

LIFE GOALS: NON-ZERO SUM GOALS PROMOTE HAPPINESS, ZERO SUM GOALS ARE DETRIMENTAL. IMPLICATIONS FOR SET-POINT THEORY.

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Using 2004-07 data from the German Socio-Economic Panel (SOEP), this paper provides further evidence that life goals matter to subjective well-being (SWB). Non-zero sum goals, which include commitment to volunteering, and also to family and friends, promote life satisfaction. Zero sum goals, including commitment to career success and material gains, appear detrimental. Finding that conscious life goals matter can potentially make an important contribution to SWB theory. The most widely accepted theory – set-point theory – essentially claims that set-points are near-automatic consequences of hereditary characteristics, including personality traits. Evidence that choice of life goals can promote or damage happiness cannot be reconciled with set-point theory as currently understood.

This paper extends previous work, showing that non-zero sum life goals contribute to life satisfaction (Headey, 2007). It is hypothesized that individuals who prioritise non-zero sum goals will achieve greater satisfaction to the extent that (1) they have appropriate skills and personality traits (human capital) required to pursue their goals effectively, and (2) they devote time/effort to the goals. Both hypotheses are confirmed in regard to altruistic volunteering goals. However, only the human capital hypothesis is confirmed in regard to family goals. In the case of individuals who prioritise career and material goals, little relationship was found between human capital or time/effort and satisfaction outcomes, except that those who made good money were somewhat less dissatisfied than those who did not prosper (Nickerson et al, 2003).

The concluding section of the paper discusses the need to revise SWB theory in the light of finding that conscious life goals can make a substantial difference to SWB.

Sources and methods

SOEP data 2004-07

In our statistical models, life goals/priorities and human capital (skills and personality traits) are viewed as antecedent to choices about how much time/effort to invest in various domains of life. Time/effort is in turn viewed as antecedent to domain satisfactions (satisfaction with volunteering, family life etc) and to life satisfaction. So life goals and, where possible, human capital variables are measured in 2004¹, time/effort is measured in 2004-07, and satisfaction outcomes in 2007.

¹ In practice, some of the personality trait measures used in the paper were not included in SOEP until 2005. This is not a serious problem, since adult personality is usually regarded as more or less stable.

References

Headey, B. (2007) Life goals matter to happiness: implications for set-point theory, *Social Indicators Research*, on line (July).

Nickerson, C., Schwarz, N., Diener, E. and Kahneman, D. (2003) Zeroing in on the dark side of the American dream: a closer look at the negative consequences of the goal for financial success, *Psychological Science*, 14, 531-36.