

OPTIMAL LIFE-STYLE MIX

An Inductive Approach

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ABSTRACT

There are three approaches to assessing life balance: (a) assessing how well the reality of a person's life fits preconceptions of what a balanced life should be, (b) assessing how balanced people think their own life is, and (c) assessing which lifestyle mixes yield the most happiness. In theory, these approaches can yield quite different results, and the available evidence shows that they also do so in practice. In case of conflict, there are good arguments for favoring the last approach, but the policy process is best served with making the differences explicit.

1 CONCEPTS OF LIFE BALANCE

The notion of *life balance* figures in several contemporary discourses, particularly in the discourses on working hours in modern market economy and on division of household tasks between men and women. In these contexts, the term denotes mostly that there is an imbalance that should be corrected. The term is typically used for rhetorical purposes, and for that reason is not sharply defined. In this chapter, the focus is on the analytic use of this notion, and that requires that we be more specific.

1.1 Life Balance as a Property of Lifestyle Mix

The word *balance* denotes that different things weigh against each other. When used in combination with life, it refers mostly to major life domains, such as working life and private life. The term is also used for major activities, such as work versus leisure, or within domains, for example, the shares of leisure time spent alone versus time spent socializing. As such, the term life balance conveys a judgment about the composition of someone's way of life or *lifestyle*.

An imbalanced life then, is a lifestyle in which one or more components have too much weight at the expense of other components, typically too much paid work and as a result too little time at home with the family. A balanced life is a lifestyle where components are in proportion relative to each other. In proportion may mean that there is nothing wrong with the relative weights, but it may also mean that the weights are the best possible. When referring to the best possible weights, the term denotes an optimal lifestyle. In this chapter I will consider the entire range, from imbalanced to optimal.

In sum: a lifestyle is a composition of habitual activities, and this composition or mix can be more or less appropriate. The term life balance denotes the degree of aptness, which can vary from inapt (imbalanced) to optimal (balanced).

1.2 Assessment of Balance

How do we assess how apt a lifestyle mix is? Traditionally, there are two approaches:

the objective approach, based on explicit criteria of aptness that can be applied by an outside observer, and the subjective approach, based on mostly implicit criteria of the individual concerned. In addition, I will propose a third approach with both objective and subjective elements, in which aptness is judged ex post facto on the basis of its observed consequences.

These three approaches can also be seen in other fields of inquiry, such as nutrition research. The objective way of assessing whether a diet is balanced requires checking if the required amounts of various nutrients appear on the table. However, minimum levels can be specified better in the case of nutrition than in the case of lifestyle components. The subjective way of assessing diet is asking people whether they think their diet is balanced. Research in this line has shown that people are often ignorant about serious deficiencies in their eating habits. The third way is assessing the consequences of eating patterns on long-term health and longevity. This latter approach is common practice in large-scale follow-up studies such as the 36-year follow-up study on effects of energy intake by Willcox et al. (2004).

1.2.1 Assumed Life Balance

The objective approach is based on preconceptions of what is balanced or not. Such preconceptions may be based on ethics of fairness, for instance the idea that fathers and mothers should take an equal share in child care. Preconceptions may also derive from a theory about reality, for instance the idea that working more than 10 hours a day puts our health at risk. There are several problems with this approach. One problem is that axioms about a proper mix are often disputable. Is the 50-50 share in child care really the most fair? That is the case only if parents have the same preferences for child rearing and other home tasks. Likewise, one may doubt the rule that 10 hours of work a day is too much for everybody.

A second problem is that preconceptions tend to conflict. For instance, a 50-50 split in child care may be fair, but not economical, therefore leading to more hours of work and less time for family life. The problem of conflicting preconceptions can be solved in theory; if utility functions are known and interpersonal comparison of these is possible. Yet in practice this does not work, with preconceptions of a proper lifestyle mix being as comparable as apples and oranges.

A third problem is measuring the degree to which the appropriate lifestyle balance is met in practice. This is often more difficult than it seems at first. For instance: how to assess the share of child care of fathers and mothers? Simply clocking time does not suffice, since there is also variation in emotional investment and pedagogical effectiveness.

All these problems make the objective approach impractical when applied to the entire lifestyle mix. The objective approach can only be used in the simple one-issue comparisons that dominate rhetoric. It falls short in an empirical assessment that takes more components into account.

1.2.2 Self-Perceived Life Balance

The subjective approach assesses balance in the eye of the beholder. In this approach, a life is balanced if the person leading that life thinks it is balanced. This method bypasses the above mentioned problems of the objective approach, but runs into different ones.

The subjective approach is often defended with the argument that nobody is better informed than the people concerned, yet people are often unaware of the reasons for their view about their life balance. Criteria of aptness are often implicit or

lacking, and as a result, people know better *how* they think of the balance in their life than *why*. Researchers have learned that perceptions draw on more sources than reality alone and that this is particularly true for intangible things such as balance in one's life. Because clear reality anchors are lacking, perceptions of this matter are likely to be largely shaped by preconception and wishful thinking.

As a result, perceptions of life balance can be flatly wrong: you can think that your life is imbalanced, while in fact you lead the best possible life. One reason for such misunderstandings may be the tendency to think that the grass is greener on the other side of the fence. Another reason may be in faulty attribution, such as the case of the neurotic who attributes his misery to his workload rather than to his personality. On the other hand, defense mechanisms can make you think that you lead a balanced life, while most people around you say you do not.

A clear advantage of this approach is that balance can be easily measured using self-reports. For that reason the subjective method dominates in the research literature.

1.2.3 *Apparent Life Balance*

The third approach is to look at the consequences of lifestyle mixes for overall happiness. In this approach *aptness* of lifestyle mix is seen functionally as leading a happy life. If people live happily with a certain mix of activities, then that mix is apparently apt, even if it does not fit preconceptions of good balance, or if people think that their life is imbalanced.

In this chapter, I explore the third way of inferring aptness of life balance from the consequences of different lifestyle mixes on happiness. I do so by assessing long-term effects of lifestyles on happiness. This requires an explanation of what is meant by happiness and why happiness is used as an outcome criterion.

2 **HAPPINESS**

When used in a broad sense, the word happiness is synonymous with quality of life or well-being. In this meaning, it denotes that life is good, but does not specify what is good about life. The word is also used in more specific ways, and these can be clarified with the help of the classification of qualities of life presented in [figure 1](#).

2.1 **Four Qualities of Life**

The classification of meanings in [figure 1](#) depends on two sets of distinctions. Vertically, there is a difference between chances for a good life and actual outcomes of life. Chances and outcomes are related but are certainly not the same. Horizontally, there is a distinction between external and internal qualities. In the first case, the quality is in the environment, in the latter, it is in the individual. Together, these distinctions mark four qualities of life, all of which have been denoted by the word *happiness*.

2.1.1 *Livability of the environment*

Livability of the environment, the top-left quadrant, means good living conditions. Often the terms *quality of life* and *well-being* are used for this particular meaning, especially in the writings of ecologists and sociologists. Economists sometimes use the term *welfare* for this meaning. *Livability* is a better word, because it refers explicitly to a characteristic

of the environment and does not carry the connotation of paradise. Politicians and social reformers typically stress this quality of life.

2.1.2 *Life ability of the person*

Life ability of the person, the top-right quadrant, means inner life chances. That is, how well we are equipped to cope with the problems of life. This aspect of the good life is also known by different names. In biology, the phenomenon is referred to as *adaptive potential*. On other occasions, it is denoted by the medical term *health*, in the medium variant of the word. Sen (1992) calls this quality-of-life variant *capability*. I prefer the simple term *life-ability*, which contrasts elegantly with *livability*. This quality of life is central in the thinking of therapists and educators.

2.1.3 *Utility of life*

utility of life, the bottom-left quadrant, refers to the notion that a good life must be good for something more than itself. This presumes some higher value, such as ecological preservation or cultural development. In fact, there are myriad values on which the utility of life can be judged. There is no current generic for these external results of life. Gerson (1976, p. 795) referred to these quality-of-life concepts as *transcendental*. Another appellation is *meaning of life*, which then denotes true significance instead of mere subjective sense of meaning. I prefer the simpler *utility of life*, admitting that this label may also give rise to misunderstanding. Moral advisors, such as pastors, emphasize this quality of life.

2.1.4 *Satisfaction with life*

Finally, satisfaction with life, the bottom-right quadrant, refers to the inner outcomes of life. That is, the quality in the eye of the beholder. As we deal with conscious humans, this quality boils down to subjective appreciation of life. This is commonly referred to by terms such as *subjective well-being*, *life satisfaction*, and *happiness* in a limited sense of the word. There is no professional interest group that stresses this meaning, and this seems to be one of the reasons for the reservations surrounding the value of happiness.

Which of these four qualities of life should be used as an outcome criterion in our assessment of consequences of lifestyle mixes? Clearly not the top quadrants, which denote life chances, since life balance itself belongs in this category. The focus should be at the bottom quadrants of life's outcomes.

Should we judge the life balance by the final utility of life? This is very difficult, because utility can be hard to grasp. A life may have many different consequences on the environment over different periods of time, and one can only guess at the long-term balance of effects. Moreover, this criterion can lead to counterintuitive results, such as the life of a workaholic turning out to be the most useful in the long run. Satisfaction is a better criterion, because it concerns outcomes for the person, and, as such, indicates how well a lifestyle mix works for the person who lives that life.

2.2 **Four Kinds of Satisfaction**

This brings us to the question of what *satisfaction* is precisely. This is also a word with multiple meanings and again we can elucidate these meaning using a simple scheme.

Figure 2 is also based on two sets of distinctions—vertically, between satisfaction with parts of life versus satisfaction with life as a whole, and horizontally, between passing satisfaction and enduring satisfaction. These two bipartitions yield again a four-fold taxonomy.

Pleasures

Passing satisfaction with a part of life is called *pleasure*. Pleasures can be sensory, such as a glass of good wine, or mental, such as reading this text. The idea that we should maximize such satisfactions is called *hedonism*.

Part satisfactions

Enduring satisfaction with a part of life is referred to as *part satisfaction*. Such satisfactions can concern a domain of life, such as working life, and aspects of life, such as its variety. Sometimes the word happiness is used for such part satisfactions, in particular for satisfaction with one's career.

Peak experience

Passing satisfaction can be about life as a whole, in particular when the experience is intense and oceanic. This kind of satisfaction is usually referred to as *top experience*. When poets write about happiness they usually describe an experience of this kind. Likewise, religious writings use the word happiness often in the sense of a mystical *ecstasis*. Another word for this type of satisfaction is *enlightenment*.

Life satisfaction

Enduring satisfaction with one's life as a whole is called *life satisfaction* and also commonly referred to as happiness. I have delineated this concept in more detail elsewhere (Veenhoven, 1984).

Which of these kinds of satisfaction should we use for assessing apparent balance in life? By looking at the satisfaction taxonomy, it is clear that we should use overall life satisfaction or happiness. A life full of short-lived pleasures is not necessarily a balanced life, and neither is a life with incidental peak experiences. Likewise, satisfaction in particular domains of life does not denote balanced living, in particular not high job satisfaction if that goes at the cost of low satisfaction with family life. Balance is best reflected in satisfaction with life as a whole, that is, in happiness.

2.3 Significance of Happiness

There are many misgivings about the value of happiness, such as that happiness is mere contentment and that it typically results from an unrealistically rosy view of reality. In this context, I cannot go in the details of these qualms. Suffice to say, that in assessing how happy we are, we use our mood as the prime source of information, and that mood reflects the degree to which basic needs are met. As such, happiness signals how well we thrive biologically (Veenhoven, 2009). Consequently, happiness is strongly linked with physical and mental health and also predictive of longevity (Veenhoven, 2008). Happiness exerts also beneficial effects on productivity and social bonds (Lyubomirsky et. al 2005) and tends to 'broaden' our action repertoire and 'build' up resources (Fredrickson 2006). As a result, happiness appears to be contagious; your personal happiness tends to enhance the happiness of your family members and friends (Fowler & Christakis 2008). In this context, it is not surprising that happiness is also highly valued all over the world (Diener & Oishi 2004).

3 ASSESMENT OF APPARENT LIFE-BALANCE

Having established that life balance must result in happiness, we can now proceed to find out what kinds of lives are more and less balanced. The first step is to chart lifestyle mixes, the second step is to assess happiness, and the third step is to assess the effect of the former on the latter.

3.1 Measurement of Lifestyle Mix

Most studies on life balance focus on specific aspects of lifestyle, such as the number of working hours (Faganini & Letablier, 2004) and having child-care responsibilities (Tausig & Fenwick, 2001). Obviously, that does not provide a comprehensive view of the lifestyle mix. Time-use studies are better suited for that purpose.

Time-use studies differ in sophistication, and some of their weaknesses are discussed in Christiansen and Matuska (2006). The simplest ones only ask respondents to record the time spent on a set of activities on a typical day. Another approach is to have respondents keep a time diary for a week or so. A recent variant in this line is the day recall method (Kahneman, Krueger, Schkade, Schwarz, & Stone, 2004), which will be discussed below.

Time-use studies provide the following pieces of information about lifestyle mix: (a) the number of waking hours, (b) the proportion of time spent on productive activities and leisure, (c) the variation in activities, and (d) the nature of activities. Typologies can be constructed on the basis of these strands.

3.2 Measurement of Happiness

Happiness was defined as subjective enjoyment of one's life as a whole. Since that is something people have in mind, it can be measured using questioning. Different ways of questioning about happiness are being used:

3.2.1 Global Self-Reports

The most common way to measure people's happiness is using single direct questions, such as the following standard item in the World Values Studies (2008) All things considered, how satisfied are you with your life as a whole these days?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Dissatisfied									Satisfied

This question is well understood all over the world. Typically less than 1% of respondents choose the "don't know" option, and there is remarkable consistency in distribution and patterns of correlation in successive surveys in nations. Though quite valid, these measures are not too reliable. A person may check 7 today, but 6 tomorrow. This is no problem when aggregates are compared, but it does hinder comparison of the same people over time. Another limitation of these measures is that they tap a cognitive evaluation of life that may be influenced by defensive distortions. Happiness can also be measured using multiple questions, such as the Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985). Yet many such inventories involve items that do not quite fit the previous definition of happiness.

3.2.2 Affect Balance Scales

Another category of measuring happiness focuses on hedonic level of affect. One variety in this kind is the Affect Balance Scales (Bradburn, 1969). These are lists of

questions on positive and negative feelings in the recent past, for instance whether one has felt “blue” or “cheerful” in the past week. Ratings are summarized in scores for positive affect and negative affect, the difference of which is the affect balance score. An advantage of this approach is that the experience is less filtered cognitively, but a disadvantage is that the week on which the respondent reports may be atypical. Hence this method works best when repeated over time.

3.2.3 *Experience Sampling*

A radical variant of this approach is focusing on happiness of the moment and asking people repeatedly, “How happy or unhappy do you feel right now?” Such multi-moment assessments use beepers that call for responses several times on a day. Often respondents note their answers on a palmtop computer or a cell phone. An advantage of this method is that the respondent can also note what he or she is doing at that moment, which is particularly relevant in this context. This method is discussed in more detail in Schimmack and Diener (2003).

3.3 **Assessment of Effect of Lifestyle on Happiness**

The next step is to assess the outcome of different lifestyle mixes on happiness. This is usually done with cross-sectional analysis, such as studies that compare working mothers with full-time homemaking mothers. For example, Veroff, Douvan, and Kulka (1981) found homemaking mothers to be happier than working mothers¹. Obviously, this difference can be due to other things than lifestyle, such as for instance having higher earning husbands. To some extent, such intervening variables can be controlled in a multivariate analysis, but the best way to get the effect on happiness is follow-up of the same people over time. This requires panel studies that involve measures of both lifestyle and happiness.

Effects are probably not the same for everybody; for example, a speedy lifestyle may be more satisfying for young adults than for seniors. Hence studies must either focus on specific categories or use samples that provide a sufficient number of cases in subgroups.

3.4 **Combination Study: Lifestyle and Life-Satisfaction of Retirees**

Several of the above mentioned approaches are combined in a study by Lyanda Vermeulen and me among people age 50 and older in the city of Rotterdam in the Netherlands. This study focuses on retirees who adopt new lifestyles and follows what they do and how they feel. Data are gathered using our Web-based Yesterday’s Diary, on which respondents first note their activities for the previous day and then rate how much they enjoyed each of them (Veenhoven & Vermeulen, 2007). An example is presented in [figure 3](#).

Respondents complete this diary one day a month. The study plan is to have respondents do that the entire four years of the study. If this works as designed, it will result in a detailed view of their habitual activities, from which much information about their lifestyle mix can be inferred. It will also provide detailed information about how happy they feel, both an accurate estimate of their average happiness and also information about enjoyment of particular activities. The sample is both focused on a specific category and quite sizable.

¹ The difference in happiness changed in the United States between 1956 and 1976. In 1956 working mothers were the most happy, in 1976 full-time mothers.

4 SOME ILLUSTRATIVE FINDINGS

Attempts to assess the effects of lifestyle on happiness are few as yet. The section “Lifestyle and Happiness” in the World Database of Happiness contains only a handful of research findings (Veenhoven, 2007). Most of these findings are cross-sectional, but there are also a few findings from longitudinal studies. Below is an example in each category

4.1 Working Hours and Happiness in Nations

There is much concern about growing imbalance between work life and private life in modern society. Exemplary books are Julian Scherer’s (1992) *The Overworked American* and Robert Lane’s (2000) *Loss of Happiness in Market Democracies*. Cross-national studies indeed show more working hours in the most advanced economies, and comparison over time reveals a slight rise in hours worked. Yet these differences do not go with a decline in happiness. Average happiness rather tends to be higher in nations where reported time pressures in work are highest ($r = +.50!$) and appears to be unrelated to incidence of complaints about time stress (Grahame, 2002). Moreover, the slight rise in working hours in modern nations is typically paralleled with a slight rise in average happiness (Veenhoven & Hagerty, 2006).

Remarkably, this pattern coexists with rising complaints about time stress (Grahame, 2002). This illustrates that the subjective approach to assessing life balance can yield different results than the present approach of assessing “apparent” balance. A possible explanation for the paradox is that doing more than we want may be good for us, as long as it keeps us vital. This fits the theory that we feel best when functioning optimally (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997), and in an evolutionary perspective, one can imagine that we are designed to live in a challenging environment.

4.2 Working Mothers

As mentioned above, an early cross-sectional study in the United States found working mothers to be less happy on average than full-time homemaking mothers. This finding is replicated in a recent large-scale follow-up study in Germany. Using the German Socio Economic Panel (GSOEP) Stutzer and Frey (2003) followed the happiness of people from 10 years before marriage to 10 years after. They observed a rise in happiness from singlehood to marriage and a gradual decline after marriage. That decline is strongest in couples with children and sets in earlier in dual-career couples (thick dotted line of no specialization in [figure 4](#)) than in couples where one works and the other (typically women) is a full-time homemaker (thick line of full specialization in [figure 4](#)). This difference exists for about 5 years and roughly equates to the preschool period. The average difference is about half a point on the 0–10 life-satisfaction scale.

This case illustrates the difference between the objective approach to assessing life balance and the present approach of assessing apparent balance. On the basis of ideological preconceptions of what a balanced life is, one can say that the lives of working mothers are more balanced, their role being more equal to their husbands’ and their tasks being more varied. Yet this ideology has a price; a loss of half a point

of happiness during 5 years is comparable to one year of mild depression.²

5 CONCLUSION

The term 'life-balance' is used in three different meanings: 1) meeting pre-conceptions of what a balanced life is, 2) thinking that one lives a balanced life and 3) leading a life that is apparently balanced, since one thrives well. This latter meaning is not very prominent in the discourse as yet, but marks a promising approach to evidence policy making.

² Half a point during 5 years is equivalent to 2.5 points in one year. Since average happiness is about 7.5 in most Western nations, this involves a one year dip to score 5, which is about how mildly depressed people rate their happiness.

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FOUR QUALITIES OF LIFE

OUTER QUALITIES

Life chances

Livability of environment

Life results

Utility of life

INNER QUALITIES

Life ability of the person

Satisfaction with life

FOUR KINDS OF SATISFACTION

PASSING

Pleasure

Peak experience

ENDURING

Part satisfaction

Life satisfaction (happiness)

Part of life

Life as a whole

Yesterday's Diary

How did you feel during each of these activities? Click the face that best corresponds with how you felt.

Begin time	End time	Activity	Feeling during activity									
07:00	07:30	Get up	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	
07:30	08:00	Eating	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	
08:00	08:30	Travel	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	
08:30	12:00	Unpaid work	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	
12:00	12:30	Travel	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	
12:30	13:00	Eating	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	
13:00	15:00	Household work	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	
15:00	17:30	Socializing	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	
17:30	18:00	Cooking, preparing meals	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	
18:00	18:30	Eating	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	
18:30	19:00	Household work	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	
19:00	22:00	Going out (theatre, concert)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	
22:00	22:30	To Bed	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	

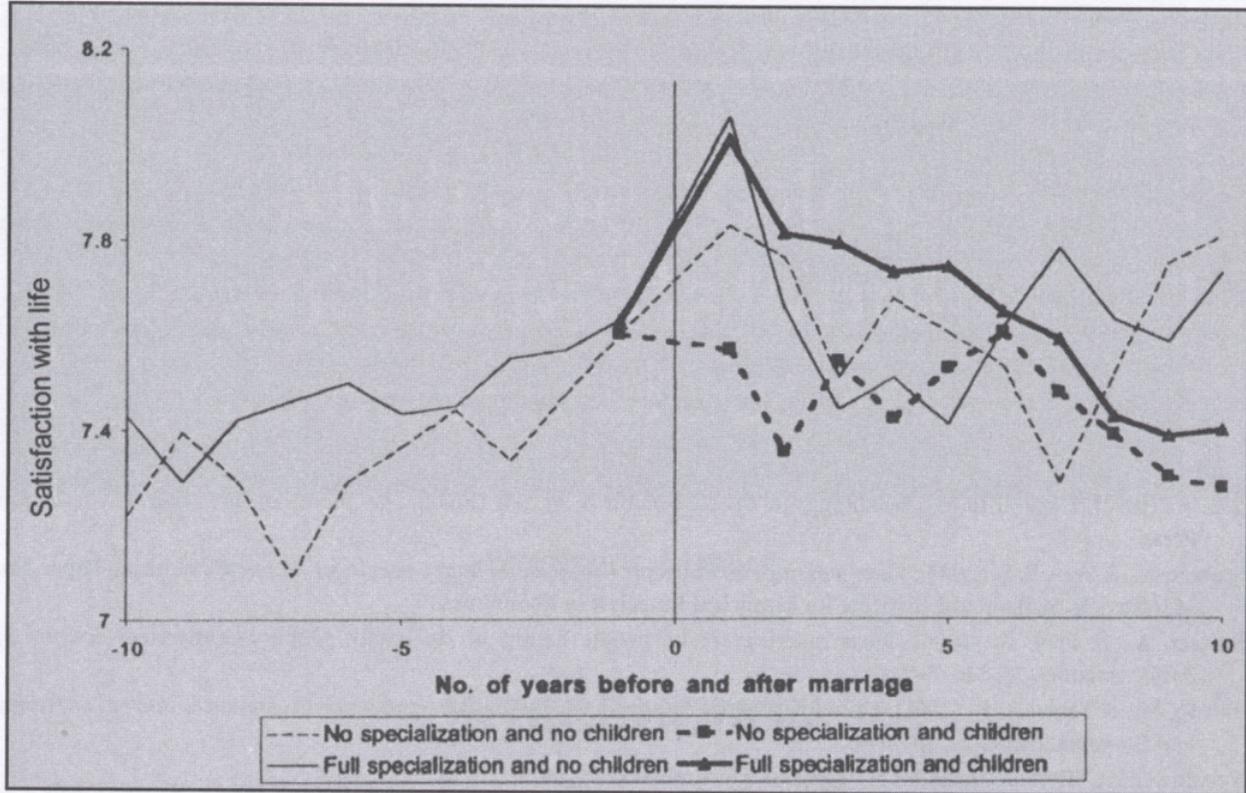


Figure 4 . Effects of dual careers on happiness. *Note:* The graph represents the pattern of well-being after taking respondent's sex, age, parenthood, household size, relation to the head of the household, labor market status, place of residence, and citizenship into account. Data source: GSOEP. Specialization = both have a full-time job; no specialization = one person is a full-time homemaker and the other has a full-time job outside the home. From "Does Marriage Make People Happy or Do Happy People Get Married?" by A. Stutzer and B. Frey, 2006, *Journal of Socioeconomics*, 35, p. 340. Copyright © 2006, by Elsevier. Reprinted with permission.