Mother's Time with Children and Subjective Well-Being

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Abstract

A spate of recent media attention highlights American women's exceptionalism in the realm of intensive parenting and raises questions about the implications for mothers' well-being. In this paper we: 1) assess the multidimensional nature of subjective well-being among women with and without children across a range of activities; and 2) compare mothers' subjective well-being when engaging in intensive versus routine childcare. We draw on new data from the 2010 American Time Use Survey that records multiple measures of affect while engaging in specific activities. These data allow us to assess activities that are more or less enjoyable or taxing and how activity duration, time of day/week, and the presence of others contributes to subjective well-being in a range of activities. In addition, we look at subjective well-being while parenting in the context of union status, child and parent age, educational attainment, employment, and typical sleep duration.

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Recent high-profile books and articles highlight American women's exceptionalism in the realm of intensive parenting (e.g. Druckerman, 2012; Pickert 2012). Meanwhile, there is debate over whether the demands of American mothering are too much to manage alongside high-powered careers (Slaughter, 2012; Sandberg, 2010), and more generally whether they undermine the status of women (Badinter 2011). Serving as a backdrop to these discussions is research showing mothers are less happy than women without children (e.g. Everson and Simon 2005; Nomaguchi and Milkie, 2003).

Several strands of social science research suggest that parenthood may compromise women's well-being. First, a series of studies documents lower levels of psychological well-being among parents, compared to non-parents (Everson and Simon 2005; Stanca 2012), especially mothers (Nomaguchi and Milkie 2003). Second, parenthood is a documented strain on marital relations (Lawrence et al., 2008; Tweng, Campbell and Foster 2003), and finally, its time demands are inconsistent with many of the requirements for career advancement (Craig and Mullan 2011). The most common trade-off in the zero-sum time game appears to be between pursuits that promote women's own status achievement (e.g. work) and mental health (e.g. leisure and self-care) versus time with children (Craig, 2007; Gauthier, Smeeding, & Furstenberg 2004; Kimmel & Connelly 2007; Sayer, 2005 & 2011). Taken together, this literature suggests that parents may struggle to meet the cultural expectations of optimal parenting and simultaneously maintain personal well-being (see too, Hays 1996).

Despite time and role strains, however, the suggestion that parents are worse off than men and women without children appears on the face of it inconsistent with the fact that most adults report strong childbearing desires (Edin and Kefalas, 2005; Morgan & King 2001). More recent studies have begun to unpack the contexts in which parents report more or less happiness than non-parents including whether they are married or cohabiting, how many children they have, their ages or ages of their children, cultural context, and historical period (Margolis and Myrskyla 2011; Myrskyla and Margolis 2012; Herbst and Ifcher, 2012). This has shed valuable light, but more attention is needed to understanding the complex set of costs and rewards that may come with parenthood. A recent headline "All Joy and No Fun" (Senior, 2010) conveys the basic idea that parents may, for example, experience great meaning in time spent with children combined with frustration, worry, and strain. Many studies linking parenthood and well-being are limited by their focus on a single dimension (happiness), whereas a multidimensional measurement strategy would capture meaningful experiences that may nonetheless feel stressful or not completely enjoyable. Likewise, differentiating types of parenting activities may provide a more nuanced understanding of the potentially "mixed bag" of parenting.

Focusing on *parenthood* and well-being, as opposed to *parenting* and well-being, also constrains our understanding of the joys and strains experienced by parents. As noted, recent scholarship and commentary points to an intensification of the role of parents in the last several decades, especially mothers (Hays, 1996; Lareau, 2003; Sayer, Bianchi and Robinson 2004). Milkie and colleagues (2010) suggest that time with children is now a "critical barometer" of model parenting in the U.S. context. Other studies suggest that it is not solely the amount of time, but the types of activities that

signal parents' active role in their child's development (Garey, 1999). For example, parents helping with homework or practicing the violin with their child are not only spending quality time with their children, they are helping to cultivate important human and cultural capital (Lareau, 2003). Indeed, Sayer and colleagues (2004) find that despite changes in families that could compromise time with children (e.g. more single-parenting, more working mothers), today's parents are spending more time with children overall, and especially in activities directly tied to child development. Indeed, children whose parents engage in "concerted cultivation" do better in school than children with parents who apply a more laissez faire approach (Lareau, 2011). While parents may be gratified that their children "turn out" (Hays, 1996), do parents pay a price in terms of their personal well-being along the way? Or, conversely, are parents who engage in intensive parenting better off, themselves, for having met the demands of the culturally prescribed model of optimal parenting?

In this paper we pursue two objectives: 1) to assess the multidimensional nature of subjective well-being among women with and without children in the home across a range of activities; and 2) among mothers, to compare subjective well-being in activities that characterize intensive parenting like reading with children or helping with homework compared to more routine care like feeding children and getting them to bed. To address these two objectives, we draw on new time diary data recording multiple measures of affect while engaging in specific activities. Affect is assessed for three randomly selected activities throughout the day, providing within-person variation that can be leveraged to better understand the factors contributing to mothers' subjective well-being. For any given activity, the data allow us to assess how activity duration, time of day or week, multi-tasking, and the presence of others (e.g., husbands or partners) are associated with subjective well-being. In addition, we can examine differences in subjective well-being while parenting in the context of union status, educational attainment, age, race/ethnicity, work status and hours, number and age of children, and typical sleep duration.

Data & Measures

We use data from the 2010 American Time Use Survey (ATUS-X; Abraham, Flood, Sobek and Thorn 2012). The ATUS is a time diary study of a nationally representative sample of Americans. Respondents in the ATUS reported the activities they engaged in over a 24-hour period from 4:00 a.m. of a specified day until 4:00 a.m. of the following day as well as where, when, and with whom they occurred.[1] Respondent activities are coded using a six-digit, three-tier coding system, and over 400 activity categories are represented by the classification. All responses were recorded using Computer Assisted Telephone Interview (CATI) procedures.

ATUS sample members are invited to participate in the survey following the end of their participation in the Current Population Survey (CPS). One individual aged 15 or older per former CPS participating household was invited to participate in the ATUS during the two to five months following their exit from the CPS. Data are collected every day of the week, including holidays, with weekends oversampled. Fifty percent of diaries are about weekend days (25% each), and fifty percent are about weekdays (10% each

[1] Information on where and with whom the activities occurred is available for all activities except for personal care and sleeping.

day). Weights account for the oversample of weekends and other aspects of the sample design.

Our dependent variables tap five dimensions of subjective well-being. We draw specifically on the new 2010 well-being module data. All ATUS respondents were eligible for participation in the well-being module, and there is minimal nonresponse. Well-being module participants reported momentary well-being for three randomly selected activities of at least five minutes in duration. Sleeping, grooming, and personal activities as well as activities where the respondent didn't know or refused to report what they were doing were not eligible to be selected. For each selected activity, the respondent was asked five affect questions: 1) How *meaningful* did you consider what you were doing? 2) How *happy* did you feel during this time? 3) How *sad* did you feel during this time? 4) How *stressed* did you feel during this time? 5) How *tired* did you feel during this time? For each dimension, scores range from 0 (e.g., not at all meaningful, not stressed at all) to 6 (e.g., very meaningful, very stressed).

To address the first objective, we compare the subjective well-being across these dimensions of women who are engaging in a set of activities. For our initial analyses, we chose seven general activity groupings of things that could be done with or without children and that are common across women regardless of whether or not they have children: meal preparation (activity codes[2] 0202xx), eating/drinking (11xxxx), leisure (12xxxx), household tasks (02xxxx, excluding 0202xx), traveling (18xxxx), shopping (07xxxx), and paid work (05xxxx). This first descriptive pass includes nearly the full sample of activities for which affect was assessed, and it organizes them into major activity category groupings, save for meal preparation, so that we can assess where there might be divergence from common patterns across activities. As outlined in "next steps", we will include the full sample of activities and test alternative categorizations of activities (e.g., using broader groupings as in Bianchi and Wight, 2010, and Offer and Schneider, 2011).

To address the second objective, we follow the lead of prior studies (Guryan, Hurst, and Kearney, 2008; Milkie et al., 2010; Sayer et al., 2004) in distinguishing between those activities that characterize intensive parenting and those representing more routine care. In preliminary analyses, we follow Milkie and colleagues (2010) and characterize as "interactive" care talking with child, reading with child, helping with homework, and playing games indoors or outdoors. We characterize as routine care: feeding, bathing child, putting child to bed, transporting children, or providing medical care to child as a primary activity. Here, we include only primary childcare activities, but we will test the sensitivity of our results to including affect scores on other activities when childcare is reported as the secondary activity.

As noted, for each respondent, affect is assessed for three randomly selected activities throughout the day, allowing us to nest multiple observations within individual women. We restrict our analysis to activities of women ages 18-55 (a very small share of women over 55 have children under 18 in the household). Sample sizes are large enough to examine variation within and across women: 13,422 activities among 4,523 women. Thus our key independent variables exist at two levels: the activity level and the person level. The activity level is where the activities themselves and several key features of

[2] Activity codes and examples responses associated with activity codes are available online (http://www.atusdata.org/time_use_documentation/activities).

them can be assessed: type, duration, time of day/week, with whom, and whether childcare was reported as a secondary activity (only childcare is recorded in this way in 2010, and so multitasking can only be assessed for activities in which childcare is the secondary activity). The person level is where several key socio-demographic indicators are captured: child less than 18 years old in the household, union status, educational attainment, age, race/ethnicity, work status and hours, number and age of children, and typical sleep duration.

Table 1 shows key person-level independent variables by whether or not women have a child under age 18 in the household. Sixty percent of the women in our sample have children under 18 in the household. The women without children under 18 in the household are a somewhat heterogeneous group: some of them have children 18 or older in the household (18%); some have children under 18 living outside of the household (9%). Others have adult children living outside of the household or have never had children, though we cannot differentiate these two groups of women with the information available in the ATUS alone. To check the degree to which combining these two groups masks important variation, we will link ATUS data to the 2008 and 2010 CPS June Fertility Supplement, in which women ages 15-44 were asked their number of live births and when their last child was born. While this will substantially reduce our sample size due to the CPS rotation pattern and the more restrictive age band, it will serve as a sensitivity check on our primary analysis that groups these two categories of women together.

Method

As a preliminary step to address our first objective, assessing the multidimensional nature of subjective well-being, we compare the affect of mothers who are engaging each of our seven activities *with their children* to mothers who are doing the same activities *without their children* and to *women without minor children in the home*. We calculate mean levels for each of five affect measures across the seven activity groupings, and we test for differences in these means across the three groups of women. As a preliminary step to address the second objective, assessing mothers' affect in intensive versus routine care, we calculate mean levels for each of the five affect measures, and we test for significant differences in these levels when doing interactive versus routine care. The preliminary results described below inform how we will proceed in multivariate analysis prior to the PAA.

We will estimate separate hierarchical linear models (HLM) for each of the five measures of affect assessed per activity. This method allows a within-person analysis of subjective well-being with respect to particular activities during the day. At the activity level, as indicated above, these models will control activity type (we will test the sensitivity of our results to various broad and more specific groupings of activities), whether the activity was engaged in with or without children, activity duration, time of day and day of week, and whether a partner or someone else was present during the activity. Person-level controls will include those shown in Table 1. The HLM framework is well suited to our research questions, providing estimates of the association between affect and aspects of parenting (namely, was the respondent in an activity with her child), while netting out other characteristics of the context in which affect was assessed—both the more micro-level context of who else the respondent was with and what they were doing, but also the broader-level context of roles and life course stage that structure the

day to day. In this framework, we can examine how activity- and person-level factors are associated with affect, and we can consider the extent to which they may *condition* the link between parenting and affect. As a more rigorous test of the causal connection between affect and parenting, we will also run fixed-effects models, which net out any stable characteristics of individuals (measured or unmeasured), providing an estimate of the relationship between parenting and affect identified completely from within-person variation in affect.

Preliminary Results

Table 2 shows mean affect levels in activities for mothers when household children under age 18 are present, mothers when household children under age 18 are not present, and women with no household children under age 18. The descriptive analysis presented in this table gives us some insight into basic patterns, but should be interpreted with caution since we have yet to include the many activity- and person-level controls that undoubtedly contribute to the mean differences presented here. Further, as noted above, we will carefully consider the universe of all activities in the ATUS, testing various alternative activity categorizations.

Several patterns emerge in the top panel of Table 2. First, six out of seven activities indexed here are more meaningful to mothers when engaged in with children (household tasks are the only exception). Further, five of the seven activities are more meaningful among mothers who do them with minor children than women without minor children in the home. It seems that nearly everything is more meaningful when engaged in with children. The pattern for happiness is similar, with somewhat fewer significant contrasts both between mothers of minor children who engage in the activity with their child(ren) versus without them and versus women without minor children in the home.

Second, mothers who have minor children but are not with them report more stress and sadness in leisure and more sadness in travel compared to mothers who are doing these things with their minor children. Taken together, these early findings indicate that women with minor children in the home are better off when they are doing activities with their children than without them.

The second panel of Table 2 shows mean differences in each dimension of affect by parenting activities—interactive versus routine care. The story here is quite consistent: interactive care is associated with more positive affect (meaningfulness and happiness) and less negative affect (stress and sadness) than routine care. There is no significant difference based on type of activities with children in how tired mothers are.

These preliminary analyses indicate that mothers report more positive affect when they engage in activities with their children. Moreover, where there are differences, mothers engaging in activities with their children report more positive affect than women without minor children in the home. This early evidence is counter to the more general finding in the literature that parents, especially mothers, are less happy than non-parents. It could be the case that assessing affect with reference to activities yields different responses than those obtained from global happiness or satisfaction questions. Affect tied to activities may provide respondents with a more concrete reference for assessments of their well-being. It could also be the case that the lower affect and greater stress observed among mothers in time spent away from children colors their overall assessments of subjective well-being. That is, the relatively lower affect of mothers while engaging in

activities *without* their children (potentially reflecting guilt, as discussed in many popular accounts of parenting, e.g., Pickert, 2012) may drive down global assessments of well-being that nonetheless include the positive feelings observed among mothers in time with children. Our planned multivariate analysis in the HLM framework will attempt to further unpack the activity- and person-level contexts in which mothers report better or worse subjective well-being than those without children under 18 at home.

Next Steps

As discussed above, we will devote attention in the coming months to refining our measures and estimating multivariate models. Specifically, we will expand our activity sample to include the universe of activities on which affect data is collected. Second, we will broaden the scope of, and consider alternatives to activity groupings—both for the universe of activities and for our measures of intensive and routine care. Third, we will estimate HLM models to assess five dimensions of affect in various activities with a range of features and in the context of women's family and work lives, and we will examine whether key results with respect to affect and parenting hold up in fixed-effects models. Finally, we will conduct sensitivity analyses to determine what bias, if any, may result from our rather heterogeneous comparison group of women with no children under 18 in the household.

We anticipate this project will advance knowledge on parenting and well-being in several ways. First, we assess a much richer set of subjective well-being indicators than most existing research. Second, in assessing links with well-being we measure *parenting* (in activities) rather than *parenthood* (a status). Both of these advances allow for a much more nuanced portrait of the joys and challenges of parenting. Finally, our modeling strategy will allow us to net out individual disposition and assess the causal nature of the affect-parenting relationship by comparing within-person variation in affect tied to particular activities.

While these advances will shed important light on the various feelings associated with parenting and the contexts in which it is more or less rewarding or taxing, a few important questions remain. Much of the focus on the ratcheting up of expectations for parents documents the challenge it presents for middle-class mothers. Are there differences in the affect-parenting link for mothers of different social class or education levels? For example, recent research suggests that women's educational attainment may interact with intensive parenting to yield stronger links to well-being for more highly educated women (Guryan et al., 2008; Kalil, Ryan, and Corey, 2012). Do fathers experience parenting differently? Evidence again suggests that gender may interact with intensive parenting, with stronger links to well-being for mothers (Milkie et al., 2010; Nomaguchi and Milkie 2003). This project will examine potential differences in links between parenting and subjective well-being on these persistent stratifying dimensions.

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Table 1. Means/Percentages of Selected Demographic Characteristics for Women with and without Own Co-Resident Minor Children

	Mother with Own HH Children <18	No HH Children <18	
Age (in Years)	36.56	37.54	*
18-24	9.78	23.99	***
25-34	32.12	20.05	***
35-44	38.58	13.96	***
45-55	19.52	42.00	***
Race			
White, non-Hispanic	60.78	67.31	***
Black, non-Hispanic	12.34	13.62	
Other	26.88	19.07	***
Education			
Less than a HS Degree	13.26	9.69	**
HS Degree	25.49	27.45	
Some College	28.15	29.34	
College Graduate	33.11	33.53	
Enrolled in School[3]	7.43	16.90	***
Employment Status			
Full Time	44.12	57.02	***
Part Time	20.46	18.18	
Not Employed	35.42	24.80	***
Usual Hours Worked Per Week[1]	36.38	38.97	***
Marital Status			
Married	71.24	38.50	***
Cohabiting	4.61	6.37	
Divorced, Separated, Widowed	11.19	14.90	**
Never Married	12.95	40.23	***
Has Co-Resident Parent	8.74	24.76	***
Has Co-Resident Child(ren) Over 18	13.88	17.87	*
Number of Co-Resident Children Under 18[2]	1.87	--	
Has Co-Resident Child(ren) Under 5[2]	42.78	--	
Sleep			
<7 hours	16.68	17.70	
7-9 hours	44.96	37.11	***
>9 hours	38.36	45.19	***
N	2758	1765	

* mothers with own hh children <18 and women without own co-resident minor children significantly different (p<0.05)

** mothers with own hh children <18 and women without own co-resident minor children significantly different (p<0.01)

*** mothers with own hh children <18 and women without own co-resident minor children significantly different (p<0.001)

[1] Mean is only for those women who work for pay.

[2] Mean/percentage is only for mothers with child(ren) under age 18.

[3] Percentage is only for women to age 49.

Table 2. Variation in Affect by Activity and Parenthood Status for Women ages 18-55

	Average Affect Score (range 0-6)					Time in	
Panel 1	Meaningful	Happy	Stressed	Tired	Sad	Activity	N
Meal Preparation (overall)	4.48	4.37	1.33	2.56	0.61	64	1278
Mothers w/kids	4.69 [b]	4.48	1.40	2.60	0.41 [c]	55	406
Mothers w/o kids	4.26 [a]	4.21	1.33	2.73	0.62	49	475
No HH Children <18	4.50	4.40	1.29	2.43	0.73 [a]	78	397
Eating/Drinking (overall)	4.60	4.72	1.22	2.24	0.47	59	1705
Mothers w/kids	5.02 [bc]	4.93 [bc]	1.22	2.22	0.39	57	633
Mothers w/o kids	4.22 [a]	4.44 [a]	1.52	2.42	0.52	47	309
No HH Children <18	4.47 [a]	4.67 [a]	1.15	2.20	0.49	63	763
Leisure (overall)	4.05	4.38	1.18	2.54	0.76	156	2072
Mothers w/kids	4.45 [bc]	4.67 [b]	1.11 [b]	2.46	0.40 [bc]	145	557
Mothers w/o kids	3.75 [a]	3.98 [ac]	1.70 [ac]	2.68	1.07 [a]	118	495
No HH Children <18	4.00 [a]	4.38 [b]	1.07 [b]	2.53	0.80 [a]	169	1020
HH tasks (overall)	4.22	3.87	1.67	2.76	0.66	129	1387
Mothers w/kids	4.42	4.09	1.80	2.98	0.82	132	301
Mothers w/o kids	4.11	3.71	1.83	2.74	0.70	142	529
No HH Children <18	4.22	3.89	1.51	2.68	0.57	119	557
Traveling (overall)	3.85	4.29	1.73	2.60	0.62	40	3224
Mothers w/kids	4.33 [bc]	4.49 [b]	1.67	2.44	0.57 [b]	49	973
Mothers w/o kids	3.93 [ac]	4.11 [a]	1.86	2.58	0.87 [ac]	32	935
No HH Children <18	3.60 [ab]	4.29	1.70	2.68	0.54 [b]	40	1316
Shopping (overall)	3.99	4.41	1.67	2.18	0.46	86	553
Mothers w/kids	4.54 [bc]	4.64	2.00 [c]	2.15	0.37	94	174
Mothers w/o kids	3.77 [a]	4.15	1.81	2.30	0.66	85	143
No HH Children <18	3.76 [a]	4.39	1.38 [a]	2.13	0.41	81	236
Paid Work (overall)	4.29	3.79	2.77	2.68	0.79	288	868
Mothers w/kids	5.15 [bc]	4.97 [bc]	2.25	3.71	0.39	287	43
Mothers w/o kids	4.44 [a]	4.01 [ac]	2.49 [c]	2.60	0.78	259	416
No HH Children <18	4.15 [a]	3.61 [ab]	2.96 [b]	2.68	0.81	305	409
Panel 2							
For Mothers Only:							
Routine Care	4.86 [d]	4.56 [d]	1.34 [d]	2.82	0.45 [d]	47	1442
Interactive Care	5.46	5.15	1.08	2.47	0.23	92	300
Person Average (overall)	4.23	4.28	1.57	2.56	0.62	64	13442
Mothers w/kids	4.72 [bc]	4.59 [bc]	1.48 [b]	2.44	0.49 [bc]	47	4498
Mothers w/o kids	4.25 [a]	4.18 [ac]	1.80 [ac]	2.61	0.81 [a]	64	3709
No HH Children <18	4.03 [a]	4.21 [ab]	1.54 [b]	2.54	0.62 [a]	72	5235

[a] significantly different from mothers w/kids ($p<0.05$)

[b] significantly different from mothers w/o kids ($p<0.05$)

[c] significantly different from women without own co-resident minor children ($p<0.05$)

[d] significantly different from interactive care for mothers ($p<.05$)

overall = average of each of five affect measures for all reporting on particular activity (e.g. average meaningfulness for meal prep)

person average = average of each of five affect measures across the three activities each person reported (e.g. average of all respondents on meaningfulness)