with a ten-point scale tried-and-tested life satisfaction question: “All things considered, how satisfied are you with your life as a whole these days?” Research has shown that this question measures SWB in a comparable and reliable way (Diener, Inglehart, & Tay, 2013). The key independent variable of the study is child parity (no children, one child, two children, three children, and four children and above) which refers to the number of alive children of the respondents. The control variables are: gender (1=female); age groups (15-29 years old, 30-49 years old, and 50 years old and above); employment status (1=employed); income levels (low, middle and high); and year dummies.

**Analytical Strategy:** For data analysis, first, we use descriptive statistics to track the relationship between number of children and average levels of life satisfaction according to gender, age, employment status and income. Second, OLS regression models were run to further understanding the relationship between having children and life satisfaction.

**Initial results:** Preliminary findings of the study show that there is significant differences between the mean levels of life satisfaction of the people who do not have children or one children and the people having two or more children. Only for the year 1996, childless people reported higher levels of subjective well-being. In long-term trend, we observe that until 2001 financial crisis, there is clear differentiation in the mean levels of life satisfaction among the people with respect to the number of children they have (See Figure 1). Then after economic recovery period starts, this gap between the subjective well-being levels starts to decrease and almost disappears in 2011. In 2007, only respondents who have four children and above do have lower levels of happiness. When we observe the association between child parity and happiness in sex groups, we find that women in general reports slightly higher levels of satisfaction with their lives than men, and this gap starts to close with having three children and above (See Figure 2). The mean levels of life satisfaction decrease with the number of children for both women and men. In terms of age groups, confirming the results of previous research, older people benefit from children more, whereas mean levels of life satisfaction decrease with higher numbers of children among younger parents (See Figure 3). The negative effect of unemployment for men is strong for especially who do not have children or one children. On the contrary to men, working women reports lower levels of satisfaction with their lives in comparison to her non-employed counterparts. In terms of socio-economic status, surprisingly we see positive influence of one child on parent’s well-being who report lower income. Expected differentiation between the mean levels of parents belong to different income groups appears at the people who have either two children or four children and above. The mean levels of middle income and low income groups get closer to each other if they have three children (Figure 6). In order to empirically test the relationship between happiness and fertility, we divide our data into subsamples based on gender, and we run the same regression model for men and women separately. The results of our regression analysis show that the number of children has a negative effect on women’s subjective well-being. Whereas men’s satisfaction with their lives is not associated with having kids. Furthermore, higher income levels contribute to women’s subjective well-being if they have more than one child.

Figure 1: Child parity vs. Life Satisfaction by year

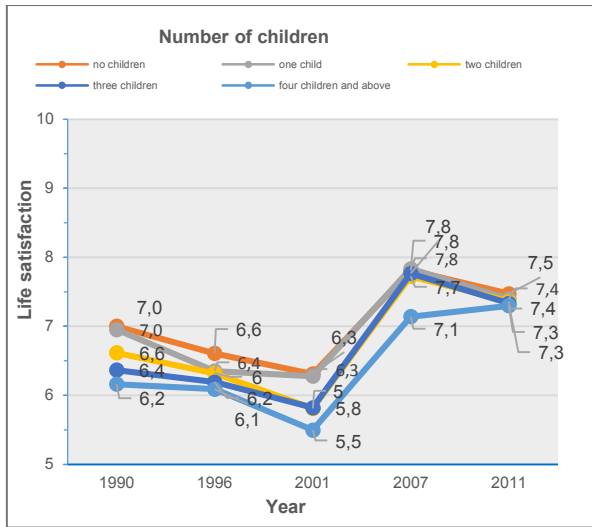


Figure 2: Child parity vs. Life Satisfaction by Gender

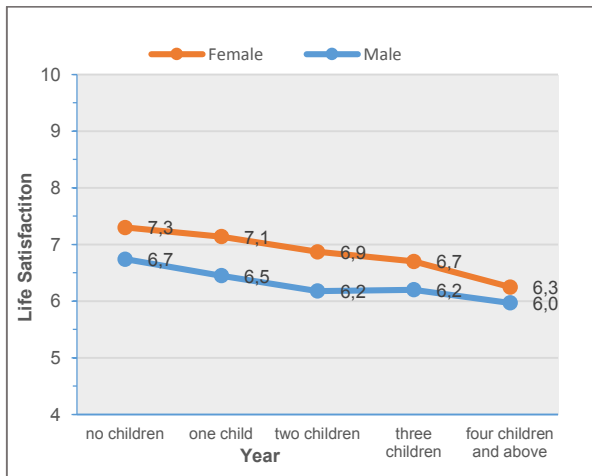


Figure 3: Child parity vs. Life Satisfaction by age groups

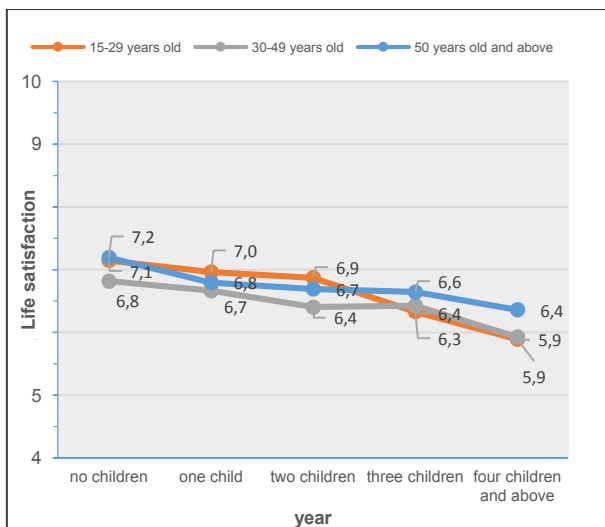


Figure 4: Child parity vs. Life Satisfaction by employment status (Men)

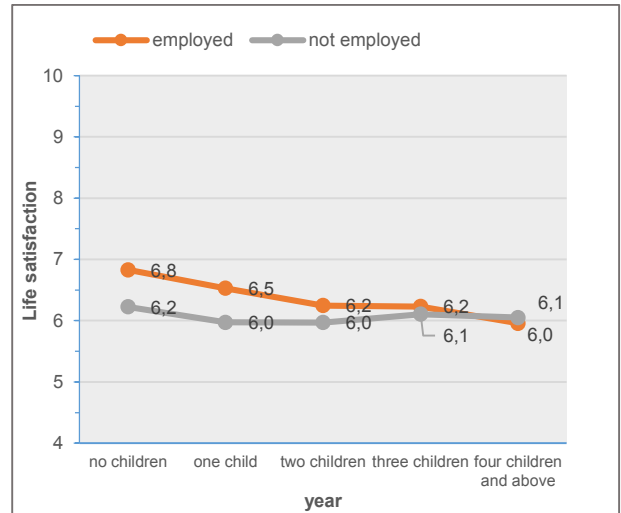


Figure 5: Child parity vs. Life Satisfaction by employment status (Women)

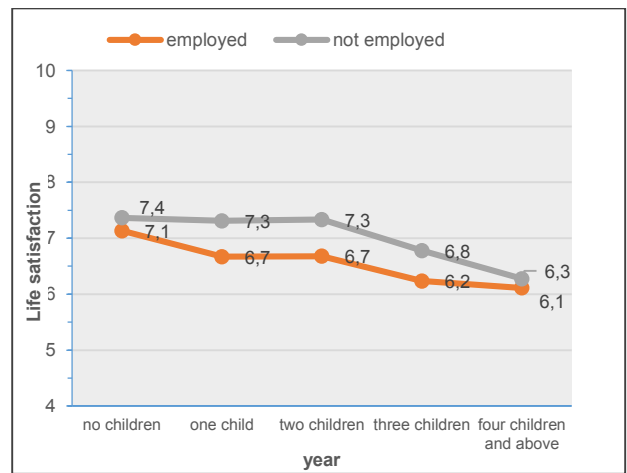
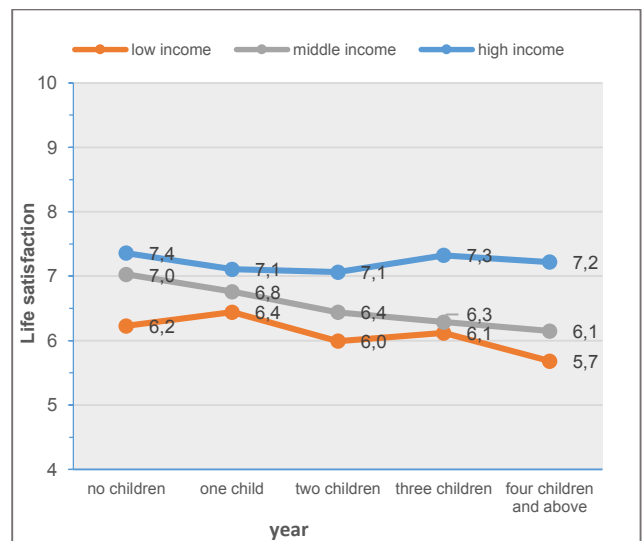


Figure 6: Child parity vs. Life Satisfaction by income groups



**OLS Regression Results**

	All	Women	Men
child parity	-0.190** (-3.464)	-0.243** (-3.103)	-0.126 (-1.572)
age	-0.75*** (-4.058)	-0.60*** (-2.165)	-0.063** (-2.346)
age <sup>2</sup>	0.001*** (4.790)	0.001*** (1.890)	0.001*** (4.072)
employed	-0.320* (-1.704)	-0.362 (-0.980)	0.573*** (1.693)
socio-economic status	0.235** (3.243)	0.170*** (1.663)	0.246** (2.378)
year=1996	.318 (0.604)	-0.286 (-0.394)	0.983 (1.099)
year=2001	-0.312 (-0.632)	-0.538 (-0.797)	-0.503 (-0.606)
year=2007	1.925** (3.456)	1.546** (2.028)	3.063** (3.138)
year=2011	0.443 (0.769)	-0.630 (-0.823)	1.374 (1.318)
age x child parity (2007)	-0.003*** (-1.857)	-0.003 (-0.988)	-0.004*** (-1.901)
age x child parity (2011)	0.004*** (1.783)	0.005 (1.549)	0.004 (-1.901)
age x child parity (2007)	0.180*** (1.835)	-0.243 (-0.783)	0.166 (1.357)
age x child parity (2011)	0.049 (0.476)	0.325*** (1,650)	-0.118 (-0.759)
socio-economic status x child parity (1996)	0.032*** (1.922)	0.054** (2.186)	-0.013 (-0.103)
socio-economic status x child parity (2007)	0.055*** (2.339)	0.068*** (1.814)	-0.333** (-2.432)
Observation	6053	3132	2916
R-squared	.123	.102	.163

Dependent variable: life satisfaction

Standardized beta coefficients; t statistics in parentheses.

Data: WVS (II-VI)

\* p&lt;.05, \*\* p&lt;.01, \*\*\* p&lt;.001

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