



## Subjective Well-Being, Family Dynamics and Vulnerability

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Studies on subjective well-being (SWB) have become increasingly common from a life course perspective over the last 20 years. From that perspective, individuals' SWB is viewed as sensitive to different stressors generated by critical life course events/transitions or daily life activities, depending on the life course status under examination (Clausen, 1998; Turner & Schieman, 2008). Elder and Giele (2009) emphasized the dynamic relationship between stressors generated by changes within the life course and the consequences of such stressors on SWB, underlining that “stressors affect people’s lives while life transitions entail stressful adaptations” (Elder & Giele, 2009, p. 18).

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Based on the vulnerability framework (Spini et al., 2017; Spini & Widmer, [this volume](#)), this chapter aims to review the main findings of projects at LIVES<sup>1</sup> dealing with the dynamic relationships between family life in mid-adulthood and changes in SWB. In this context, SWB is primarily considered as an outcome resulting from a combined effect of stressors and individual resources and reserves.

The first section of this chapter defines the concept of SWB used at LIVES and outlines the general vulnerability framework. The following sections review the three main research directions taken by LIVES scholars to better understand the dynamics of the relationship between resources and SWB. The second section deals with the influence of life course family events/transitions, while the third deals with relations between daily family life and chronic strains. The fourth section highlights the mediating effect of institutional context on the previous relationships.

### SUBJECTIVE WELL-BEING FROM A LIFE COURSE PERSPECTIVE AND THE VULNERABILITY PROCESS

The most frequently used conceptualization of SWB within LIVES primarily follows Ed Diener's (1984) tripartite hedonic approach, which aims to reveal what each person considers fundamental and essential in their lives. This concept has both cognitive and emotional components. The cognitive dimension of SWB refers to the individual's cognitive evaluation of life overall (i.e., global life satisfaction) as well as of specific life domains (e.g., family, leisure, health or professional life) (Luhmann et al., 2012). This evaluation is conducted by comparing things that the individual views to be an appropriate norm or standard. This general assessment of existence or a domain of existence represents life satisfaction (LS), often considered a dimension of the quality of life in a given social context or environment (Phillips, 2006). Therefore, its enhancement has become a crucial target for social policies (Carrasco-Campos et al., 2017). The two emotional dimensions of SWB are positive affects (PA), composed of emotions such as joy or enthusiasm, and negative affects (NA), composed of emotions such as anger or sadness (Diener, 1984). Many research studies have demonstrated that these three components—LS, PA and NA—are structurally distinct, although they are often related (e.g. Lucas et al., 1996).

<sup>1</sup>For a review of changes in the dynamic of SWB in the elderly, see chapter Jopp et al., [this book](#).

Within LIVES, most studies focus on one or two components of SWB, mostly LS and, to a lesser extent, PA and NA. However, a broad range of domain-specific satisfaction types, such as self-rated health, maternal marital satisfaction, satisfaction with working conditions, satisfaction with leisure activities, satisfaction with living alone or in a couple, and satisfaction with social relationships, are also considered. In the case of PA, relationship quality and affectionate behaviours towards one's partner/affectionate couple interactions are investigated. Two kinds of stressors are considered in LIVES research on SWB. The first kind is life course events or transitions, such as union formation (Ryser & Le Goff, 2018), transition to parenthood (Bernardi et al., 2017; Roeters et al., 2016; Wernli & Zella, 2018), widowhood, divorce or separation (Perrig-Chiello et al., 2015, 2016), and the transition to lone parenthood (Struffolino et al., 2016). Taking a longitudinal perspective, Wernli and Zella (2018) offer a panorama of variations in LS for both men and women, following a wide range of family events/transitions in the Swiss context in the short and long terms. For example, marriage is associated, on average, with higher LS in the short term, but this effect vanishes after a few years. Conversely, couple breakdown negatively impacts LS: women suffer in the years before and during the separation, whereas men's LS decreases at the moment of the break and continues to suffer in subsequent years.

The second kind of stressor is related to daily life activities, such as the stress engendered by childrearing for young parents, as developed by Debrot et al. (2018). Daily stressors are associated with the family life stage during the life course, such as marital status (Le Goff & Ryser, 2022, to be published), parenthood (Debrot et al., 2018; Favez et al., 2015), and lone parenthood (Recksiedler & Bernardi, 2020).

These two research directions consider exposure to a stressor related to daily or life course events/transitions as an external process, i.e., not dependent on the individual degree of SWB during the first phase of the vulnerability process (cf. Spini & Widmer, *this volume*). Individuals use some resources and/or reserves to face or to recover from this stress. These resources can be fixed, such as personality traits, or can fluctuate throughout the life course, such as financial situations (Perrig-Chiello et al., 2016). SWB and its variations are thus considered mainly an outcome of the combination of the stress process and the individual's resources or reserves.

LIVES scholars focus mainly on the second (during exposure to the stressor) and the third (postexposure) stages of the vulnerability process

sequence, but not on the first (pre-exposure) stage (Spini et al., 2017; Spini & Widmer, [this volume](#)). Two studies have taken a somewhat different approach and consider SWB as a resource. First, Cullati et al. (2014) conceptualize SWB as a resource that fluctuates during the life course and might influence an/other outcome(s). Within this perspective, the degree of LS with living alone or with a partner and/or another person affects mental health, with distinct effects between men and women. Second, Perrig-Chiello et al. (2015) investigate the impact of different resources on different indicators of SWB after a divorce and showed that LS with the relationship with the former partner does not ultimately affect SWB.

### LIFE COURSE EVENTS OR TRANSITIONS AS STRESSORS

This section investigates different mechanisms of change in SWB in relation to life course events/transitions. Individuals mobilize some resources or reserves to prepare for and adjust to an event/transition, whether it is expected or unexpected. The mobilization of resources is also required to reorganize other life course domains, as events/transitions in one life domain (e.g., family) also strongly influence others (e.g., work or leisure).

Bernardi et al. (2017) study how the transition to parenthood affects LS, domain-specific satisfaction and NA, considering personality traits as resources. Mothers experience a positive peak in LS around birth that returns to prebirth levels after three years. A decline in mothers' satisfaction with work occurs after childbirth, with only partial recovery, as they do not fully recover their decrease in SWB. Similarly, fathers' satisfaction with leisure time suffers more from losses and seems to drive a slight decline in LS after the birth of their child. In this research, resources such as personality only marginally affect how individuals maintain, recuperate, or lose their SWB in specific life domains during the years surrounding parenthood. Roeters et al. (2016) emphasize the importance of couples' lifestyle and the multidimensionality of vulnerability processes during the transition to parenthood. The authors studied the impact of the transition to parenthood on NA, focusing on the importance of pretransition leisure activities and involvement in paid work. After the transition to parenthood, high involvement in leisure activities and paid work might lead to role overlap. In that situation, parents with higher participation in leisure activities experienced a decrease in their SWB after the transition to parenthood. This research shows that involvement in several social fields is not a resource but, on the contrary, induces vulnerability due to role

overload in that context. Another resource mobilized during the transition to parenthood is the expected role of each partner as a parent (Turner-Zwinkels & Spini, 2020). Turner-Zwinkels and Spini (2020) demonstrate that identity coordination within couples, notably the domestic identity linked with the feeling of being a housewife or househusband, has longitudinal effects on couples' SWB. More significant differentiation in domestic identity was associated with greater SWB for men and a reduction in stress for women. This research emphasizes the effect of the multidimensionality of identity and its influence on the SWB dimension, although such influence may vary depending on what dimension of identity is involved.

Unexpected events such as the loss of a partner in middle adulthood, an unanticipated birth or a sudden union breakdown theoretically impact SWB. Individuals are less prepared for such events or transitions and the associated changes following them (Bernardi et al., 2019). Such changes are expected to weaken considerably both individual resources and reserves and the individual's ability to cope, at least in the short or medium term. For example, Perrig-Chiello et al. (2016) show that time after separation plays a role in the level of SWB, with the period soon after separation being related to a deterioration of different dimensions of SWB. Despite a gradual improvement in SWB dimensions over time for separated or divorced persons, their SWB remains lower than that of married people, especially for women, who seem more affected by depression and lower LS. Personality traits such as neuroticism, extraversion, conscientiousness and resilience are psychological resources that improve SWB after a divorce. However, SWB after a divorce also depends on other resources, such as individuals' financial situation or level of education. In their study on the effects of the transition to lone parenthood on mental health, Struffolino et al. (2016) distinguish two kinds of resources that moderate the impact of the stressful event on SWB: first, the level of education related to past trajectory; second, employment conditions associated with the individual's situation at the time of the separation. Authors find that lone mothers in short, part-time employment and with an average level of education mention lower self-rated health than mothers living in couples (Struffolino et al., 2016).

An innovative approach (Comolli et al., 2020, 2021) focuses on the combined effect of events in different trajectories and event concentrations, i.e., events occurring in close temporal proximity. The authors investigate the existence of nonlinearities or thresholds in the association

between event concentration and LS. Their investigations are based on the definition of critical events, whether positive or negative, as occurrences that force a readjustment of people's lives through their habits, behaviours or social roles (Park, 2010). In the same vein as studies challenging the view that some events are intrinsically stressful or negative (e.g., Kettlewell et al., 2020), they test whether transitions that are usually benign may become stressful and, consequently, reduce SWB if they take place in close temporal proximity with multiple other transitions. Additionally, they test whether there are gender differences in the relationship between event concentration and LS. They conclude that the concentration of critical events is negatively related to LS, with a slightly more significant effect for women than men. Moreover, the authors show that the sequence of events also impacts SWB, perhaps indicating that the trajectory contains some information on the kind of stresses, (cumulative) resources and capital that produce an SWB outcome (Comolli et al., 2020).

In conclusion, according to LIVES scholars, the relation between life course events or transitions and SWB is mediated by several types of resources or reserves. These resources are psychological and economic and are related to education. Moreover, they may be fixed throughout the life course or linked to a process of accumulation or even fluctuation. The intensity of their impact on SWB also depends on the concentration of different events at one moment of the life course, with spillover effects between life domains. Paradoxically, some scholars have also shown that a life event per se is not necessarily the source of differentiated SWB but can, rather, reveal preexisting differences in resources (Ryser & Le Goff, 2018; Perrig-Chiello et al., 2016).

### DAILY LIFE STRESSORS/CHRONIC STRAINS

A general model of relations between daily stressors and SWB within a life course perspective posits that an individual's position or stage in the life course gives rise to specific stresses that can impact SWB (Almeida & Wong, 2009). An example is parenting, especially during early parenthood. Many stressors are related to the care of the child, work-family balance, partners' interaction, and the share of tasks related to the family organization (Favez et al., 2015). In the same vein, living with a partner is susceptible to producing daily stress that can impact SWB (Ryser & Le Goff, 2018). The main findings of the effects of daily stressors on SWB emphasize that these stressors shape vulnerability in multiple domains that

interact over time such as family, work, or health (Bernardi et al., 2017; Cullati, 2014; Cullati et al., 2014; Debrot et al., 2018; Roeters et al., 2016; Sauvain-Dugerdil, 2018).

LIVES scholars have taken a primarily comparative approach to investigate the relations between daily stressors and SWB. The first compares SWB in different social groups at the same life course stage. Based on Pearlin's (2010) social stratification perspective on SWB, Cullati (2014) investigates individuals' socioeconomic position, which is considered an individual resource mobilized against the stress engendered by work-family conflict on a self-rated health trajectory. His results show that self-rated health slowly declines over time and is significantly correlated with exhaustion after work. However, this decline is slower for more-educated than for less-educated people. In addition to the importance of the socioeconomic position, Favez et al. (2015) highlight the role of the family structure in the vulnerability process during parenthood by contrasting two groups of women: women living in stepfamilies and those living in first-marriage families. Favez and colleagues investigate how parenting and coparenting modify SWB by changing parents' daily experience. Their results indicate that mothers promote family integrity in stepfamilies either with the partner or the father but not with both. They also demonstrate that in first-marriage families, maternal marital satisfaction is associated with all dimensions of coparenting with the father, whereas in stepfamilies, maternal marital satisfaction is only linked with disparagement against the partner and conflict with him. The promotion of cohesiveness decreases as the child becomes older and more autonomous.

The second type of comparison contrasts people in different life stages (Debrot et al., 2018; Favez et al., 2015; Ryser & Le Goff, 2018; Sauvain-Dugerdil, 2018). Debrot et al. (2018) consider the daily stress of partners generated when young children or preschool children are present in the household. The authors focus on how partners detach from work, how they interact, and the consequences to the individual and their interrelation with SWB. The results emphasize that detachment from work affects not only the individual but also their close partner's perception of their interactions. Work detachment then plays a crucial mediating role in the stress spillover and crossover process. This research highlights that vulnerability is not just an individual matter but also impacts close connections.

These two strategies of comparison, between social groups and at different life stages, are combined by Sauvain-Dugerdil (2018), who compares parents and childless adults at two moments of the life course, young

adulthood and the end of middle life. The author shows that while the SWB of parents and childless individuals did not differ significantly, childlessness is related to less social integration for older people which has an impact on individuals' SWB.

In conclusion, everyday life at a family life course stage generates specific stresses that individuals have to face. LIVES scholars show that these stresses are related to difficulties in reconciling life domains, especially family and work. They also show that these stresses are generated by interacting with others (e.g., children, partner). People face these stresses by using resources belonging to different registers (psychological, economic, etc.).

### THE MEDIATING ROLE OF THE INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT

Both the institutional context, composed of welfare policies and laws (Recksiedler & Bernardi, 2018), and/or the cultural and normative context, constituted by informal norms and attitudes (Le Goff & Ryser, 2022, to be published), act as potential mediators of the relationships among resources, life events/transitions or daily life stressors and SWB. Based on the vulnerability framework, welfare states are expected to act differently in acquiring and redistributing resources, thereby allowing men and women to cope with daily stressors or stressful life events. Welfare state organizations are considered a kind of collective set of resources (or lack of resources) that play a role in the average level of SWB in a society (Fioretta & Rossier, 2018). Similarly, socionormative climates that are more or less tolerant of given lifestyles influence how individual resources or reserves can be used according to their "degree of permissiveness" (Le Goff & Ryser, 2022, to be published).

A first approach compares the vulnerability process of people situated in the same phase of the life course or experiencing the same life course event but living in different countries. According to Fioretta and Rossier (2018), parents living in Switzerland who are both full-time workers report more difficulties reconciling work and family than more traditional couples. Conversely, in Belgium, France, Germany or Sweden, dual-earner couples show fewer work-family conflicts and better self-rated health and economic well-being than other couples. This research highlights the vulnerability engendered by the structural difficulty of combining work and family life in Switzerland, which reflects the structural gender inequalities between men and women. In a similar vein, Recksiedler and Bernardi



(2018) investigate the SWB of lone mothers according to welfare type, considering the union trajectories after the transition to lone parenthood (whether and how often women experience repartnering). The authors highlight the vulnerability caused by different welfare states, finding that frequent repartnering was more negatively associated with LS in countries characterized by liberal policies than in conservative countries or countries with high levels of social protection (Recksiedler & Bernardi, 2018).

A second approach investigates the effect of a change in social policy on SWB. Family law and its changes are important contextual factors insofar as they modify opportunities for family behaviour and the perception of what is (and is not) normative, legitimate, and expectable. Recksiedler and Bernardi (2020) compare cross-sectional data collected before and after a change in Swiss family law that facilitated parents' access to shared physical custody arrangements for children of separation and divorce. They found that parents' mental and physical health in shared physical custody arrangements was higher after the law's implementation. However, they could not disentangle between the causation effect (i.e., the legal change increases SWB) and the selection effect (i.e., the legal change allows new social groups to pursue shared custody arrangements). This research shows how changes and variations in Swiss family law are associated with parents' mental health and how these changes decrease parents' vulnerability to shared physical custody arrangements.

## CONCLUSION: A LIFE COURSE VULNERABILITY PERSPECTIVE ON SWB

This chapter aims to review the main findings of research dealing with the dynamic relationships between family life in mid-adulthood and changes in SWB within the LIVES vulnerability framework (Spini & Widmer, [this volume](#)). SWB is primarily envisaged as an outcome related to exposure to stress. The set of resources at an individual's disposal mediates the degree or force of stress. In this way, the occurrence of the stress and the change in SWB correspond to the second and third steps of the vulnerability process elaborated within LIVES.

LIVES scholars investigate two kinds of stressors: first, life course events or transitions and, second, daily circumstances related to a specific phase of the life course. Many people experience these stressors during their life course. Thus, LIVES scholars have focused on fine-grained exploration of the complexity of the relations between a wide variety of life course events and transitions and daily stressors and SWB. This exploration differs from

other perspectives on vulnerability in which stressors are rare events, such as an incident or an illness or even a collective catastrophe.

People mobilize many resources to face stress. Resources investigated by life scholars belong to different registers (physical, temporal, cognitive, emotional, economic, relational or collective). These resources are constant or time-varying. They are eventually reserves rather than resources per se if they result from cumulative processes during the life course (Cullati, Kliegel, & Widmer, 2018). These resources are unequally distributed among individuals or within societies. Some individuals are therefore more vulnerable, i.e., will experience a greater decrease in their SWB.

Several discussions emerge from investigations about the role of stressors in the stress process. First, several scholars doubt that stressors exert an impact per se on SWB. Stressors instead reveal differences in mobilized resources or reserves. Stressors illuminate resource inequalities (Perrig-Chiello et al., 2016; Ryser & Le Goff, 2018). Second, other authors have investigated the concentration of events in multiple life domains during specific life course phases (Comolli et al., 2020). A dense period of sudden life course events engages much more of the individual resources and/or reserves than if the same events occurred across a longer period. Consequently, event concentration challenges the individual's ability to cope. These results raise the question of people's resilience (Bonanno, 2004) in facing different stressors during their life course.

Several LIVES scholars propose an alternative to the primary approach of SWB as an outcome (Cullati et al., 2014; Perrig-Chiello et al., 2015). In this approach, SWB is a resource for facing stressors. SWB could exert an impact on the occurrence or degree of life course stressors. In this case, SWB depends on the first phase of the LIVES vulnerability process. This approach opens a promising avenue of research in which SWB is a resource that allows for life-course stressors and an outcome resulting from the occurrence and degree of stress.

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