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## **THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN EXPECTED AND EXPERIENCED UTILITY: FINDINGS FROM SOME STUDIES ON HAVING CHILDREN\***

*BEKLENEN FAYDA VE DENEYİMLENEN FAYDA ARASINDAKİ FARK:  
ÇOCUK SAHİBİ OLMA ÜZERİNE BAZI ARAŞTIRMA BULGULARI*

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### **Abstract**

Daniel Kahneman distinguishes between two types of utility, namely; expected utility and experienced utility. He argued that the concepts of utility have different meanings. The main purpose of this article is to explain differences between expected and experienced utility on having child. Expected utility defines people's beliefs about the future effects of a choice on happiness. Experienced utility refers to the hedonic experience associated with a choice. These kinds of utility do not always concur; one can expect to get happier while in fact one does not. Especially childless couples and women believe that children will make them happier. Men believe less than women that children will make them happier. This result indicates expected utility. Do they actually get happier after the birth of a child? Are the levels of expected and experienced utility the same in their answers? After and before the birth of a child their utility levels differ. In general, happiness of women and men alike are at its climax when the first child is born and its positive effect lasts about a year after birth. Happiness of women and men would revert to pre-birth levels after one year following the birth of the first child. Having one or more children makes their parents happy at the same level. The differences between after and before the birth of a child indicate the difference between expected utility and experienced utility.

**Keywords:** Having Children, Happiness, Expected Utility, Experienced Utility

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### Öz

Daniel Kahneman faydanın iki formu olduğunu söyleyerek faydayı beklenen fayda ve deneyimlenen fayda olmak üzere ikiye ayırır. Kahneman'a göre deneyimlenen fayda hem insanlar tarafından ölçülebilir hem de deneyimlenen faydanın deneysel olarak beklenen faydadan farklılıkları bulunmaktadır. Beklenen fayda insanların mutlulukları üzerine bir tercihinin gelecekteki onlara sağlayacağı etkileri hakkındaki inançlarıdır. Faydanın deneyimlenen fayda ve beklenen fayda olarak adlandırılan bu iki çeşidi bu noktada birbirinden ayrılır. Bu makalenin temel amacı da çocuk sahibi olma üzerine beklenen fayda ve deneyimlenen fayda arasındaki farkı açıklamaktır. İnsanlar beklenen faydalarına göre daha mutlu olmayı bekler iken, aslında deneyimlenen faydada böyle olmaz. Özellikle çocuksuz çiftler ve kadınlar çocuk sahibi olmanın onlara mutluluk getireceğine inanır. Erkeklerin ise kadınların mutluluk beklentilerine kıyasla çocuk sahibi olmanın daha az mutluluk getireceği inancı vardır. Kadınların ve erkeklerin çocuk sahibi olma beklentisinin onların mutluluğunu artıracığı yönündeki bu inanışa yönelik sonuç Kahneman'ın belirttiği beklenen faydayı ortaya çıkarmaktadır. Peki, kadınlar ve erkekler çocuk sahibi olduktan sonra gerçekten mutlu olurlar mı? Kadın ve erkeklerin bu konudaki cevaplarına bakıldığında beklenen ve deneyimlenen fayda aynı seviyede midir? Çocuğun doğumu öncesinde ve doğum sonrasında kadınların ve erkeklerin mutluluk seviyesi farklıdır. Kadınların ve erkeklerin mutluluğu genellikle onların ilk çocuklarının doğumuyla zirve seviyesine ulaşır ve bu pozitif etki bir yıl boyunca sürer. Çocuğun doğumundan bir yıl sonra hem kadınların hem de erkeklerin çocukla ilgili mutluluk seviyesi doğum öncesi seviyesine geri döner. Ebeveynlerin sahip oldukları çocuk sayısının azlığı veya çokluğu onların mutluluk seviyesini olumlu veya olumsuz etkilememektedir. Bir başka deyişle bir çocuk sahibi olmak ile çok çocuk sahibi olmak arasında mutluluk seviyesi bakımından annelerin ve babaların mutluluk seviyelerinde fark bulunmamaktadır. Çocuğun doğumu öncesinde kadınların ve erkeklerin mutluluk seviyesi beklenen faydayı ve çocuğun doğumundan sonraki mutluluk seviyeleri de onların deneyimlenen faydasını gösterir. Kadınların ve erkeklerin çocuğun doğumundan önceki mutluluk seviyesi ile doğumundan sonraki mutluluk seviyesindeki bu farklılık bize beklenen fayda ile deneyimlenen fayda arasındaki farkı göstermektedir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Çocuk Sahibi Olma, Mutluluk, Beklenen Fayda, Deneyimlenen Fayda

### 1. Introduction

In this study we will discuss Bentham's experienced utility which is also known as decision or expected utility. This study is the part of a wider exploration of differences between expected and experienced utility across topics and people across the world. We use data of happiness from many nations to explain the difference between expected and experienced utilities. Firstly, we have compared couples' decisions based on future beliefs. In other words, expected utility differs from experienced utility. Experienced utility results are of people's actual life. We focused on having children in order to explain the difference between expected and experienced utilities.

We have investigated whether there is an increase in the level of happiness of couples when they have children. Secondly, we have compared the level of happiness of couples before and after having their first child. Thirdly, we have analyzed whether there is a gap between expected and experienced utilities by the data we obtained. Lately, we have investigated whether there are similar differences in some countries.

The concept of utility has carried two different meanings in its history. As Bentham used it, "utility refers to pleasure and pain, the "sovereign masters" that "point out what we ought to do, as well as determine what we shall do" (Bentham; 1789, 21), (Kahneman,

Wakker, Sarin; 1997, 375). "This usage was retained in the economic writings of the nineteenth century, but it was gradually replaced by a different interpretation. In current economics and in decision theory, the utility of outcomes and attributes refers to their weight in decisions: utility is inferred from observed choices and is in turn used to explain these choices. To distinguish the two utilities, we shall refer to Bentham's utility concept" (Kahneman, Wakker, Sarin; 1997, 375-376).

Experienced utility is ignored and rejected in standard economic model. According to standard economic model, subjective hedonic experiences cannot be measured by rational individuals who make their choices based on their own preferences. Contrary to these arguments Kahneman argued that experienced utility is both measurable and empirically distinct from expected utility (Kahneman, Wakker, Sarin; 1997, 375-376).

*Experienced utility:* Experienced utility refers to the hedonic experience and peak-end rule of this experience associated with an outcome. "Systematic errors of hedonic forecasting can be demonstrated in several ways: by comparing hedonic forecasts with direct measures of experienced utility, by creating situations in which choices lead to demonstrably inferior experiences, and by showing that hedonic forecasts or choices are influenced by factors that are irrelevant" (Kahneman, Thaler; 2006, 222).

*Expected utility:* As for expected utility it is defined as an individual's belief about the future experienced utility of an event (Wilkinson; 2008, 61). In other words, expected utility refers to beliefs about the outcomes of experienced utility (Kahneman, Wakker, Sarin; 1997, 377).

*Aim of this paper:* This paper reports an exploration of differences between expected utility and experienced utility of having children among couples in different countries. I take stock of the available research findings

using the World Database of Happiness in order to answer the following research questions:

1. Do people expect that having children will add to their happiness?
2. Do people become happier after the birth of their first child?
3. Are there differences between expected and experienced utilities of having children?
4. If so, do these differences vary across time, places and people?

This study is the part of a wider exploration of differences in expected and experienced utility across topics and people the world.

## 2. Method

Most recent studies argue that utility can be measured by reported subjective well-being or "happiness" (Frey, Stutzer; 2002, 405), (Frey; 2008, 16).

We explained with the example made on the subject. We separated research findings on expected and actual effects of having children on a person's happiness. Then, we separated research findings on actual effects as cross-sectional data and longitudinal data. We used correlation findings from WDH. We compared level of happiness of couples after and before having children. We analyzed whether there was a gap between expected and experienced utility by the data we obtained. We investigated whether there were similar differences in every country and society.

## 3. Results

### 3.1. Question 1: Do people expect that children will add to their happiness?

Most people believe that having children will make them happy, but most parents know that children take a lot of time and are tiring although parenting has much happy time. (Gilbert; 2006. 6-7). Kohler, Behrmen, Skytthe argued that "individuals have children because these decisions increase

their subjective well-being or happiness" (Kohler, Behrmen, Skyttthe; 2005, 407).

Most of the people are permeated by cultural beliefs that children increase the wellbeing of parents, and especially women (Baumeister; 1991, 175; Blake; 1979, 245-257). These beliefs have encouraged thoughts about the desirability of having children (McQuillan, Stone, and Greil; 2007, 955-981; Thornton, Young-de Marco; 2001, 1009-1037). Although childlessness has decreased in almost all European countries and North America (Connidis; 2001, 38; Park; 2002, 21-45), levels of childlessness have remained low (Kohler, Billari, Ortega; 2002, 641). Most of the researched on having a child and well-being find a negative or insignificant relationship between the happiness of parents and their fertility (Cleary, Mechanic; 1983, 111-121; Gore, Mangione; 1983, 300-312; McLanahan, Adams; 1987, 237-257; Nomaguchi, Milkie; 2003, 356-374).

Expected utility might not be a good forecast of the real time utility experienced after the decision has been taken. Research on affective forecasting has shown that individuals systematically miscalculate the amount of utility (or displeasure) that future events would bring (Wilson, Gilbert; 2005, 131-134). It's possible that is a bias which can be due to unrealistic optimism (Liefbroer, Gerritsen, de Jong Gierveld; 1994, 193-203; Weinstein; 1980, 806). On the contrary, individuals might underrate their ability to adapt to circumstances they seemed to dislike earlier (Loewenstein, Schkade, 1999). There is no reason to think that predicted happiness is not systematically biased of future experienced happiness. Therefore, the prediction of a potential increase (or decrease) in utility around the time of decision-making is more important than the actual increase (or decrease) in utility experienced when bearing a child. (Kohler; 2001).

Nevertheless, children make their parents happy, as well as causing them stress. Generally, children are a source of tenderness and nice time (Hoffman, Manis; 1982, 43-170). But in terms of the third world countries whe-

re children are often source of labor and it might be expected that the more the better to their parents (Argyle; 1999, 360).

Table 3. 1. about here

### 3.2. Question 2: Do people get happier when they have children?

The study about old parents and having children shows that having children increase old parents' well-being and happiness (Hilleras, Aguero-Torres, Winblad; 2001, 361-365). Having children has a rather small effect on marital satisfaction and happiness. Overall, the effect is negative (Glenn, Weaver; 1978, 279); it is also curvilinear, two to three children being best, and the effect depends on stage in the family life cycle (Walker; 1977, 127-139). There is little happiness study about Chinese people and they are generally related to happiness of Chinese immigrant. The absence of Chinese migrants' child has negative effect migrants' happiness. (Akay, Bargain, Zimmerman; 2012, 435).

Different groups with children report similar average life satisfaction scores after a lot of years of marriage. Their life satisfaction diminishes after a few years of marriage. At the same time, childless couples report greater satisfaction than couples with children. It indicates that childless couples, who believe having children will make them happier, are extrinsically happier people. These results are of expected utility. These differences indicate that there is a gap between expected utility and experienced utility. Childless couples believe that children will make them happier, but in reality having children actually diminishes their happiness. These findings on actual happiness are of experienced utility.

Table 3.2a and Table 3.2b about here

### 3.3. Question 3: Difference between expected and experienced utility of children

We summarized Table 3.1. and 3.2a/3.2b a part of results based on differences of utility. Table 3. 1. and 3.2a/3.2b indicate that there is an important difference between expected utility and experienced utility of having children. Especially, life satisfaction of

woman is higher before the birth of child, and remains high level until birth and then reverts to its previous level (Clark, Georgellis; 2013, 505). There is, mostly, a positive effect after the birth lasting 1 year for men and 2 years for women. However, by the time the first child is 4-5 years old, the estimated coefficients are negative for both men and women (Clark et al., 2008; 235, 236). Similar results are obtained in most of the European countries, the USA and Australia. When we broader aspects to topic, we notice there is little happiness study about The Asians, especially China. We have little study about having child and happiness on Chinese people. The absence of Chinese migrants' child has negative effect migrants' happiness. The achieved findings show that there is a difference between expected and experienced utility.

#### **4. Discussion**

The object of this paper was to show that experienced utility is measurable and different from expected utility. Standard economic theory argues that happiness of people cannot be measured by expected utility and experienced utility. People are rational agents who wish to optimize their hedonic experience. Kahneman and colleagues explain in their article "Back to Bentham" that experienced utility is measurable and different from expected utility. On the other hand, in many carried out experiments and surveys, psychologists and economists studied how measure people are in forecasting the utility they are about to experience. According to Frey, "...when making a decision, the extrinsic attributes are relatively more salient than the intrinsic attributes of different option. When it comes to decision-making, individuals therefore tend to undervalue the future utility of intrinsic attributes compared to extrinsic attributes. This distortion leads to a systematic discrepancy between predicted utility and experienced utility" (Frey, Stutzer; 2014, 940).

#### **4.1. Summary of findings**

We tested this theory on couples having children. Childless couples believe that children will make them happier. On the other hand, when they have children it diminishes their happiness. We summarized that the gap in utility between full / non-specialized and no children and full / non-specialized and having children rises with the number of years they are married. Life satisfaction is greater in specialized people with and children than people with children, but that are not specialized. Children having groups report similar average satisfaction scores after a number of years of marriage. Their life satisfaction diminishes after a few years they are married. After all, childless couples are happier than children having groups. It indicates that childless couples, who believe having children will make them happier, are extrinsically happier people. It indicates that expected utility.

On the other hand, having children does not seem to have a substantial impact on migrants' well-being in China. The level of happiness of couples reduces after having child in the European countries, Australia and the USA. The level of happiness of couples remains the same or increase after having child in China. These differences indicate that there is a difference between expected utility and experienced utility. Childless people believe that children will make them happier. But when they have child this diminishes. These results show actual happiness or experienced utility.

#### **4.2. Implications of this study**

Couples are supposed to find happiness by having children. According to most people, the traditional "father" and "mother" roles of the nuclear family is a part of becoming happy. Every human culture generally believes that children bring happiness. Clark et al. (2008) found that "there is a significant increase in life satisfaction for both men and

women one year before the birth of their child—which is also present at the year of child's birth—before dropping beyond zero within one year of the new arrival, and they then go on to experience significant unhappiness for the next four years before being just content about parenthood they become no less happier than when they were childless all those years ago" (Clark et al., 2008; 235, 236). For example, they tend to believe that the rare, but meaningful experiences would give those increases in their happiness, but these jumps in well-being tend not to last for very long.

#### 4.3 Limitations of this study

This study clearly shows that there is a difference between actual effect of having a child and beliefs about the effect of having a child. Thus, we compared couples' level of happiness after and before the birth. But there is not too much scientific research which is associated with the birth and happiness.

#### 5. Conclusion

Childless people believe that children will make them happier (Table 1), but when they have a child diminishes their happiness (Table 2a – 2b). When the European, Australian, American and British people have a child generally diminishes their happiness. There was a positive effect of having a child for East Germans, and the negative effect of having a child for West Germans in the past. Chinese migrant's happier if no a child left in home village. Generally, life satisfaction of woman is higher before the birth of child, after the birth reverts to its previous level. The studies indicate that findings by the time, a few months after birth, level of life satisfaction reverts to it's before level. These findings explain to actual happiness. The results show a gap between expected and experienced utility. In other words, these differences indicate that there is a difference between expected utility and experienced utility.

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Example of summary tables

Table 3.1

**Research findings on expected effect of having children on one's happiness**

<i>Public, place, time</i>	<i>Question</i>	<i>Response</i>		<i>Source</i>
		<i>Average</i>	<i>Variation by subgroup</i>	
General public Bulgaria, 2003-2007 N = 2501	What effect will have a child have on your joy and satisfaction with life? -2 much worse	+0.28	In all nations: - slightly greater among males - much greater among childless - smaller among parents of 2 - greater among high educated	<a href="#">Aassve et al 2014</a>
General public France, 2003-2007 N = 1259	-1 worse 0 neutral	+0.75		
General public Italy, 2003-2007 N = 2018	+1 better +2 much better	+0.95		
18-40 aged, general public, Bulgaria, 2004-2006	Suppose that during the next 3 years you were to have a/another child.	+	In all nations: - slightly greater among males - much greater among childless - smaller among fathers of 2 - higher among mothers of 2 than 1	<a href="#">Kohler and Billari, 2009</a>
18-40 aged, general public, France, 2004-2006	What effect will have a child have on your joy and satisfaction with life?	++		
18-40 aged, general public, Georgia, 2004-2006	-2 much worse -1 worse	++		
18-40 aged, general public, Germany, 2004-2006	0 neutral +1 better	+		
18-40 aged, general public, Hungary, 2004-2006	+2 much better	++		
18-40 aged, general public, Russia, 2004-2006		+		

Studies located using [Bibliography of Happiness](#), section Sc01 Perceived sources of one's own happiness

Tables 3.2

**Research findings on actual effects of having children on one's happiness****3.2a Cross-sectional data on happiness and having children or not**

<i>Public, place time</i>	<i>Observed <u>difference</u> in happiness</i>	<i>Detail in WDH finding page</i>
62 aged married gifted women USA 1972	Childless slightly less happy.	<a href="#">4697</a>
General public 18 nations 1995-97	No difference when background variables controlled.	<a href="#">4189</a>
General public, 10 EU nations 1981	Childless slightly less happy in Italy, Ireland, Germany and Spain. No difference in Belgium, Denmark, France, Northern Ireland and UK. Controls inapt.	<a href="#">121</a>
Chinese migrant, China, 2002	Happier if no children left in home village.	<a href="#">Knight, Gunatilaka, 2010</a>
20-50 aged, General public, 19 EU nations 2006	Childless slightly less happy. Difference controlled for marital status, income after control for marital status, income, education and employment.	<a href="#">Aassve, Giosis and Sironi, 2012</a>
15+ aged, General public, 86 nations 1981-2005, N=201988	Childless less happy, no difference with parents of 4 or more children. Childless more happy when marital status is controlled.	<a href="#">1942</a>
25-45 aged, identical twins, Denmark, 2002, N=3226	"The effects of number of children on subjective well-being are small for both males and females". Women and men are happier after birth of child.	<a href="#">15565</a>
12 – 16 aged, youths, USA, 1997 – 2008	The presence of children is not associated with any change in overall happiness.	<a href="#">Grossbard and Mukhopadhyay, 2013</a>

Data taken from: World Database of Happiness, Findings on [Happiness and Having Children](#), subject section C3.2

**3.2b Longitudinal findings on the effect of the first child on happiness**

<i>Public, place, time</i>	<i>Observed <u>change</u> in happiness</i>	<i>Detail in WDH finding page</i>
Working aged, USA 1973 -1977	No significant change in happiness after birth of first child in past 5 years. Positive change after birth of second child.	<a href="#">10001</a>
21-64 aged, general public, Germany, followed 14 years, 1985-1999	Slight positive change in happiness in first year after birth. Only among women.	<a href="#">20459</a>
16-40 aged, general public, Britain, followed 12 years, 1996-2008	Female happiness peaks in the three years before birth of the first child, but reverts to baseline level in the year after and remains at that lower level. Birth of first child does not change life satisfaction of men.	<a href="#">Clark and Georgellis 2013</a>
16-40 aged, general public, Germany, followed 20 years, 1984-2003	Happiness peaks in the year before birth for men, but not for women. Happiness drops in the years after and is below the 1 year before level by the time the first child is 4 or 5 years old, both among men and women.	<a href="#">Clark et al. 2008</a>
15+ aged, married couples, Germany, followed 17 years, 1984-2000	Happiness peaks in the years before birth of the first child, but drops soon after, in particular among working mothers.	<a href="#">8621</a>
15+ aged, General public, Australia, followed 6 years, 2002-2007	“A positive anticipation effect on life satisfaction in the year leading up to the first birth and a positive effect lasting one year after birth, after which the effect is no significant and near zero”.	<a href="#">Frijters et al. 2011</a>
25-50 aged, Married and cohabiting couples, Australia, followed three years, 2001-2003 N=4676	Women and men are happier after birth of child.	<a href="#">Booth and Van Ours 2009</a>
15+ aged, Parents, Germany, followed 26 years, 1984-2009. 15+ aged, Parents, Britain, followed 17 years, 1991-2008	Happiness peaks in the year before birth of the first child and then drops back to pre-birth levels.	<a href="#">Myrskylä and Margolis 2012</a>

21-64 aged, general public, Germany, followed 14 years, 1985-1999	The positive effect of children found for East Germans life satisfaction, the negative effect of children found for West Germans and the positive effect having a baby in the last year found for West Germans.	<a href="#">20459</a>
18-30 aged, young adults, The Netherlands, 1987-1999N= 836	"The first birth has a positive effect on women's and men's life satisfaction."	<a href="#">10950</a>
Female fertility patients, Great Britain, 1977-80N= 27	Women are happier after birth of child.	<a href="#">16238</a>
15+ aged, German migrants, Germany, 2002-2009N=11096	Having children is not found any effect German migrants' satisfaction or happiness.	<a href="#">20724</a>
Working aged, British, 1991-1993 N=17809	Children are not associated with well-being, except for having three or more children, which has a negative effect.	<a href="#">Clark and Oswald 2002</a>
Jobless, British, 1991N= 522	Having children (especially one) is associated with less satisfaction among British jobless.	<a href="#">Clark and Oswald 1994</a>

Data taken from: World Database of Happiness, Findings on [Happiness and Having Children](#), subject section C3.1.1.2