This dissertation project and my interest in *parental wellbeing* were inspired by two seemingly contradicting trends. In the U.S., about 80% of the adult population will eventually make the transition to parenting. However, institutional support to parents is low. Further, while pro-natalist values remain strong, a growing number of adults choose not to parent. Taken together, these seemingly contradictory trends have inspired the question: How does parental status (i.e., parenting or not) actually affect adults’ wellbeing in the U.S.?

In the first study of my dissertation, I find that raising children exacerbates both positive and negative emotions, and that the main driver of these effects is time spent in activities outside of paid work (i.e., leisure and housework). I also find that children’s presence during an activity positively moderates feelings of happiness and meaning, but that negative feelings (i.e., stress and fatigue) persist regardless of child presence. My results cast doubt on the large body of previous work arguing that parenting makes people unhappy, as well as on folk theories arguing that parenting makes people happy, suggesting instead that raising children is a more diverse experience, associate with both positive and negative emotions, which depend on the context in which adults are engaged in. This work is important because emotions, like happiness and stress, are intimately related to an individual’s mental and physical health. Therefore, identifying the groups which may be at a disadvantage, and understanding the contexts and factors explaining differences in population wellbeing, is critical for effective public policy and true social equality.

The second study in my dissertation addresses a related question: given that parenting is associated with higher levels of both positive and negative affect, do adults with lower education levels experience more or fewer of these emotions, compared to those with higher education levels? This is particularly important given past work suggesting that lower status individuals’ transition into parenthood -- despite their unfavorable economic situations -- because children represent one of the few available sources of happiness and meaning. Further, other work studying the decline of fertility rates in developed countries suggests that higher status individuals downwardly adjust their fertility intentions because role expectations associated with parenting and employment compete for people’s limited time and energy, resulting in a negative balance where the costs of raising children outweigh the benefits. Beyond its potential of explaining fertility intentions and behavior for various economic groups, this work can also describe sources of positive and/or negative emotions which may affect people’s mental and physical health. Results of the second study suggest that raising children is associated with higher levels of positive emotions (i.e., happiness and meaning) across education groups, but, perhaps surprisingly, negative emotions peak for parents at the highest levels of the education spectrum, and at the lowest level of the education spectrum for adults who do not parent. This study provides further support for the overall theory that affective wellbeing associated with raising vs. not raising children varies across groups and contexts.

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