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**How do Cultural Activities Influence Happiness?
The Relation Between Self-Reported Well-Being and
Leisure**

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How do cultural activities influence happiness? The relation between self-reported well-being and leisure

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Abstract

Well-being, measured as self-reported happiness has many determinants, which range from gender to income and political affiliation. When it comes to more or less active ways of participating in cultural activities, leisure has a significant impact in the levels of reported happiness, which is in line with the proposed ideas of Stiglitz et al (2009). We also quantify the likelihood of being more or less happy in relation to different types of leisure activities. Our approach has the advantage that all these cultural activities can be considered at the same time, accounting for the individual impact of each on individual happiness levels.

Keywords: happiness, leisure, culture, well-being

Resumen

El bienestar, recogido a través de la felicidad autorreportada, tiene múltiples determinantes que van desde el sexo hasta el ingreso y la afiliación política. Cuando se trata de formas más o menos activas de participación en actividades culturales, el ocio tiene un impacto significativo en los niveles de felicidad, lo que va en línea con lo argumentado por Stiglitz (2009). En el presente trabajo se estudia también la probabilidad de ser feliz en relación a diferentes actividades relacionadas con el ocio. Este enfoque tiene la ventaja de que éstas actividades pueden ser consideradas conjuntamente, dando cuenta del impacto de cada una en la felicidad de los individuos.

Palabras clave: felicidad, ocio, cultura, bienestar

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Section 1. Introduction

The research on living conditions and quality of life based on subjective measures has achieved popularity in economics. Once neglected by economics, it has proven an interesting and solid line of research. From the behavioral approach to economics, subjective well-being measures bring sounder psychological grounds to individual decision making and, from the policy making point of view, it can help in the evaluation of alternative policies (Frey and Stutzer, 2002). After the study of the so called “Easterlin paradox” –which presents the puzzle due to the fact that though material living standards increased during the twentieth century, average happiness remained pretty constant– new insights were brought to economic analysis from interdisciplinary research on social sciences.

This approach may be especially suitable to study human activities and conditions such as leisure (Ateca-Amestoy, 2011). From the economic point of view, leisure is a commodity that has to be produced and consumed at the same time by the individual. According to Becker, that time intensive commodity has to be produced by the optimal allocation of the individual’s own resources: time, money, personal characteristics and social relations (Becker, 1965 and Osberg, 2008). Measurements of well-being and quality of life are based on a multidimensional definition, which also include leisure time indicators, such as participation in activities like sports, cultural events and recreation (Stiglitz et al, 2009).

The relation among participation in cultural activities and quality of life at the individual and at the societal level has not been very much explored by cultural economics. It is through cultural policy that subjective well-being measures enter into cultural analysis. Public programs oriented to the assessment of the impact of culture in its many dimensions, such as the English CASE, have taken into consideration the beneficial aspects of cultural participation (DCMS, 2010).

Cross-country analysis on cultural participation poses some challenges (Schuster, 2007, Katz-Gerro, 2011). This is further enhanced when considering that the effects of cultural participation over well-being may depend on cultural and institutional factors. A well-studied fact is how subjective evaluation depends on contextual factors. How an individual evaluates his financial satisfaction, for instance, may well depend on his personal

experience, his aspirations and his relative standing in the income distribution of some relevant peer-group. Accordingly, we should use models that account for a heavy presence of unobserved heterogeneity. For some countries, there is evidence that leisure could be more oriented to the fulfillment of the need for autonomy, thus favoring individualistic leisure engagement. For some others, the community belonging aspects of leisure are more relevant, so individuals derive more enjoyment from social leisure (Ateca-Amestoy, 2011).

In this paper, we do a descriptive analysis on the relation between cultural engagement and quality of life at a macro level. To do so, we explore the links between more and less active ways of cultural participation with an indicator of quality of life, self-reported happiness.

Section 2. Subjective well-being and cultural activities

Although microeconomic models always assume that individual well-being can be related to utility maximization, depending on income and leisure, leisure is generally absent from empirical studies of happiness (Wang and Wong, 2011). Leisure is a complex human need that is fulfilled by the production and consumption of individually defined pleasant experiences. We define leisure as “*an action that takes place at a given time, develops an identifiable activity and is perceived as a pleasant experience by the actor*” (Kelly, 1982).

Behind the relationship between well-being and leisure two theories can be identified: psychological needs and activity theory (Rodriguez et al, 2008). Psychological needs theory is based on the fact that satisfaction of the individual’s human needs maintains or increases well-being (Diener and Lucas 2000). Activity theory suggests that a higher degree of participation and intimacy related to the performed activity influences well-being as well (Lemon et al. 1972).

Then there is a relationship between leisure and quality of life that should be quantified. Recent literature has shown that individuals are the best judges of their own well being, and that subjective well-being might be an appropriate way of measuring happiness or quality of life in several aspects of an individual’s life, such as religiosity, marriage, sports, work and leisure (Boes, 2006; Diener et al., 2003).

Related to an individual’s well-being, cultural participation is seen as a symbol of self-presentation and helps define socio-economic status. In addition to maintaining group

boundaries and social inequalities, cultural preferences also define individual identities (Bourdieu, 1984; Lamont and Molnar, 2001; Skeggs, 1997). Leisure activities define the aspirations of different reference groups and are, in the end, positional goods (in the sense of Veblen (1899)). Several studies (Becchetti et al., (2012), Frey (2008), Grossi et al., (2010), Hampshire and Matthijsse (2010), Merz and Scherg (2013)) have analyzed the impact cultural and leisure activities have on the subjective well-being of different populations with the same results: culture has a relevant role in psychological well-being and life satisfaction.

Cultural consumption can range from museums, music, dance and literature to gardening and pottery. In particular, leisure and cultural activities are regarded as having a significant impact on self-reported happiness. For example, Uhrig (2005) analyzes the effects on cinema on self-reported happiness and depression, with this activity promoting, in general, a positive response, when assessing sensory stimulation and its resulting emotion inducing properties and when pairing it to other activities, such as live performances and eating out. Television viewing does not maximize satisfaction, according to Gui and Stanca (2009), as television viewing is an overconsumed commodity, with consumers regretting the immediate satisfaction watching television brings afterwards. This affects well-being negatively, as it does not reflect the individuals' true preferences. Other studies such as Michalos (2005, 2008, 2010), Iwasaki (2006), Borgonovi (2004), have also studied the impact of the arts in the quality of life with similar results for different activities. Leisure activities may also have different effects depending on whether they are active or passive activities (Kahneman et al., 2006). Leisure-time activities and cultural consumption even have an impact on body weight (Pampel, 2012).

Section 3. Data description

The data source is the module on Leisure and Sports carried out by the International Social Survey Program in 2007 (<http://www.issp.org>). The fieldwork includes the same questionnaire and methodology for 33 countries, from which 30 of them are considered in this paper.⁵ This enables us to overcome some of the problems that traditionally arise when

⁵ This is due to data availability on the variables of interest. Argentina, Australia, Austria, Flanders (Belgium), Chile, Taiwan, Croatia, Cyprus, Dominican Republic, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Israel, Japan, South Korea, Latvia, Mexico, New Zealand, Norway, Philippines, Poland, Russia, Slovak Republic, Slovenia, South Africa, Sweden, Switzerland, Uruguay, USA.

doing cross-country comparisons on cultural participation (Schuster, 2007, O'Hagan and Castiglione, 2010 and Katz-Gerro, 2011). Some of the problems are: the different goal of the studies, their different boundaries of analysis, the differences in the dependent variable, the harmonization performed at the explanatory variables and the design of the questions.

The ISSP 2007 survey asks respondents their opinions on a great variety of issues: frequency of leisure activities in respondent's free time; main purpose of free time activities; enjoyment from reading books, getting together with friends, taking part in physical activities, and watching TV or DVDs; motivation for leisure time activities: establishing useful contacts, relaxing, and developing skills in free time; frequency of feeling bored, feeling rushed, and thinking about work during free time; preference for sharing time with other people or being alone; wishes for: more time in a paid job, more time doing household work, more time with family, and more time in leisure activities; number of nights the respondent stayed away from home for holiday or social visits; days of leave from work; most frequent exercises or physical activity; preferred type of games rather than sports; most important reasons for taking part in sports or games: physical or mental health, meeting other people, competing against others or physical attractiveness; most frequently watched sport on TV; feeling of national pride when respondent's country does well at international sports or games competition; attitudes towards sport (scale); social and political participation; trust in people; interest in politics; reasons for staying away from doing free time activities: lack of facilities nearby, lack of money and time, personal health or responsibility to take care of someone; perception of happiness; estimation of personal health ⁶.

Demographic and socio-economic information is also included, such as age, gender, education, household income, religiosity and others.⁷

⁶ Source: <http://zacat.gesis.org/webview/index.jsp?object=http://zacat.gesis.org/obj/fStudy/ZA4850>

⁷ sex; age; marital status; steady life partner; years of schooling; highest education level; country specific education and degree; current employment status (respondent and partner); hours worked weekly; occupation (ISCO 1988) (respondent and partner); supervising function at work; working for private or public sector or self-employed (respondent and partner); if self-employed: number of employees; trade union membership; earnings of respondent (country specific); family income (country specific); size of household; household composition; party affiliation (left-right); country specific party affiliation; participation in last election; religious denomination; religious main groups; attendance of religious services; self-placement on a top-bottom scale; region (country specific); size of community (country specific); type of community: urban-rural area; country of origin or ethnic group affiliation.

We use the variables measuring the intensity of cultural participation as the dependent variable in the first part of our analysis. The questions from the ISSP 2007 used in this paper are the following:

a) Cultural participation

For home-based and going-out practices:

How often do you do each of the following activities in your free time?

- * ***Read books***
- * ***Watch TV, DVD, videos***
- * ***Listen to music***
- * ***Go to movies***
- * ***Attend cultural events***

The frequency for each activity takes 5 possible values: Everyday, several times per week, several times per month, several times per year or less often, never.

The first two activities correspond to the home-based type of cultural practices. Listening to music is a very general question, so we cannot disentangle whether it refers to music listening at home or live concerts. Going to the movies and attending at cultural events belong to the attendance and participation in events subject to programming, capturing the going-out dimension of cultural activities.

For the identity building and communitarian dimension of cultural practices:

In the last 12 months, how often have you participated in the activities of one of the following associations or groups?

- * ***A cultural association or group***

The answers are measured in a similar scale as the previous 5 types of cultural participation, adapted to the fact that this type of activities is a bit more infrequent (note that the most intense category for this variable is every week).

To have a more intuitive interpretation, we recode our variables so lower values represent lower intensities of participation (thus, the lowest value corresponds to “never” and the highest value corresponds to the most intensive frequency of participation “every day” and “every week”, respectively).

b) Happiness

How happy or unhappy do you feel, in general, these days?

The values of this variable (also recoded in an ascending scale) are: Not at all happy, not very happy, fairly happy and very happy.

Table 1 includes the basic descriptive statistics for the variables of interest.

Section 4. Methodology

Since our dependent variables are ordered outcomes where higher values represent higher intensity of cultural engagement (from never to every day practice) and higher levels of happiness (ranging from not at all happy to very happy), we briefly present the ordered response models to be estimated. In this empirical exercise, we are going to estimate ordered probit models.

We use a sample of 30 countries. Therefore, there are two methodological questions we are aware of. First, cultural participation decisions are estimated as a function of observable individual, household and context variables, but individual unobserved heterogeneity will be important. The individual error term contains unobservable traits but, given that our dataset is derived from a cross-section study, we cannot apply longitudinal analysis to control for unobserved individual or household characteristics that are invariant, such as personality traits and intra-household arrangements and norms. Second, country level factors (in the form of culture, values and social norms) can have a heavy influence in the determinants of happiness. We control for them in the error term of our models, allowing for observations from the same country to be correlated among them and uncorrelated with

observations coming from a different country (clustered error terms at the country level are considered in our estimations). We also estimate models with country fixed-effects and the results do not vary substantially.

Ordered response models are the standard way of modeling subjective well-being estimations. Being a non-observable variable, but a latent process, one can only try to infer the individual utility from answers to happiness questions. Individuals make an evaluation of their utility and they classify it under one of the categories at his disposition. Results using ordered models have been proved to be close to the results derived from OLS regressions when the dependent variable ranges in a large scale –which is not our case –. For our study, we therefore favor ordered response models (for an overview of methods and implications, see Ferrer-i-Carbonell and Frijters, 2004).

In an ordered probit model, the individual response is related to a latent process which is unobserved. The response belongs to an ordered set that takes as many values as possible answers (k categories). We assume that there exists an underlying process and that individual response is related to that process in the sense that individual reports a given value if his/her value in the latent process lies in a given interval, determined by some unobservable thresholds. That latent process depends linearly on the observable characteristics (dependent variables) and unobservable factors (captured in the error term). If the error term is assumed to be normally distributed, an ordered probit model is to be estimated. Regression parameters and $k-1$ threshold parameters are jointly estimated.

The estimated coefficients are interpreted somehow differently from the OLS. A positive sign of the coefficient determines whether satisfaction increases with a given covariate. A restrictive assumption of this class of models is the “parallel regression” one, by which it is assumed that each covariate has the same effect on probability for low levels of the latent process and for high ones. This can be relaxed by using generalized models.

Section 5. Results

Table 2 presents the results of the ordered probit estimation as well as the marginal effects for the highest category of the dependent variable (“very happy”). In line with the

literature, leisure activities have a positive and significant effect on self-reported happiness. This means that individuals who take part in leisure activities are more likely to report themselves as happier than the ones who do not consume any cultural goods, such as watching television, going to the cinema, listening to music or reading books. Our results reinforce the findings by Uhrig (2005), Iwasaki (2006), Borgonovi (2004) and others.

Participating in cultural activities has a positive and significant effect as well. This is also related with Kahneman et al (2006), who propose that the effects are different for active and passive activities. Watching television and reading books have the lowest impact in self-reported happiness when compared with other leisure activities, while the other activities such as attending cultural events have a higher impact. However, participating in cultural groups or associations has no significant impact.

Our control variables also hold important results. Gender does not have a significant impact in reported happiness, but age does. We find the same convex profile as in the literature, namely, happiness declines with age, reaching a minimum at 45 years. One possible explanation for the U-shape is that people learn to adapt to their strengths and weaknesses, and in adulthood quell those aspirations that are not achievable (Blanchflower and Oswald, 2008).

With regard to education, low educational levels are not significantly different when compared to the lowest level (omitted), while having above higher secondary education decreases by 3.2 percentage points the probability of being happy. Complete tertiary education is not significantly different from the lowest education level either. These results might be a consequence of including income variables in the model. The importance of education is often due to its strong relationship with income variables and this is a remarkable fact, since, in general, in Latin America education does not appear significant in explaining satisfaction with life, while it is in the developed countries (Graham, 2008). Education may increase the probability of being happy, but is more likely that education is a proxy for income, since people with higher income are also happier. But in this does not hold, since both income variables are significantly different from zero. This means, simply, that richer people have a higher probability of being happy, compared to the poor.

Being separated or widowed appears as not significant, while being married or cohabiting increases by 10.6 percentage points the probability of being happy, which is supported by the international empirical evidence. Average happiness levels are higher for married people, and the effect is positive and long lasting (Cunningham, 2007; Mookherjee, 2010; Shapiro, 2008).

Also related to socioeconomic status, being unemployed appears as significant with a marginal effect of great magnitude (-14.7 pp). This is a stylized fact in the literature (Carroll, 2007; Krueger and Muller, 2012, Winkelmann, 2009), which states that unemployment is one of the worst events affecting happiness and one of the most difficult to adapt from, with individuals being potentially less happy when they re-enter the workforce.

With regard to religion, there are significant differences in terms of happiness for the not so practicing and practitioners compared to those who are not religious, with marginal effects of 7.0 and 6.8 pp respectively, in line with previous empirical evidence (Green and Elliot, 2010; Ismail and Desmukh, 2012). Religion is also seen as an important factor. Protestants have 7.7 percentage points less of probability of being happy in relation to those who claim to be Catholics.

Health status also has a significant impact on subjective well-being. Good health status has a positive impact in happiness, while poor health status has a negative impact. This is in line with previous authors' findings, which suggest that people with lower levels of subjective well-being tend to report more severe symptoms of illness and take worse care of themselves (Binder and Coad, 2013; Saunders, 1996; Wagner, 2004).

In terms of interacting with other people, households composed of only one individual are more likely to report lower levels of happiness. This reinforces the idea that less social interactions –which would be implied by, among other things, living alone- lead to lower levels of subjective well being and satisfaction with life (Nezlek et al, 2002) and that living alone increases the chances of being depressed and feelings of loneliness (Lim and Kua, 2011).

Lastly, when comparing reported happiness and political affiliation only those individuals who self-report as right party or more conservative advocates seem to report higher levels of happiness (Dreher and Öhler, 2011; Bjørnskov, Dreher and Fischer, 2008). Center and left-center affiliation do not seem to be significantly different from left (omitted).

Section 6. Conclusion

Our results lead us to conclude that well-being, measured as self-reported happiness has many determinants, which range from gender to income and political affiliation. In regards to culture and happiness, attending cultural activities or consuming leisure (such as watching tv or reading books) has a significant impact in the levels of reported happiness, which is in line with the proposed ideas of Stiglitz et al (2009) who define that people enjoy attending recreational activities.

Using an ordered probit regression approach we were able to quantify the likelihood of being more or less happy in relation to different types of leisure activities, concluding that leisure or cultural activities such as going to the cinema or going to concerts increase the probability of self-reporting a higher level of well being. This supports the previous literature stating that artistic-related activities, cinema and other active activities have a positive impact on happiness, while the impact of passive activities is lower, such as watching tv. Our approach has the advantage that all these cultural activities can be considered at the same time, accounting for the individual impact of each on individual happiness levels.

Table 1: Data description

Variable	Definition	Mean	Std. Dev.
Happiness	1 if the person is not at all happy, 4 if very happy	3.07	0.71
Television	1 if the person never watches television, 5 if everyday	4.50	0.93
Books	1 if the person never reads books, 5 if everyday	2.77	1.40
Music	1 if the person never listens to music, 5 if everyday	4.05	1.25
Cultural	1 if the person never assists to cultural events, 5 if everyday	1.76	0.76
Cinema	1 if the person never goes to the cinema, 5 if everyday	1.67	0.74
Participate	1 if the person never participates in a cultural association or group, 5 if everyday	1.51	1.01
Female	1 if female	0.55	0.50
Age	Age of the respondent (in years)	46.05	17.27
income2		0.05	0.21
income3		0.10	0.30
income4	Relative position of the household income in 1-10 th decile within the income distribution of the country	0.14	0.35
income5		0.24	0.43
income6		0.22	0.41
income7		0.12	0.32

income8		0.07	0.25
income9		0.02	0.13
income10		0.01	0.11
catholic	1 if respondent is catholic	0.36	0.48
protestant	1 if respondent is protestant	0.05	0.21
religiosity	1 if respondent attends religious services at least two or three times a month	0.27	0.45
poor s.a.h.s	1 if self assessed health stats (s.a.h.s) is poor	0.21	0.41
good s.a.h.s	1 if self assessed health stats (s.a.h.s) is good	0.32	0.47
very good s.a.h.s	1 if self assessed health stats (s.a.h.s) is very good	0.26	0.44
excellent s.a.h.s	1 if self assessed health stats (s.a.h.s) is excellent	0.14	0.35
left_center	1 if political self adscription is left_center	0.15	0.35
center	1 if political self adscription is center	0.15	0.36
right	1 if political self adscription is right	0.15	0.35
above lowest education	1 if respondent has above lowest education	0.21	0.41
secondary completed	1 if respondent has secondary education	0.24	0.43
above higher secondary	1 if respondent has above higher secondary education	0.17	0.38
university completed	1 if respondent has completed university		

	education		0.15	0.36
married	1 if respondent is married		0.52	0.50
widow	1 if respondent is a widow/er		0.08	0.28
divorced	1 if respondent is divorced		0.06	0.25
separated	1 if respondent is separated		0.02	0.15
employed	1 if respondent is employed		0.57	0.49
unemployed	1 if respondent is unemployed		0.07	0.25
one_person	1 if there is one people in the household		0.15	0.35
two_person	1 if there are two people in the household		0.19	0.39
three_person	1 if there are three people in the household		0.19	0.40

Source: ISSP (2007)

Table 2: Ordered probit regression and marginal effects for happy=4 (“very happy”)

	<i>happiness</i>	<i>marginal effects</i> <i>(evaluated at happiness=4)</i>
television	0.025*	0.008*
cine	0.042***	0.013***
libros	0.026***	0.008***
cultural	0.039***	0.012***
music	0.035***	0.011***
participate	0.009	0.003
female	0.015	0.005
age	-0.019***	-0.006***
age2	0.000***	0.000***
above_lowest_educ	-0.05	-0.015
secondary_completed	-0.035	-0.011
above_higher_secondary	-0.104***	-0.032***
university completed	-0.051	-0.015
married	0.278***	0.085***
widow	0.000	0.000
divorced	-0.025	-0.008
separated	-0.091	-0.028
employed	-0.022	-0.007
unemployed	-0.187***	-0.057***
one_person	-0.198***	-0.060***
two_person	0.032	0.010
three_person	-0.010	-0.003
center	0.036	0.011
left_center	-0.012	-0.004
right	0.096***	0.029***
catholic	0.026	0.008
protestant	0.112***	0.034***
religiosity	0.123***	0.038***

poor s.a.h.s	-0.513***	-0.156***
good s.a.h.s	0.325***	0.099***
very good s.a.h.s	0.653***	0.199***
excellent s.a.h.s	1.227***	0.374***
inc2	0.059	0.018
inc3	0.234**	0.071**
inc4	0.316***	0.096***
inc5	0.422***	0.129***
inc6	0.489***	0.149***
inc7	0.510***	0.155***
inc8	0.542***	0.165***
inc9	0.699***	0.213***
inc10	0.882***	0.269***
<hr/>		
cut1	-1.479***	
cut2	-0.200	
cut3	1.648***	
<hr/>		
Observations	25870	

Note: * Significant at 10%; ** Significant at 5%; *** Significant at 1%. Country-effects were included in all models but not in the tables.

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