

# What matters for well-being: Individual perceptions of quality of life before and after important life events

Anke C. Plagnol\*  
University of Cambridge

Jacqueline Scott  
University of Cambridge

GeNet Working Paper No 33  
December 2008  
Revised: November 2009

## Abstract

In recent decades, what matters for individual quality of life (QoL) has increasingly been the focus of empirical social science research. However, individuals are rarely asked directly what is important for their quality of life as part of large-scale surveys. The present analysis studies perceptions of what matters for QoL in a large-scale longitudinal dataset – the British Household Panel Survey – which includes an open-ended question on QoL in three waves spanning ten years. We find that concepts of QoL change over the life course and differ between men and women. We hypothesize that changes in perceptions of QoL are related to important life events, such as the birth of a first child and retirement. These life events constitute 'turning points' after which individuals often shift their priorities of what matters for their QoL. We further explore whether such shifts in priorities are stable or disappear more than five years after the life event.

---

\*Department of Sociology, Free School Lane, Cambridge CB2 3RQ. Email: az266@cam.ac.uk

# 1 Introduction

In recent years, social scientists have increasingly drawn their attention to the study of people's quality of life [for a short overview in gerontology see George, 2006]. How people *evaluate* their quality of life is often measured by subjective indicators – such as life satisfaction and happiness. A considerable advantage of subjective well-being measures is that survey respondents assess for themselves which aspects of life are important for their well-being. Measures of overall satisfaction with life allow respondents to weigh each domain of life according to their own standards to form an evaluation of their satisfaction [Diener et al., 1985]. However, there is little empirical research on how individuals themselves *conceptualize* quality of life. The aim of the present study is to analyze individuals' perceptions of what is important for quality of life and how these change over the life course.

The life domain approach, pioneered several decades ago by Angus Campbell and colleagues, posits that overall well-being depends on satisfaction with each of several domains of life [Campbell, 1981, Campbell et al., 1976]. These and other studies on domain satisfaction indicate that satisfaction with health, family and finances are most important for overall life satisfaction [see also Cummins, 1996, Salvatore and Munoz Sastre, 2001, Van Praag and Ferrer-i Carbonell, 2004, Van Praag et al., 2003], and it is therefore likely that these are the areas of life people reflect on when they assess their personal well-being. An earlier cross-sectional study by Cantril [1965] also indicates that economic factors, as well as health and family, rank highly among people's personal concerns.

In the present study we use longitudinal data from the British Household Panel Survey to investigate what individuals consider to be important for their quality of life. The aims of the present study are threefold. We first ask whether perceptions of quality of life change over the life course and whether these perceptions differ between men and women. We then consider several important life events as possible causes for changing perceptions of quality of life. Lastly, we are interested in knowing whether changes in these perceptions are transient or last for more than five years.

We have selected four life events which typically occur at different stages of the life course, and we hypothesize that these life events affect men and women differently with regards to what they consider to be important for quality of life. We find that perceptions of quality of life differ significantly between genders and change considerably over the life course. Some of these changes can be attributed to life events, which are experienced differently between men and women.

## **2 Conceptual framework**

The notion that individuals' concepts of what matters for their well-being change has been stated before. For instance, various studies have noted that old people are more satisfied with their finances than young people with similar income levels [George, 1992, Hansen et al., 2008]. One explanation that has been put forward for this observation is that older people adjust their financial aspirations downward [George, 1992]. Changes in aspirations for having a happy family and material goods have also been found in an American sample [Plagnol and Easterlin, 2008]. Blanchflower and Oswald [2004] attribute their finding that life satisfaction is U-shaped in age in Britain and the US to the possibility that older people relinquish some of their aspirations.

Aspirations are conceptually different than perceptions of what matters for ones quality of life. Nevertheless, changes in one imply a change in the other. The examples mentioned above provide support for our hypothesis that what matters for people's quality of life changes over the life course.

We are particularly interested in the impact of life events on perceptions of what matters. Life events, such as family formation and retirement often imply a change in the social role of the individual and thus have a likely impact on well-being. Many typical life events tend to cluster at certain stages of the life course and may have negative consequences for well-being if they do not occur at the usual age [McLanahan and Sorensen, 1985]. For instance, family formation usually occurs in young adulthood, while exit from the labor market is typically experienced towards the end of the life course. In our analysis, we are interested in whether these life events are accompanied

by changes in individuals' priorities for their quality of life. Such events are often denoted as 'turning points' in the life course literature. The use of the term turning points differs between authors and the definition we use here does not only include unusual events, but also normative life transitions such as graduating from university. We borrow the definition formulated by Wheaton and Gotlib [1997] who describe a turning point as "a change in direction in the life course, with respect to a previously established trajectory, that has the long-term impact of altering the probability of life destinations" [Wheaton and Gotlib, 1997, p. 5]. Normative life events, such as becoming a parent, are included in this definition as such transitions involve adjustment to new social roles and thus changes in life trajectories. Turning points can only be identified retrospectively and data before and after the event are therefore needed [George, 2009]. The dataset we employ in our analysis – the BHPS – has such information for a number of turning points and allows us to observe intra-individual as well as inter-individual changes in perceptions of quality of life.

In our analysis, we focus on life events that are experienced by many and are often age-related. These events include entering a serious partnership either through cohabitation or marriage, the birth of a first child, the last child leaving the household, and retirement. Brim and Ryff [1980] caution against the assumption that only unusual, attention grabbing events matter for personal change. Widely experienced events, such as the ones we selected for our analysis, are also important and, as we will demonstrate below, can alter an individual's perception of what matters for quality of life.

We further hypothesize that the events we have selected might have a different influence on men and women with regards to their priorities for quality of life. For instance, women are more likely than men to stay at home and take care of the child after childbirth [Gershuny, 2004, Harkness, 2008]. It is therefore possible that women's perceptions of what matters for their quality of life are more affected by childbirth than that of their partners. Similarly, women might be affected more by children leaving the household because they are more likely to have left the labor force to raise children. Entering a partnership, on the other hand, is likely to have a similar impact on both genders. With regards to retirement, we speculate that men might be more affected

than women because, on average, men are more likely to base their identity on their jobs while women are often less career-centric, preferring to balance work and family identities [Blossfeld and Drobic, 2001]. As we will show below, there are indeed gender differences in perceptions of what matters for one's quality of life though our tentative hypotheses are not always verified.

### **3 Data and methods**

#### **3.1 Data**

The data are from the British Household Panel Survey (BHPS), an annual longitudinal study that was started in 1991 [for a full description of the data, including sampling methods and attrition, see Taylor et al., 2009]. Our key dependent variable measuring the respondent's personal concept of quality of life was included in three survey years spaced five years apart, 1997, 2002 and 2007. Our analysis is therefore restricted to these three survey years, yielding a total sample size of 40,248 person-year observations. Respondents were asked to list what things they consider to be important for their own quality of life. Depending on their initial responses, survey participants were prompted to list further items, up to a total of four mentions. The survey question is open-ended and does not offer any pre-defined answer options, thus providing a wide variety of responses which were classified into 52 categories by NOP, the fieldwork organization [see Taylor et al., 2009, Appendix 3.18]. We reduced these initial categories further to 16 items, which capture the main concepts that were mentioned, such as family, health and finances (see Appendix A for the full survey question and classification of mentions). We created a binary variable for each of these 16 items, where each variable takes a value of one if it was mentioned by the respondent and zero otherwise.

Open-ended questions seem most appropriate to assess the salience of a concept because closed questions might not offer all appropriate answer categories and respondents could be tempted to simply guess, answer mechanically, or respond according to social desirability [Schuman and Presser, 1979]. Schuman and Scott [1987] note that neither open nor closed questions might be adequate to assess absolute preferences or

rankings because both forms can lead to different types of bias. The authors propose that survey questions should rather be used to evaluate changes over time or differences between groups, as we are doing in the present study.

An additional issue with open-ended questions arises because of the necessity of some coding reduction to make analysis possible. In order to prepare the BHPS data for quantitative analysis heterogeneous responses were grouped in the same answer categories thus making the interpretation of results more difficult. For instance, the 'health' category includes mentions which concern the individual's own health as well as responses describing the health status of family members [Scott et al., 2009].

We are primarily interested in knowing to what extent life events influence an individual's perception of what constitutes quality of life. A number of the respondents in our sample experienced significant life events, such as the birth of their first child, between two survey years, and we can therefore compare their definition of quality of life before and after the event. As we have three survey years, it is in some cases possible to assess whether perceptions of quality of life are still changed – if at all – more than five years after the life event. Similarly, some individuals experienced certain life events before our first survey year in 1997. For these individuals we use the 1992 BHPS survey – which includes all of the variables that indicate the life events we analyze here, with the exception of the open-ended question on quality of life – to assess whether the life event in question occurred between 1992 and 1997 or before 1992. For each life event we create one of two dummy variables; the first takes a value of 1 if the event occurred during the five years preceding the current survey while the second dummy variable has a value of 1 if the event occurred earlier. This coding allows us to assess whether changes in perceptions of quality of life after important life events are temporary or persist for more than five years. We choose a time span of five years because the open-ended questions on quality of life were only included in surveys spaced five years apart. It is, of course, possible that after some life events perceptions of quality of life change for a time span that is much shorter than five years, but the data we have do not allow us to investigate this possibility properly.

The life events we have selected for our analysis include entering a serious part-

nership either through cohabitation or marriage, the birth of a first child, the last child leaving the household, and retirement. Our additional explanatory variables include age, gender, and time dummies.

### 3.2 Methods

We model the dependent binary variable QoL using a probit specification [for a similar treatment see Ferrer-i-Carbonell, 2005]. The following model describes the latent, unobservable variable  $QoL^*$ :

$$QoL_{nt}^* = \alpha + \beta age_{nt} + \gamma gender_n + \tau T_t + \varepsilon_{nt} \quad (1)$$

where

$$\varepsilon_{nt} = v_n + \eta_{nt} \quad (2)$$

and  $n$  denotes the individual,  $t$  denotes time, and  $\varepsilon_{nt}$  captures the unobservables. We model the error term  $\varepsilon_{nt}$  using individual random effects, where  $v_n$  is the individual random effect and  $\eta_{nt}$  is the usual error term. The individual random effects account for characteristics that are constant within each individual over time. These stable, unobservable characteristics include personality traits such as optimism or extroversion, which might generally bias individual evaluations. The error terms are assumed to be random and not correlated with the observable explanatory variables. It is reasonable to assume that individual random effects, such as personality are not correlated with age and gender.

The inclusion of fixed time effects  $T$  – the dummy variables for the 2002 and 2007 waves – accounts for the differences between all waves that are the same for all individuals, such as political events or macroeconomic changes. The model further accounts for age in order to capture changes by age within and across individuals. The results of this model are presented in table 2.

In our second model, we include as additional covariates a set of  $k$  explanatory variables – life events and interactions of these life events with gender – denoted by  $x$  in equation 3. The results of this model are presented in tables 3 and 4.

$$\text{QoL}_{nt}^* = \alpha + \beta \text{age}_{nt} + \gamma \text{gender}_n + \tau T_t + \sum_k \delta_k x_{k,nt} + \varepsilon_{nt} \quad (3)$$

where

$$\varepsilon_{nt} = v_n + \eta_{nt} \quad (4)$$

## 4 Results

### 4.1 Life course changes

Are concepts of quality of life stable over the life course or do they vary with age and between genders? Our analysis indicates that concepts of quality of life do not remain stable over the life course. Both men and women mention health as being an important part of their own quality of life more often than any other item overall. However, at young ages, both genders are more likely to mention family and finances than health (Table 1). The percentage of respondents who mention health increases notably with age (Figure 1), with women continuously reporting health more often than men until late in life. The importance of family for one's quality of life diminishes somewhat with age (Figure 2) and could be related to life events such as the dissolution of unions or children leaving the home. These results are consistent with previous research using American data which shows that with age fewer people consider a happy marriage to be part of the good life [Plagnol and Easterlin, 2008].

On average, men mention finances more often than women and for both genders the importance of finances declines with age. Similarly, friends, home comforts and employment are reported less at old age, whereas the importance of leisure and freedom increases (Table 1). Almost all categories display significant gender differences. In the

following, we will concentrate on the first eight items listed in Table 1, which are, on average, mentioned by more than ten percent of the population.

The data include only three survey years spaced five years apart. The means reported in Table 1 are therefore based on the responses of individuals from vastly different birth cohorts. For instance, all the observations for the lower age category (15-25 years) are from people who were born between 1972 and 1992, whereas members of the 65 and above age group were all born before 1942. It is possible that members of the 15-25 age group will place considerably less importance on health and other items once they reach age 65 than the old age group shown here. However, our data support a life course rather than a cohort interpretation of why quality of life perceptions change over time. Although our data span only ten years, probit regressions with individual random effects (see Equation 1) largely confirm the life course trends suggested by the means. As people age, they place more importance on health and leisure, while concentrating less on family, finances, happiness, friends, home comforts and employment (Table 2). Women are more likely than man to mention health, family and happiness, but this gender difference diminishes somewhat with age, as evidenced by the significant, negative interaction between gender and age. Similarly, men are more likely to mention friends, leisure and employment, and the gender difference in these domains decreases with age as well, except for employment. We include time fixed-effects in the form of indicator variables for the 2002 and 2007 waves – waves 12 and 17 in the survey – to account for general changes between our three waves. Although the age variable does not allow us to distinguish clearly between within-individual changes and between-individual age differences, we can assume that age differences in concepts of quality of life are not merely based on differences in age-group sample composition across time, but do also occur for individuals over a time span of ten years.

## **4.2 Life events**

We have established that perceptions of what matters for quality of life change considerably with age for both men and women. People might simply change their concept of quality of life because they mature and develop a different outlook on life, but a more

reasonable explanation would be that through life experiences individuals shift their perception of what is important for their quality of life. For instance, the importance of family might only be salient after one is in a committed partnership or after the birth of a child. In a regression age would largely proxy for such life events, although the effects of two events might cancel each other out.

We test the hypothesis that concepts of quality of life are shaped by life events through the example of four events which were experienced by a sufficiently high number of people between 1997 and 2007. These events include entering a committed partnership through either marriage or cohabitation, the birth of a first child, the last child leaving the home, and retirement. We further distinguish between changes in perceptions of quality of life up to five years after the event and more lasting changes, measured more than five years later.

Indeed, entering a committed relationship, such as marriage or cohabitation, led people to mention family, happiness and home comforts more often than before, while friends were considered less important for one's quality of life (Tables 3, 4). Except for the mention of home comforts, these changes persisted even more than five years after the start of the relationship. These changes applied equally to men and women, thus refuting the assumption that women might be more focused on family after entering a relationship. In addition, both genders were more likely to mention health and finances as an important part of quality of life six or more years after entering a serious relationship.

Respondents who experienced the birth of their first child between any of the three survey years were more likely to mention family than before the event. They were also less likely to mention friends, but none of these changes differed significantly between men and women in the short-term. Increased mentions of family continued until more than five years after the birth, as did less frequent mentions of friends. However, more than five years after the event, women were even to a greater extent less likely than men to consider friends as being important for quality of life, and they were also more likely to mention happiness. We thus observe some – though not large – differences in the effect of children on perceptions of quality of life of men and women.

It is perhaps not surprising that both genders were more likely to mention family as an important aspect of their quality of life five or more years after the birth of their first child. After all, most people still share the same household with their child when it is 5 years or older and the event of having a child is therefore salient in their daily lives. What happens once the last child leaves the household and parents are confronted with an empty nest? Will they be less likely to mention the importance of family if they are not in daily contact with their children? Our analysis did not show any short-term changes in perceptions of quality of life after the last child has left the household – neither for women nor for men. However, more than five years after the event both men and women were less likely to mention family.

Another event that occurs towards the end of the life course is retirement, and for this life transition one can observe several changes in perceptions of quality of life. Within five years of retirement men were more likely to mention health, but later on both genders were less likely to mention it than before. Family and, not surprisingly, employment were mentioned less after retirement, while friends gained in importance. These effects continued on more than five years after retirement, indicating that people who have retired noticeably shift their perceptions. In addition, both genders were less likely to mention happiness more than five years after retirement.

## **5 Discussion**

We hypothesized that perceptions of quality of life are not a stable concept over the life course and expected significant differences between men and women. Indeed, life events – most notably entering a partnership and retirement – seem to influence what people consider to be important in life. However, men and women mostly reacted equally to life events although overall perceptions of quality of life differ between the two genders.

Although women are more likely to take on childcare responsibilities, both men and women shift their priorities towards family, away from friends, after the birth of a first child. Parenthood as a turning point does therefore not seem to be strongly influenced

by the amount of time that each partner potentially devotes to childcare. Similarly, we do not find gender differences in changes in perceptions of quality of life when the last child leaves the household. Our analysis suggests that the turning points studied here are not gender specific concerning perceptions of quality of life. We only observe small gender differences in such perceptions with regards to retirement.

Among the four life events that we have considered here, entering a partnership and retirement seem to have the largest effects of perceptions of quality of life. Life events do indeed explain some of the changes in concepts of quality of life with age, but after controlling for these events we still observe significant changes over the life course, which are indicated by significant age coefficients (Tables 3, 4). Of course, there are many other changes in circumstances that could lead to changes in one's concept of quality of life which were not included in our analysis due to data limitations. For instance, someone who made new friends between any two survey years might subsequently report a higher importance of having good friends, but unfortunately the range of possible life changes are too numerous to capture in full.

However, the life events studied here to some extent explain the age pattern of mentions of family that we considered earlier (Figure 2). More people in their mid 20s and early 30s consider family to be important for quality of life. This is roughly the age range when people usually enter long-term partnerships and start families. The importance of family diminishes later in life when children leave the household and individuals enter retirement. Our results thus support a life course rather than a cohort explanation for differences in perceptions of quality of life across ages.

## Figures

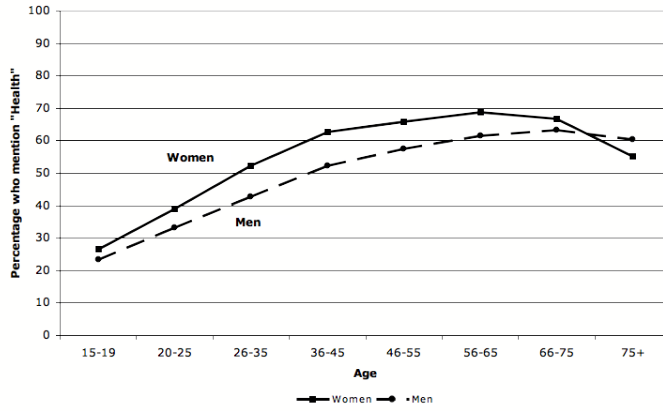


Figure 1: Percentage of respondents who consider *Health* to be important for quality of life, by gender (1997, 2002 and 2007)

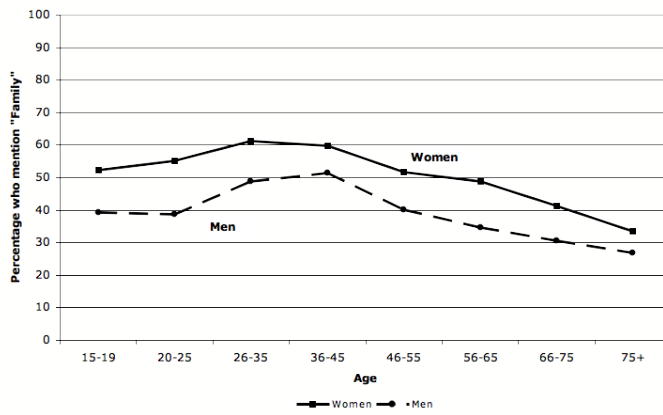


Figure 2: Percentage of respondents who consider *Family* to be important for quality of life, by gender (1997, 2002 and 2007)

## Tables

Table 1: Quality of life mentions by age and gender (pooled data 1997, 2002 and 2007)

Age	Women			Men		
	15-25	>64	all	15-25	>64	all
Health	33.78	61.95	57.33	29.02	62.29	50.33
Family	54.05	38.57	52.35	38.96	29.42	41.10
Finance	38.64	20.90	33.21	40.99	27.68	38.14
Happiness	29.75	16.32	27.86	23.69	16.40	23.33
Friends	36.13	19.53	20.09	33.12	11.16	15.65
Leisure	10.84	23.36	15.08	18.33	24.39	19.31
Home comforts	15.58	11.77	12.36	14.88	10.27	11.74
Employment	19.45	0.63	9.33	23.56	1.49	13.94
Misc other	8.27	10.10	8.36	7.20	8.29	7.81
Time for self	5.00	3.58	7.74	6.26	5.00	10.00
Freedom	4.52	12.07	6.93	5.49	10.70	7.59
Other material	11.85	6.50	6.47	10.94	6.92	6.75
Other personal	6.55	4.46	4.97	6.36	3.75	4.79
Spiritual	1.72	7.96	3.91	2.52	6.16	3.64
Environment	2.60	3.39	3.77	4.58	6.40	6.52
Negatives	1.69	4.78	3.47	2.81	4.73	4.21
N	3,543	4,307	21,945	3,098	3,280	18,303

Table 2: Effect of gender and age on perceptions of what matters for quality of life.  
Probit with individual random effects (z-statistics in parentheses)

	Health	Family	Finance	Happiness
Female	0.419*** (9.06)	0.450*** (10.20)	-0.052 (-1.19)	0.389*** (9.05)
Age	0.019*** (25.97)	-0.009*** (-12.99)	-0.008*** (-12.61)	-0.006*** (-8.48)
Age x female	-0.005*** (-4.81)	-0.002* (-2.29)	-0.002* (-2.48)	-0.005*** (-5.67)
2002 wave dummy	0.101*** (5.45)	0.137*** (7.52)	-0.113*** (-6.20)	-0.003 (-0.15)
2007 wave dummy	0.032 (1.64)	0.355*** (18.77)	-0.083*** (-4.44)	-0.176*** (-9.10)
Constant	-0.903*** (-24.65)	-0.058 (-1.70)	0.081* (2.41)	-0.512*** (-14.98)
ll	-26299.54	-26635.2	-25441.49	-22455.1
N	40,247	40,247	40,247	40,247
N groups	22,099	22,099	22,099	22,099

	Friends	Leisure	Home comforts	Employment
Female	-0.132* (-2.50)	-0.498*** (-10.16)	0.012 (0.24)	-0.168** (-3.10)
Age	-0.019*** (-20.51)	0.005*** (6.90)	-0.005*** (-6.09)	-0.024*** (-25.63)
Age x female	0.009*** (7.76)	0.006*** (6.36)	0.001 (0.60)	-0.003* (-2.21)
2002 wave dummy	-0.211*** (-9.42)	0.043* (2.08)	-0.268*** (-12.28)	-0.275*** (-11.62)
2007 wave dummy	-0.007 (-0.33)	-0.011 (-0.51)	-0.480*** (-20.00)	-0.264*** (-10.82)
Constant	-0.424*** (-10.13)	-1.235*** (-32.17)	-0.903*** (-22.07)	-0.070 (-1.73)
ll	-18112.64	-17935.19	-14465.62	-13049.17
N	40,247	40,247	40,247	40,247
N groups	22,099	22,099	22,099	22,099

\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

Table 3: Effect of selected life events on perceptions of what matters for quality of life.  
 Probit with individual random effects (Part 1) (z-statistics in parentheses)

	Health	Family	Finance	Happiness
Female	0.357*** (7.10)	0.464*** (9.68)	-0.075 (-1.57)	0.340*** (7.16)
Age	0.020*** (23.33)	-0.008*** (-9.73)	-0.009*** (-12.00)	-0.005*** (-5.86)
Age x female	-0.003** (-2.95)	-0.002 (-1.82)	-0.002 (-1.45)	-0.005*** (-4.41)
2002 wave dummy	0.116*** (6.17)	0.163*** (8.82)	-0.098*** (-5.28)	0.012 (0.66)
2007 wave dummy	0.043* (2.22)	0.383*** (19.73)	-0.070*** (-3.64)	-0.161*** (-8.09)
Enter partnership, last 5 years	-0.020 (-0.35)	0.145** (2.68)	0.044 (0.82)	0.148** (2.71)
Partnership x female	-0.058 (-0.77)	-0.110 (-1.51)	0.061 (0.85)	-0.038 (-0.52)
Enter partnership, > 5 years	0.124*** (3.41)	0.128*** (3.60)	0.137*** (3.96)	0.093** (2.64)
Partnership > 5 years x female	0.057 (1.17)	-0.012 (-0.26)	0.025 (0.54)	0.024 (0.51)
Child born, last 5 years	0.119 (1.64)	0.691*** (9.51)	-0.126 (-1.79)	0.072 (1.01)
Child born x female	-0.076 (-0.76)	-0.184 (-1.81)	-0.003 (-0.03)	0.150 (1.55)
Child born, > 5 years	0.009 (0.19)	0.405*** (8.40)	-0.046 (-0.97)	-0.029 (-0.62)
Child born > 5 years x female	0.114 (1.67)	-0.107 (-1.63)	-0.105 (-1.63)	0.246*** (3.90)
Last child leaves home, last 5 years	-0.009 (-0.17)	-0.042 (-0.80)	0.073 (1.42)	-0.016 (-0.30)
Last child x female	0.082 (1.12)	-0.057 (-0.80)	0.047 (0.66)	0.003 (0.05)
Last child leaves home, > 5 years	0.141 (1.78)	-0.211** (-2.76)	0.126 (1.67)	0.060 (0.76)
Last child > 5 years x female	-0.193 (-1.78)	0.143 (1.38)	0.006 (0.06)	-0.131 (-1.23)
Retired, last 5 years	0.121* (1.97)	-0.198** (-3.26)	0.095 (1.62)	-0.090 (-1.42)
Retired x female	-0.197* (-2.47)	0.154* (1.99)	-0.093 (-1.20)	-0.069 (-0.84)
Retired, > 5 years	-0.324*** (-5.64)	-0.158** (-2.74)	-0.057 (-1.01)	-0.230*** (-3.88)
Retired > 5 years x female	-0.078 (-1.04)	0.016 (0.22)	-0.020 (-0.26)	0.061 (0.79)
Constant	-0.963*** (-24.52)	-0.203*** (-5.50)	0.080* (2.20)	-0.582*** (-15.64)
ll	-26186.83	-26414.93	-25403.44	-22380.3
N	40,247	40,247	40,247	40,247
N groups	22,099	22,099	22,099	22,099

\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$  <sup>16</sup>

Table 4: Effect of selected life events on perceptions of what matters for quality of life.  
 Probit with individual random effects (Part 2) (z-statistics in parentheses)

	Friends	Leisure	Home comforts	Employment
Female	-0.107 (-1.91)	-0.461*** (-8.54)	0.075 (1.32)	-0.141* (-2.42)
Age	-0.021*** (-19.48)	0.005*** (6.54)	-0.005*** (-4.86)	-0.021*** (-19.46)
Age x female	0.008*** (6.44)	0.005*** (4.35)	-0.001 (-0.44)	-0.003* (-2.10)
2002 wave dummy	-0.239*** (-10.49)	0.033 (1.53)	-0.271*** (-12.17)	-0.301*** (-12.32)
2007 wave dummy	-0.028 (-1.20)	-0.021 (-0.96)	-0.484*** (-19.76)	-0.286*** (-11.26)
Enter partnership, last 5 years	-0.271*** (-4.03)	-0.007 (-0.11)	0.198** (3.13)	-0.061 (-0.98)
Partnership x female	0.085 (0.96)	0.014 (0.16)	-0.117 (-1.36)	0.035 (0.40)
Enter partnership, > 5 years	-0.221*** (-4.69)	-0.062 (-1.67)	-0.004 (-0.09)	0.075 (1.66)
Partnership > 5 years x female	0.037 (0.61)	0.074 (1.48)	-0.051 (-0.90)	-0.091 (-1.42)
Child born, last 5 years	-0.352*** (-3.63)	-0.070 (-0.86)	-0.133 (-1.45)	-0.144 (-1.72)
Child born x female	-0.055 (-0.42)	-0.063 (-0.52)	0.193 (1.58)	-0.118 (-0.95)
Child born, > 5 years	-0.172** (-2.62)	-0.091 (-1.75)	-0.092 (-1.59)	-0.058 (-1.03)
Child born > 5 years x female	-0.189* (-2.18)	-0.081 (-1.10)	-0.097 (-1.22)	-0.032 (-0.40)
Last child leaves home, last 5 years	-0.129 (-1.72)	-0.021 (-0.36)	-0.013 (-0.18)	0.014 (0.22)
Last child x female	0.035 (0.35)	-0.023 (-0.27)	-0.013 (-0.14)	0.091 (0.98)
Last child leaves home, > 5 years	-0.015 (-0.13)	0.066 (0.79)	-0.013 (-0.12)	0.261** (2.70)
Last child > 5 years x female	0.177 (1.25)	0.051 (0.44)	-0.087 (-0.59)	0.109 (0.80)
Retired, last 5 years	0.289*** (3.60)	-0.012 (-0.18)	0.003 (0.04)	-1.330*** (-6.48)
Retired x female	-0.187 (-1.88)	0.044 (0.54)	0.034 (0.34)	0.388 (1.46)
Retired, > 5 years	0.538*** (7.19)	-0.033 (-0.57)	0.008 (0.12)	-0.918*** (-6.89)
Retired > 5 years x female	-0.176 (-1.88)	0.063 (0.84)	0.169 (1.90)	0.095 (0.47)
Constant	-0.257*** (-5.80)	-1.220*** (-29.55)	-0.903*** (-20.33)	-0.157*** (-3.67)
ll	-17932.33	-17918.25	-14433.18	-12920.54
N	40,247	40,247	40,247	40,247
N groups	22,099	22,099	22,099	22,099

\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$  <sup>17</sup>

## Appendix A

Perceptions of what matters for quality of life [See Taylor et al., 2009, Appendix 3.18 for the full list of possible mentions]

Question 1:

*Would you take a moment to think about what 'quality of life' means to you, and tell me what things you consider are important for your own quality of life?*

Coding of mentions: based on BHPS manual Appendix 3.18

1. Health: good health, mobility, living and breathing, personal welfare
2. Family: children and grandchildren, partner, marriage, other family members, family in general
3. Finance: finances, money, standard of living
4. Happiness: happiness, peace of mind, security
5. Friends: friends, friendship
6. Leisure: food, cooking, having a drink, music, radio, theatre, sports, walking, exercise, TV, gardening, nature in general, reading, writing, painting, travel, incl. holidays abroad, getting out and about (going places generally), other leisure/pleasure activities (not elsewhere codable), exercising
7. Home comforts: home comforts, roof over head, regular meals, domestic hygiene
8. Employment: employment, job satisfaction
9. Misc other: Safety, lack of fear, neighbors, pets, other relationships, other positive mentions, other
10. Freedom: freedom, independence
11. Time self: time for self, not too overworked, life in balance, sleep, no stress
12. Other material: consumption, shopping, getting new things, car, transport, education (own, children's, standard of system in general), other material benefits
13. Other personal: Other personal characteristics (not elsewhere specified), love, sense of humor, personal cleanliness
14. Spiritual: religion, treating others well, equality, tolerance, helping others, voluntary work, community participation, political activities, other spiritual, moral, community aspects, law and order
15. Environment: good recreational facilities, neighborhood - specific rural/urban benefits, neighborhood general mention, likes area or neighborhood, environment, lack of pollution, general mention of environment, lack of crime, safe area, climate, weather, other local/environment mentions (not elsewhere codable), news and current affairs

16. Negatives: (this could be by implication, i.e. need more/better) need better personal characteristics less worry, better health, more happiness; need better material characteristics more money, better job; more leisure, recreation; more morality, spiritual, community spirit; better relationships; improvements in locality, environment, e.g. less crime, less crowds; other negative mentions (not elsewhere codable), need more time

## References

- David G. Blanchflower and Andrew Oswald. Well-being over time in Britain and the USA. *Journal of Public Economics*, 88:1359–1386, 2004.
- P Blossfeld and S. Drobnic. *Theoretical perspective on couples careers*. In P. Blossfeld and S. Drobnic (Eds.), *Careers of couples in contemporary society*. Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2001.
- O. G. Brim and C. D. Ryff. *On the properties of life events*. In P. B. Pines and O. G. Brim (Eds.), *Life-span development and behavior (Vol. 3)*. Academic, New York, 1980.
- A Campbell. *The sense of well-being in America*. McGraw-Hill, New York, 1981.
- A. Campbell, P. E. Converse, and W. L. Rodgers. *The quality of American life*. Russell Sage Foundation, New York, 1976.
- H. Cantril. *The pattern of human concerns*. Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, NJ, 1965.
- R. A. Cummins. The domains of life satisfaction: An attempt to order chaos. *Social Indicators Research*, 38:303-328, 1996.
- E. Diener, R. A. Emmons, R. J. Larsen, and S. Griffin. The satisfaction with life scale. *Journal of Personality Assessment*, 49:71–75, 1985.
- Ada Ferrer-i-Carbonell. Income and well-being: an empirical analysis of the comparison income effect. *Journal of Public Economics*, 89:997–1019, 2005.
- Linda K. George. *Economic status and subjective well-being: A review of the literature and an agenda for future research*. In N. E. Cutler, D. W. Gregg and M. P. Lawton (Eds.), *Aging, money, and life Satisfaction*. Springer Publishing Company, New York, 1992.
- Linda K. George. *Perceived quality of life*. In R. H. Binstock, L. K. George, S. J. Cutler, J. Hendricks and J. H. Schulz (Eds.), *Handbook of aging and the social sciences. Sixth edition (pp. 320-336)*. Elsevier, London, 2006.
- Linda K. George. *Conceptualizing and measuring trajectories*. In G. H. Elder and J. Z. Geier (Eds.), *The craft of life course research (pp. 163-186)*. The Guilford Press, New York and London, 2009.
- Jonathan Gershuny. *Time, through the life course, in the family*. In J. Scott, M. Richards, M. and J. Treas (Eds.), *Blackwell companion to the sociology of families*. Blackwell, Oxford, 2004.
- Thomas Hansen, Britt Slagsvold, and Torbjorn Moum. Financial satisfaction in old age: A satisfaction paradox or a result of accumulated wealth? *Social Indicators Research*, 89(2):323–347, 2008.
- S. Harkness. *The household division of labour: changes in families allocation of paid and unpaid work*. In J. Scott, S. Dex and H. Joshi (Eds.), *Women and employment: Changing lives and new challenges*. Edward Elgar, Cheltenham, 2008.

- Sara S. McLanahan and Aage B. Sorensen. *Life course dynamics: trajectories and transitions, 1968-1980*. In Glen H. Elder (Ed.), *Life events and psychological well-being over the life course* (pp. 217-238). Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London, 1985.
- A. C. Plagnol and R. A. Easterlin. Aspirations, attainments, and satisfaction: Life cycle differences between American women and men. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 9(4): 601–619, 2008.
- Nadine Salvatore and Mara Teresa Munoz Sastre. Appraisal of life; “area” versus “dimension” conceptualizations. *Social Indicators Research*, 53(3):229–255, 2001.
- H. Schuman and S. Presser. The open and closed question. *American Sociological Review*, 44(5):692–712, 1979.
- H. Schuman and J. Scott. Problems in the use of survey questions to measure public opinion. *Science*, 236(4804):957–959, 1987.
- Jacqueline Scott, Jane Nolan, and Anke C. Plagnol. Panel data and qualitative responses: Understanding perceptions of quality of life. *21st Century Society*, 4(2): 123–135, 2009.
- M. F. Taylor, J. Brice, N. Buck, and E. Prentice-Lane. *British Household Panel Survey user manual volume A: Introduction, technical report and appendices*. Colchester, University of Essex, 2009.
- B. M. S. Van Praag and A. Ferrer-i Carbonell. *Happiness quantified: A satisfaction calculus approach*. Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2004.
- B. M. S. Van Praag, P. Frijters, and A. Ferrer-I-Carbonell. The anatomy of subjective well-being. *Journal of Economic Behavior and Organization*, 51:2949, 2003.
- Blair Wheaton and Ian H. Gotlib. *Stress and adversity over the life course: Trajectories and turning points*. In I. H. Gotlib and B. Wheaton (Eds.), *Trajectories and turning points over the life course: concepts and themes* (pp. 1-25). Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1997.