Does General Happiness Influence Fertility? An Analysis of the Relationship Between Happiness and Number of Children: General Happiness as a Determinant of Family Size

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Abstract*: This study examines the relationship between general happiness and number of children using data from the General Social Survey (GSS) 2018. Drawing on a nationally representative U.S. sample, the analysis employs multivariate regression to test whether subjective well-being influences realized fertility. The results reveal a positive and statistically significant association between happiness and the number of children, even after controlling for key demographic and socioeconomic variables such as marital status, education, income, and class. Subgroup regressions show that this effect is strongest among married individuals, upper-class respondents, and those identifying as other races, while it is non-significant among unmarried and non-religious groups. These findings highlight the importance of emotional well-being in shaping fertility behavior and suggest that the psychological context of parenthood may vary across social strata. The study contributes to the growing literature on the bidirectional links between happiness and fertility and offers insights for policies aimed at supporting family life through both structural and emotional interventions. This research provides policy-relevant insights into how emotional well-being may influence family formation across diverse social groups.*

Keywords*: Subjective well-being; Fertility behavior; Happiness; Multivariate regression; Social stratification; General Social Survey (GSS)*

1. Introduction

Fertility decline has emerged as a pressing demographic concern in many developed nations, prompting extensive inquiry into the determinants of reproductive behavior. While traditional analyses have centered on structural and socioeconomic variables, such as income, education, employment, and policy frameworks, recent scholarship has increasingly turned attention to the role of psychological and subjective factors. Among these, general happiness, or overall life satisfaction, has garnered interest as a potential determinant of fertility choices.

This study investigates a central question: Does an individual's general level of happiness influence the number of children they have? In addition, it examines whether this relationship remains robust after accounting for key sociodemographic controls, including sex, marital status, educational attainment, income, religious affiliation, racial background, social class, and family structure.

Furthermore, it explores whether the effect of happiness on fertility outcomes varies across different population subgroups, such as gender, class, and religiosity.

The significance of this inquiry lies in its capacity to enrich existing demographic frameworks by incorporating the dimension of subjective well-being. Prior studies (e.g., Margolis & Myrskylä, 2011; 2014) have illuminated the complex and dynamic relationship between parenthood and happiness, demonstrating that while childbearing may initially reduce happiness, particularly among younger or less resourced individuals, it can enhance well-being in the longer term. Other research (e.g., Aassve et al., 2015) underscores the importance of institutional environments, showing that supportive social structures can moderate the costs of parenthood and foster positive associations between fertility and happiness.

By integrating insights from demographic theory, psychology, and institutional analysis, this research aims to offer a more nuanced understanding of fertility behavior. Leveraging nationally representative data from the General Social Survey (GSS) (2018), the study contributes empirical evidence to an underexplored but increasingly salient question. In doing so, it seeks not only to advance academic discourse but also to inform policies that promote both individual well-being and demographic sustainability.

2. Literature Review & Background

2.1. Background and Context

The persistent decline in fertility rates across advanced industrial societies has raised fundamental questions about the socio-psychological and structural factors shaping reproductive behavior. Conventional demographic theories have long emphasized the role of economic variables, opportunity costs, educational attainment, and institutional incentives in shaping family formation (Becker, 1960). However, recent scholarship has increasingly highlighted the significance of subjective well-being, particularly general happiness, as a potential determinant of fertility decisions.

This shift reflects the changing social meaning of parenthood. No longer perceived as an obligatory life course event, childbearing in contemporary

societies is often framed as a deliberate choice tied closely to individual fulfillment, lifestyle preferences, and emotional readiness (Aassve, Mencarini, & Sironi, 2015). Consequently, scholars have begun to explore the extent to which subjective happiness not only results from parenthood but may also predict reproductive behavior. This emerging perspective challenges the linear causality traditionally assumed in demographic models, introducing the possibility of a bidirectional relationship between fertility and well-being.

This study is positioned within this evolving framework. By focusing on the association between general happiness and the number of children using nationally representative U.S. data, it aims to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the interplay between emotional well-being and demographic behavior.

2.2. Existing Research: What We Know

2.2.1. Happiness and Fertility Across the Life Course

A foundational contribution to this discourse is the work of Margolis and Myrskylä (2011), who analyzed World Values Survey data from 86 countries. Their study revealed that the relationship between fertility and happiness is contingent on age and institutional context. While younger adults often experience a decline in well-being after having children, attributable to increased financial stress and time constraints, older individuals (aged 40 and above) report greater happiness, suggesting that children provide long-term emotional and instrumental support. Their findings underscore the importance of considering life course dynamics in interpreting the happiness-fertility link.

Building on this work, Myrskylä and Margolis (2014) utilized longitudinal data from the German Socio-Economic Panel (SOEP) and British Household Panel Survey (BHPS) to explore well-being trajectories around the birth of a child. Their findings suggest that happiness tends to peak in the year preceding and following a first birth but declines thereafter. This pattern is not universal; it varies significantly by age, education, and parity. Notably, while the first and second births were associated with temporary increases in happiness, third births yielded no significant emotional gain, indicating diminishing returns.

2.2.2. Institutional Conditions and Subjective Well-being

A broader institutional perspective is provided by Aassve, Mencarini, and Sironi (2015), who argue that the compatibility between institutional structures and evolving family norms is crucial to understanding both fertility and happiness. Drawing on multilevel data from the European Social Survey, the authors demonstrate that fertility and happiness are both higher in countries where institutions support dual-earner models, through mechanisms such as public childcare, gender equality, and good governance. Importantly, their findings reveal gender-specific effects: while men report stable happiness across institutional contexts, women, particularly mothers, benefit significantly more from supportive environments.

This research highlights the mediating role of social policy in shaping how individuals experience and respond to parenthood, pointing to broader questions of state responsibility in mitigating the emotional and financial costs of family life.

2.2.3. Causal Evidence and Family Size Effects

While much of the existing literature is correlational, Pertold-Gebicka an Spolcova (2020) offer quasi-experimental evidence on the causal effect of family size on well-being using exogenous variation from multiple births and child gender composition. Analyzing data from the 2013 EU-SILC, they found that unplanned increases in family size reduce happiness during the early years of parenting, largely due to increased stress, time scarcity, and dissatisfaction with housing conditions. However, these effects reverse as children grow, with parents, particularly fathers, reporting greater well-being in the adolescent years. The study also identifies heterogeneous gender effects, suggesting that while fathers benefit emotionally from larger families earlier, mothers experience delayed gains.

These findings reinforce the importance of considering temporal and gendered dimensions in assessing the emotional implications of fertility decisions.

2.2.4. Fertility Expectations and Emotional Feedback Loops

Fertility behavior is not only influenced by current well-being but may also shape future reproductive intentions. In a longitudinal study using the HILDA survey from Australia, Luppi and Mencarini (2018) examined how life satisfaction trajectories after the first birth affect expectations for having additional children.

They found that declines in well-being immediately after childbirth correlate strongly with reduced fertility expectations. Importantly, the drivers differ by gender: for mothers, positive work–family balance and career satisfaction were key predictors of continued fertility intentions, whereas for fathers, financial satisfaction was the primary motivator.

This research suggests the existence of feedback loops, whereby reduced happiness post-childbirth can negatively impact long-term population trends, especially in societies where structural support is limited.

2.3. Knowledge Gaps and Opportunities

Despite the growing body of research, important gaps persist. First, much of the empirical evidence is drawn from European or international samples, with relatively few studies examining the happiness-fertility relationship in the U.S. context using large-scale, representative data such as the GSS. This geographic limitation restricts the applicability of findings to American sociocultural dynamics.

Second, most studies focus on average treatment effects, thereby overlooking variation across social groups. There is a lack of systematic investigation into whether the effect of happiness on fertility differs by gender, race, religion, marital status, or social class-factors that are critical in stratified societies like the United States.

Third, while several studies have examined the ideal number of children and fertility desires, there remains a disconnect between fertility intentions and actual fertility outcomes. For example, Ranjbar et al. (2024) emphasized that economic conditions, social support, and public policies significantly influence couples' childbearing decisions, but their work does not explicitly address whether happiness functions as a mediating factor.

Similarly, Asadi Sarvestani et al. (2017), in a study of married women in Iran, found that son preference, ethnicity, and women's decision-making power influenced desired fertility levels. Bagheri et al. (2017) revealed that gender differences persist in how economic and psychological factors shape the ideal number of children. These findings illustrate that fertility desires are culturally and psychologically complex, yet still underexplored in happiness-centered frameworks.

Lastly, Kumari and Gavhale (2024) introduced a theoretical model integrating fertility with long-term household economic planning, emphasizing the trade-offs between quantity and quality of children. While conceptually important, this model stops short of empirically linking emotional well-being to fertility decisions.

2.4. Contribution of This Study

This study seeks to address these gaps by analyzing the relationship between general happiness and the number of children using data from the GSS. Specifically, it contributes to the literature in three key ways:

1. National Contextualization: This study focuses on the U.S. context, providing empirical insights that complement the mainly European-centered literature.
2. Subgroup Analysis: It explores how the happiness–fertility link differs across demographic groups such as gender, marital status, religion, race, and class.
3. Policy Relevance: Findings may guide targeted policies to enhance well-being and support fertility through tailored interventions.

3. Methods

3.1. Data Source

This study is based on the GSS18SSDS-C dataset, derived from the 2018 wave of the GSS. The dataset provides nationally representative cross-sectional data on adults in the United States, including key variables related to fertility behavior, subjective well-being, and sociodemographic characteristics. Its breadth and quality make it well-suited for investigating the relationship between general happiness and the number of children in a U.S. context.

3.2. Variables

The dependent variable is CHILDS, which records the number of children the respondent has. This variable captures realized fertility and serves as the main outcome of interest. The main independent variable is HAPPY, an ordinal measure of general happiness with three categories: very happy, pretty happy, and not too happy. This variable serves as a proxy for subjective well-being, aligning with

theoretical models that posit emotional well-being as a potential determinant of reproductive behavior.

To account for confounding factors, the following control variables are included: SEX (gender), MARITAL (marital status), EDUC (educational attainment), INCOME16 (family income level), RELIG (religious affiliation), RACE (ethnicity: White, Black, Other), CLASS (self-identified social class), SIBS (number of siblings).

These covariates are theoretically and empirically grounded in prior fertility and happiness research, allowing for a more accurate estimation of the net effect of happiness on fertility outcomes.

3.3. Statistical Technique

The study employs multivariate regression analysis to examine the relationship between general happiness and the number of children, while controlling for key sociodemographic variables. Four nested models are estimated to assess the robustness of the findings:

- Model 1: Baseline regression with HAPPY only
- Model 2: Adds individual-level controls (SEX, EDUC)
- Model 3: Adds household-level variables (INCOME16, CLASS, SIBS)
- Model 4: Full model including MARITAL, RACE, and RELIG

In addition, subgroup analyses are conducted to explore heterogeneous effects across gender, marital status, religion, race, and class. This approach enables a deeper understanding of how the happiness–fertility relationship may vary across different segments of the population.

4. Results

4.1. Descriptive Statistics

To begin, Table 1 provides summary statistics for the key variables used in the analysis, including the dependent variable (CHILDS), the primary independent variable (HAPPY), and relevant control variables.

Descriptive Statistics

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Number of children	1497	0	8	1.86	1.692
Age of respondent	1495	18	89	48.69	17.993
Highest year of school completed	1498	0	20	13.71	3.039
Number of brothers and sisters	1498	0	23	3.64	2.914
General happiness	1497	1	3	1.83	.656
Total family income	1364	1	26	17.66	6.033
UPPERCLASS VS LOWERCLASS	1490	.00	1.00	.0383	.19188
MIDDLECLASS VS LOWERCLASS	1490	.00	1.00	.4436	.49698
WORKINGCLASS VS LOWERCLASS	1490	.00	1.00	.4268	.49479
BLACK VS OTHER	1486	.00	1.00	.1682	.37420
NORELIG VS RELIG	1487	.00	1.00	.2253	.41791
MARRIED VS UNMARRIED	1500	.00	1.00	.4273	.49486
FEMALE VS MALE	1500	.00	1.00	.5427	.49834
record_happy	1497	1.00	3.00	2.1657	.65556
Valid N (listwise)	1342				

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Key Variables

Table 1 shows that respondents have, on average, 1.86 children, with most reporting high levels of happiness (M = 1.83). Around 42.7% are married and 77.5% identify with a religion. The distribution across income, class, and education suggests meaningful variation for analyzing how happiness relates to fertility.

4.2. Supplementary Analyses

4.2.1. Mean Differences by Marital Status

The table below compares the mean number of children between married and unmarried respondents.

Group Statistics

	MARRIED VS UNMARRIED	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Number of children	1.00	639	2.24	1.571	.062
	.00	858	1.58	1.725	.059

Table 2: Difference in Mean Number of Children by Marital Status

As shown in Table 2, married respondents have significantly more children on average (M = 2.24) compared to unmarried respondents (M = 1.58). An independent samples t-test confirms that this difference is statistically significant ($p < 0.001$), supporting the expectation that marital status is positively associated with fertility.

4.2.2. ANOVA by Happiness Level

Next, a one-way ANOVA was used to test whether the mean number of children differs significantly across levels of general happiness.

ANOVA[a]

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	993.880	13	76.452	35.900	.000[b]
	Residual	2828.075	1328	2.130		
	Total	3821.955	1341			

a. Dependent Variable: Number of children

b. Predictors: (Constant), UPPERCLASS VS LOWERCLASS, Number of brothers and sisters, FEMALE VS MALE, record_happy, NORELIG VS RELIG, D_OTHER, WORKINGCLASS VS LOWERCLASS, MARRIED VS UNMARRIED, Age of respondent, BLACK VS OTHER, Highest year of school completed, Total family income, MIDDLECLASS VS LOWERCLASS

Table 3: ANOVA Results – Number of Children by Happiness Level

According to Table 3, the overall regression model is statistically significant ($F(13, 1328) = 35.90$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that the set of predictors, including happiness, marital status, class, and other sociodemographic variables, explains a significant proportion of variance in the number of children.

4.3. Multivariate Regression Results

4.3.1. Full Sample Analysis

Coefficients[a]

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	.872	.301		2.898	.004
	record_happy	.144	.065	.056	2.221	.026
	BLACK VS OTHER	.359	.116	.080	3.095	.002
	D_OTHER	.141	.134	.026	1.052	.293
	WORKINGCLASS VS LOWERCLASS	-.453	.152	-.133	-2.990	.003
	MIDDLECLASS VS LOWERCLASS	-.620	.158	-.183	-3.913	.000
	UPPERCLASS VS LOWERCLASS	-.497	.262	-.056	-1.896	.058
	NORELIG VS RELIG	-.307	.099	-.076	-3.090	.002
	MARRIED VS UNMARRIED	.623	.090	.183	6.922	.000
	Age of respondent	.032	.002	.335	13.140	.000
	Highest year of school completed	-.072	.016	-.125	-4.546	.000
	Number of brothers and sisters	.084	.016	.142	5.370	.000
	Total family income	.002	.008	.007	.245	.807

a. Dependent Variable: Number of children

Table 4. Multivariate Regression Results: Predicting Number of Children

Table 4 shows that general happiness is a significant predictor of fertility (B = 0.144, p = 0.026). Marital status is strongly associated with the number of children, with married respondents reporting significantly more children (B = 0.623, p < 0.001). Age, education, and number of siblings also show strong effects. Notably, being non-religious, middle class, or working class is associated with fewer children compared to respective reference groups. Income and race (D_OTHER) are not significant in the model.

4.3.2. Subgroup Analysis

To examine whether the relationship varies across different population segments, subgroup regressions were conducted. Table 5 reports the coefficients for happiness in each subgroup.

B

Heterogeneous Effects – Subgroup Analysis for Number of Children

Groups	Coef. HAPPY	Sig.	R-squared	Observations
Male	0.158	0.107	0.325	625
Female	0.102	0.233	0.225	715
Married	0.375	0.000	0.183	575
Unmarried	-0.047	0.578	0.301	765
Religious	0.146	0.056	0.217	1042
Non-religious	0.111	0.364	0.312	298
White	0.105	0.172	0.232	964
Black	0.062	0.693	0.348	226
Other	0.452	0.024	0.367	149
Working Class	0.188	0.054	0.260	570
Middle Class	0.062	0.517	0.271	598
Upper Class	1.057	0.018	0.450	49

Table 5: Subgroup Regression Results by Gender, Marital Status, Religion, Race, and Class

Table 5 presents subgroup regression results for the effect of general happiness on the number of children. The association is strongest and statistically significant among married individuals ($B = 0.375$, $p < 0.001$), upper-class respondents ($B = 1.057$, $p = 0.018$), and those in the "other" racial group ($B = 0.452$, $p = 0.024$). In contrast, the effect is not statistically significant among the unmarried, non-religious, and middle-class groups. These findings suggest that the emotional influence of happiness on fertility varies meaningfully across sociodemographic categories.

These findings support the hypothesis that emotional returns to parenthood are not evenly distributed across society. The benefits of having children, in terms of happiness, may be amplified or constrained by institutional, cultural, or class-related factors (Aassve et al., 2015; Pertold-Gebicka & Spolcova, 2020).

5. Discussion & Conclusions

5.1. Key Findings

This study finds a positive and statistically significant relationship between general happiness and the number of children, using data from the GSS 2018. Even after controlling for key sociodemographic variables such as marital status, education, income, and class, respondents who reported being happier had, on average, more children ($B = 0.144$, $p = 0.026$). This supports prior findings that

subjective well-being can serve not only as an outcome of parenthood, but also as a factor influencing fertility decisions (Myrskylä & Margolis, 2014).

However, this association is not uniform across the population. Subgroup analysis revealed that the effect of happiness is strongest among married individuals, the upper class, and those identifying as other race—groups likely to experience greater emotional and institutional support for family formation. By contrast, no significant effect was found among unmarried, non-religious, or middle-class respondents. These patterns suggest that the emotional benefits of parenthood are not evenly distributed but are instead shaped by broader social conditions, echoing arguments made by Aassve et al. (2015) on institutional compatibility and emotional returns to fertility.

The study also confirms the robustness of classic fertility predictors. Marital status, age, and number of siblings consistently show strong positive effects on the number of children, while higher educational attainment is associated with lower fertility, likely reflecting opportunity costs. Interestingly, income and subjective class showed weaker or inconsistent effects, indicating that economic status alone does not fully explain fertility behavior in the U.S. context.

While this study offers robust empirical evidence using GSS data, it is constrained by its cross-sectional design and reliance on self-reported measures of happiness. Future research could adopt longitudinal approaches and incorporate qualitative insights into subjective well-being.

5.2. Conclusions

Taken together, the findings reinforce the increasing recognition that emotional well-being constitutes a critical dimension of fertility behavior, particularly in post-industrial societies where parenthood is increasingly framed as a personal, rather than obligatory, life choice. While traditional structural factors remain influential, subjective happiness emerges as a meaningful predictor, especially within socially or economically advantaged groups.

These results suggest that future research and policy should not overlook the psychological and emotional context of reproductive decisions. Enhancing life satisfaction, particularly for individuals in uncertain or unsupported social

positions, may be a complementary strategy to addressing fertility decline. Ultimately, understanding who benefits emotionally from parenthood, and under what conditions, is crucial to forming more effective, equitable family policies.

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7. Appendices

Appendix Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Key Variables

Linked to: Section 4.1 – Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive Statistics

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Number of children	1497	0	8	1.86	1.692
Age of respondent	1495	18	89	48.69	17.993
Highest year of school completed	1498	0	20	13.71	3.039
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General happiness	1497	1	3	1.83	.656
Total family income	1364	1	26	17.66	6.033
UPPERCLASS VS LOWERCLASS	1490	.00	1.00	.0383	.19188
MIDDLECLASS VS LOWERCLASS	1490	.00	1.00	.4436	.49698
WORKINGCLASS VS LOWERCLASS	1490	.00	1.00	.4268	.49479
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MARRIED VS UNMARRIED	1500	.00	1.00	.4273	.49486
FEMALE VS MALE	1500	.00	1.00	.5427	.49834
record_happy	1497	1.00	3.00	2.1657	.65556
Valid N (listwise)	1342				

Appendix Table 2. Mean Number of Children by Marital Status

Linked to: Section 4.2.1 – Difference in Means

Group Statistics

	MARRIED VS UNMARRIED	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Number of children	1.00	639	2.24	1.571	.062
	.00	858	1.58	1.725	.059

Independent samples t-test: $t(1495) = 7.66$, $p < 0.001$

Appendix Table 3. ANOVA Summary for Full Regression Model

Linked to: Section 4.2.2 – ANOVA

ANOVA[a]

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	993.880	13	76.452	35.900	.000[b]
	Residual	2828.075	1328	2.130		
	Total	3821.955	1341			

a. Dependent Variable: Number of children

b. Predictors: (Constant), UPPERCLASS VS LOWERCLASS, Number of brothers and sisters, FEMALE VS MALE, record_happy, NORELIG VS RELIG, D_OTHER, WORKINGCLASS VS LOWERCLASS, MARRIED VS UNMARRIED, Age of respondent, BLACK VS OTHER, Highest year of school completed, Total family income, MIDDLECLASS VS LOWERCLASS

Appendix Table 4. Multivariate Regression Results

Linked to: Section 4.3.1 – Regression Models

Coefficients[a]

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	.872	.301		2.898	.004
	record_happy	.144	.065	.056	2.221	.026
	BLACK VS OTHER	.359	.116	.080	3.095	.002
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	Highest year of school completed	-.072	.016	-.125	-4.546	.000
	Number of brothers and sisters	.084	.016	.142	5.370	.000
	Total family income	.002	.008	.007	.245	.807

a. Dependent Variable: Number of children

Appendix Table 5. Subgroup Regression Results by Group

Linked to: Section 4.3.2 – Subgroup Analysis

B Heterogeneous Effects – Subgroup Analysis for Number of Children

Groups	Coef. HAPPY	Sig.	R-squared	Observations
Male	0.158	0.107	0.325	625
Female	0.102	0.233	0.225	715
Married	0.375	0.000	0.183	575
Unmarried	-0.047	0.578	0.301	765
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