

Ageing, Health and Life Satisfaction of the Oldest Old: An Analysis for Germany

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This analysis, based on data from 13 waves of the German Socio-Economic Panel (GSOEP) and the Survey of Health, Ageing and Retirement in Europe (SHARE), examines ageing, health and life satisfaction among the oldest old in Germany (i.e. individuals aged 75 and older). We are particularly interested in the relationship between age and life satisfaction across the lifespan and the role that both perceived and objective health status plays in the life satisfaction of this population.

Our findings do indeed confirm that life satisfaction among the oldest old is affected by perceived health status. Nevertheless, although this result corresponds well to the vast cross-sectional research conducted in gerontology and related fields, we show that failing to control for unobservable individual heterogeneity substantially inflates the effect of perceived health on life satisfaction among this population. It is also interesting to note that life satisfaction among the oldest old does not generally depend on their objective health status. One exception is the prevalence of Parkinson's and cataracts – both diseases with a prolonged effect that can eventually lead to a severe loss of independence.

Only among the oldest of the oldest old (individuals over 85) do we observe a significant decline in life satisfaction, although we also find distinctly lower levels of life satisfaction among cohorts born around the 1960s, which suggests that in Germany the oft-cited U-shaped relationship between age and life satisfaction may be driven by a cohort effect. Considering Germany's unique history during and after World War II, observing lower levels of life satisfaction among individuals born between 1930 and 1960 may come as no surprise and could explain why Germany deviates in this regard from the norm (as depicted in Blanchflower and Oswald, 2008). Overall, however, once cohort effects are controlled for, our results show that, somewhat paradoxically, life satisfaction remains remarkably constant across the lifespan, even among the oldest old and despite marked declines in health status.

Three possible explanations for this “stability despite loss paradox” (Kunzmann et al., 2000) or “satisfaction paradox” (see Walker, 2005) come to mind: first, this phenomenon can perhaps be explained by the ability of older individuals to adapt to worsening conditions. A second possible explanation is that older individuals are perhaps comparing themselves primarily with individuals in their own age cohort (Kapteyn et al., 1980) and others in this age group may indeed be worse off. Related to this latter explanation is the possibility of sample selection: happy people may live longer and healthier. If this is the case – and there appears to be some evidence hereto (see, for example, Danner et al. 2001) – then our analyzed oldest old may per se be happier with life. Disentangling these three possible reasons is not easy, yet a promising avenue for future research.

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