

5 Relationships with parents in childhood and well-being in later life

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- ▶ The familial environment that older Europeans experienced during childhood is associated with their well-being in later life.
 - ▶ People who had good relationships with their parents show higher well-being scores at older ages.
 - ▶ Those who grew up in an abusive familial environment show lower quality of life scores in old age.
 - ▶ Social and healthcare professionals should address the lingering effects of interpersonal deficits during the childhoods of their older clients.
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5.1 Introduction

Early life experiences impact late life outcomes in many domains, such as employment and socio-economic status. Studies also document how early-life socio-economic conditions influence psychological outcomes in later life. The results from such studies suggest that early-life circumstances have a lasting effect on the well-being of older adults. Although the effect of early-life conditions can be mitigated or modified by subsequent life course events, such as protracted disadvantages in the labour market, research shows that early-life conditions have a lasting effect on the psychological attributes of individuals, even in old age (vast literature exists on this subject; see, e.g. Wahrendorf and Blane, 2015).

The psychological literature underscores the important role of the relationship with parents during childhood in shaping one's personality and traits. This relationship serves as the context in which future relationships and psychological developments take place (Bowlby, 1988). Studies that consider early-life relationships in relation to well-being indicate that a positive and supportive familial environment during one's childhood is associated with better health and personal well-being in adulthood. Conversely, a harmful or abusive early life familial environment is associated with poorer health and/or well-being (Shaw et al., 2004).

To verify whether the social relations that reigned in the home in early life are indeed related to the well-being of older Europeans today, we consider in

this chapter the association between relations with parents and two measures of current well-being: the CASP scale and a global measure of life satisfaction. Consideration of the interpersonal environment in the childhood home was addressed for the first time in SHARE Wave 7. The analysis reported in this chapter focuses on respondents aged 65 and older ($n = 27,347$).

5.2 Emotional support from parents – scores and measures

The Wave 7 questionnaire introduced new questions on the relations with parents and friends during childhood. Relationships with parents were captured through six questions. The first four questions inquired about the quality of the relationship with parents (or the woman/man that raised the respondent), with two questions for each parent: (a) ‘How much did your mother/father... understand your problems and worries?’ (answers were on a 4-point scale ranging from ‘a lot’ to ‘not at all’) and (b) ‘How would you rate the relationship with your mother/father?’ (answers were on a 4-point scale ranging from ‘excellent’ to ‘poor’). Two additional questions measured harmful relations with parents, asking ‘How often did your mother/father push, grab, shove, throw something at you, slap or hit you?’ (answers were on a 4-point scale ranging from ‘Often’ to ‘Never’). This question was asked in relation to each parent or caregiver.

In the first stage of the analysis, a principal component factor analysis was carried out to map the domains of the relationship with parents during childhood. The analysis confirmed that the six questions measured two constructs and could be combined into two factors: one for the quality of relations with parents and the other for the frequency of parental abuse. The first factor was based on the first four questions and accounted for almost 45 per cent of the variance, whereas the second was based on the last two questions and accounted for approximately 20 per cent of the variance. The internal reliability of the four items in the first factor displayed a good fit ($\alpha = 0.80$). Thus, a measure for the quality of relations with parents was constructed using these four items, with all items being standardized and an overall mean calculated. The harmful relations measure, in turn, was calculated as the mean of the last two items from the set of variables.

By design, SHARE respondents who participated in the previous retrospective wave of SHARE (SHARELIFE Wave 3) were not asked the retrospective questions again. Thus, approximately 12,800 respondents age 65 and older were excluded from the current analytical sample. Among them were almost all

respondents from Hungary, which led to the exclusion of that country from the analysis. Portugal was also not included in the analysis because of a small sample size.

5.3 Emotional support in childhood – demographic characteristics

Figures 5.1 and 5.2 shows the respective means of relationship quality and parental abuse by age, gender and education. As seen, the younger respondents tend to rate their childhood relationship with their parents as better and report, on average, marginally less physical harm relative to the other respondents in the current sample. Although men rated their relationship with parents as slightly better than did women, they also reported experiencing more frequent physical harm. Respondents with a secondary education and higher rated the relationship as better, and those with a high education experienced on average less physical harm than the less educated.

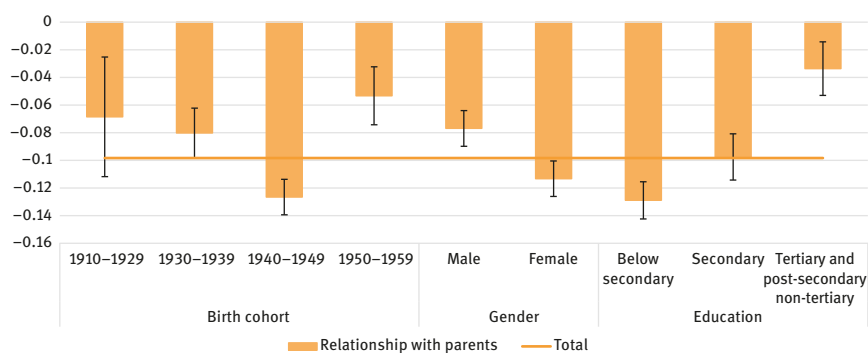


Figure 5.1: Quality of relationship with parents by demographic attributes.

Note: N = 26,703, weighted data.

Source: Wave 7 release 0.

The distribution of these same measures across the 26 countries in the current sample may be viewed in Figures 5.3 and 5.4. Different patterns can be detected. For example, the German and Italian respondents reported low quality relationships with parents and a high frequency of physical harm relative to the other countries. In France and Sweden, low scores for the quality of parental

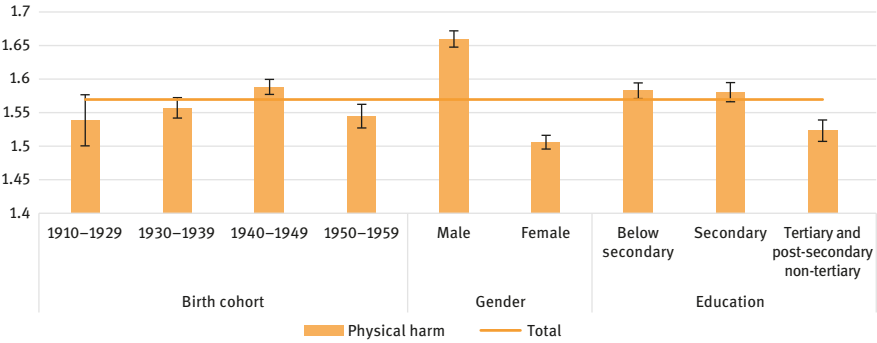


Figure 5.2: Physical harm from parents by demographic attributes.

Note: N = 26,703, weighted data.

Source: Wave 7 release 0.

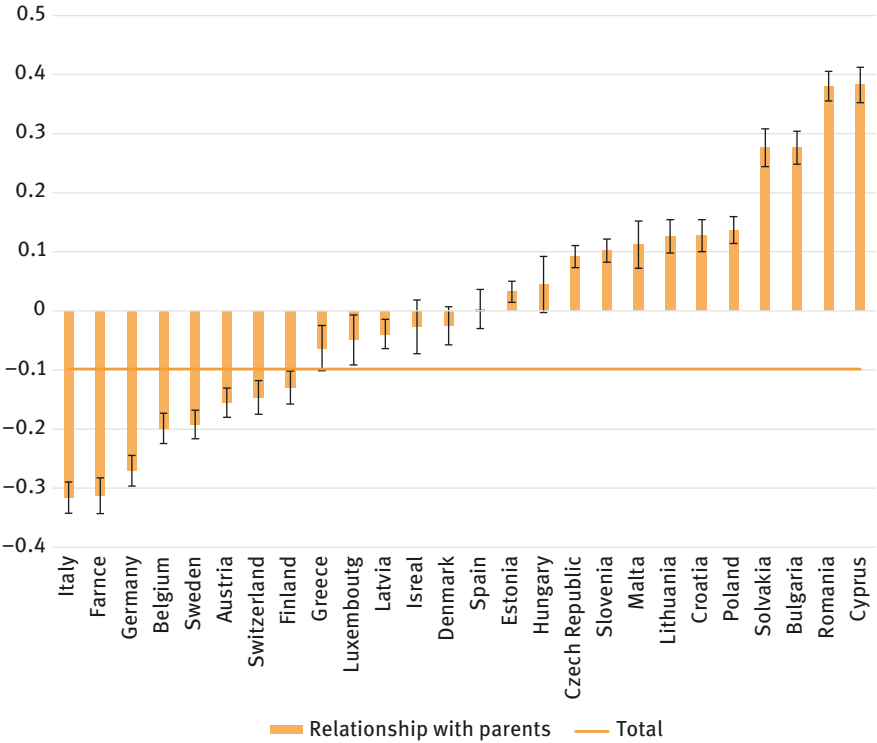


Figure 5.3: Quality of relationship with parents by country.

Note: N = 26,703, weighted data.

Source: Wave 7 release 0.

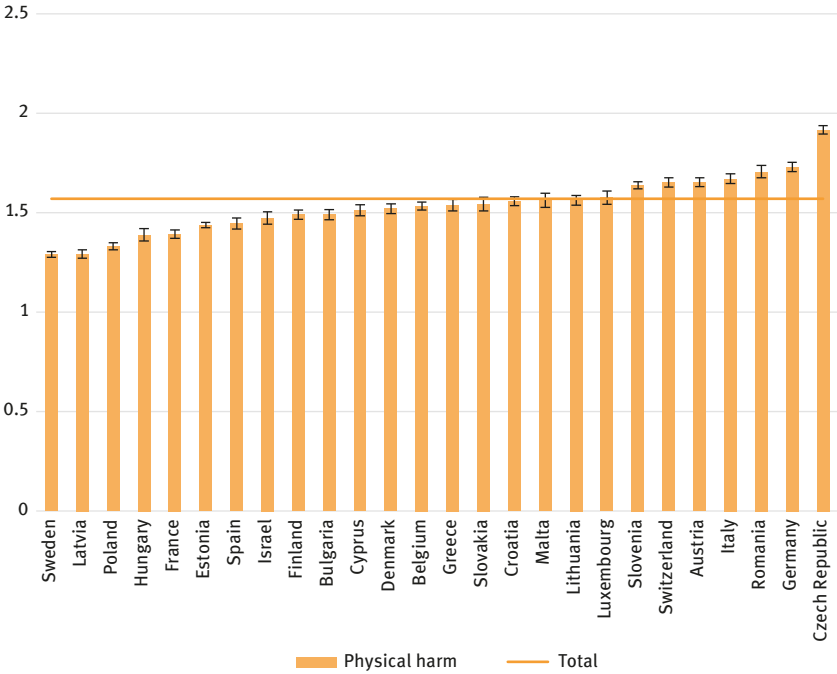


Figure 5.4: Physical harm from parents by country.

Note: N = 26,703, weighted data.

Source: Wave 7 release 0.

relationships are observed, along with a low frequency of physical harm. Thus, different patterns of parenthood and parent–child relationships may be found in different countries.

5.4 Subjective well-being and emotional support in childhood – regression analysis

In the next stage of the inquiry, we regressed the respective well-being outcomes on the two indices of childhood interpersonal environment in the home in two separate regression analyses, controlling for a host of confounders that are generally associated with these same measures (George, 2010), specifically: age, gender, education, number of children, marital status, health status, financial status and social activity. We added two additional indicators to control

for cases in which respondents reported that they never lived with their father or mother.

The results of the multivariate OLS regression analysis is summarized in Figure 5.5. The results show that, even after considering the confounders, the

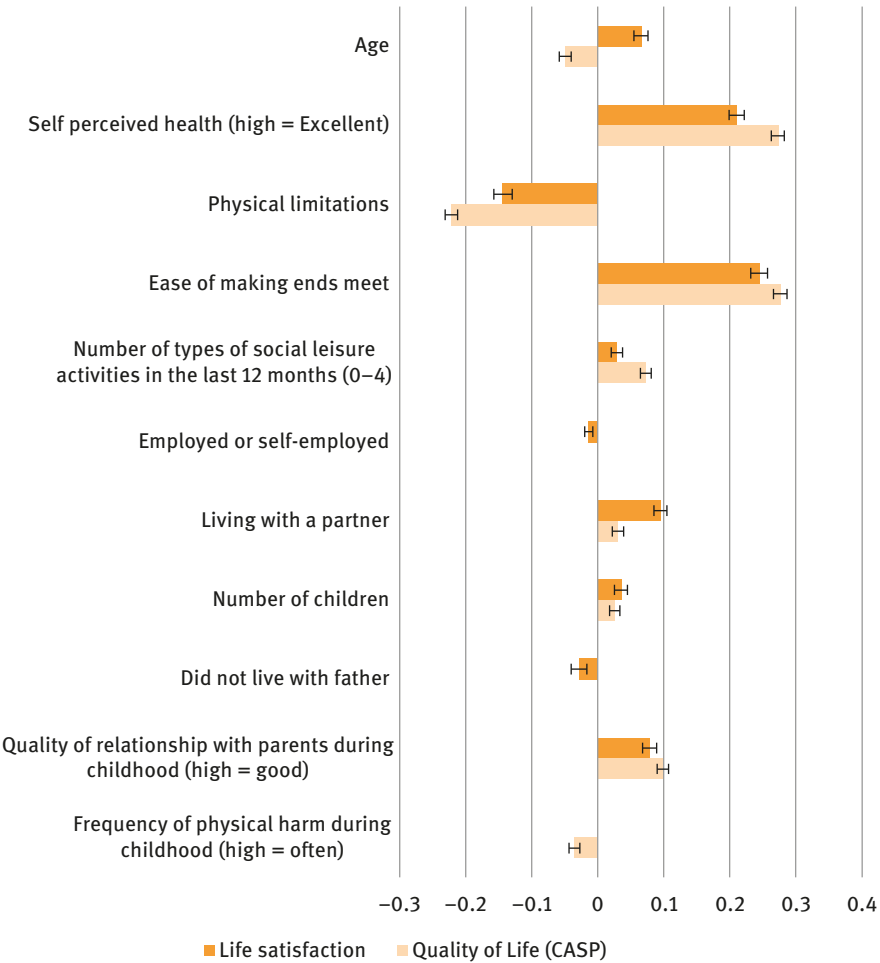


Figure 5.5: Multivariate OLS regressions results for well-being, beta coefficients.
Note: N = 26,703; only significant results ($p < 0.05$) are displayed. Gender, education level and not living with mother during childhood had no significant association with the outcome measures. All models account also for country; R^2 for CASP = 0.514, R^2 for life satisfaction = 0.279. Weighted data.
Source: Wave 7 release 0.

parental relation quality summary measure is correlated with the two well-being outcome measures. A better relationship quality in the home was positively associated with CASP ($\beta = 0.098$, $p < 0.001$) and with satisfaction with life ($\beta = 0.079$, $p < 0.001$). In other words, even after controlling for different confounding variables, the better the relationship quality in the home, the better one's well-being in older age.

Considering the effect of physical harm during childhood, the reverse effect could be seen. Namely, abusive parental relations during one's childhood is associated with poorer well-being in late life, all else considered. The association is statistically significant for CASP ($\beta = -0.035$, $p < 0.001$) but not for life satisfaction ($\beta = -0.013$, $p > 0.05$).

In the last part of the present analysis, we took a first look at a potential path by which parental support and abuse during childhood respectively influence well-being in late life. Previous studies have shown complex associations between the relations of children with parents and their educational achievements (Davis-Kean, 2005), as well as the associations between socio-economic status and well-being in middle and old ages (George, 2010). Thus, we looked specifically at the role of educational achievement (measured as completing tertiary or post-secondary non-tertiary education) as a proxy for socio-economic status. To consider this potential pathway, a path analysis was applied using the structural equation modelling (SEM) framework. As Figure 5.6 indicates, a significant association exists between the two aspects of one's relationship with one's parents during childhood and both years of education reported and measures of well-being in late life. However, no statistically significant association emerged between years of education and well-being outcomes. These results suggest that the effect of the interpersonal environment in the childhood home on well-being in late life does not necessarily work through socio-economic mechanisms. Rather, other explanations need to be sought. These preliminary results emphasize that further study is, thus, warranted to disentangle the complex mechanism by which the interpersonal environment during childhood affects one's well-being in older age.

5.5 Summary and conclusions

Previous studies have highlighted the role that early life circumstances have on different outcomes in later stages of life and that the relationship with parents during childhood has a significant effect on subsequent well-being.

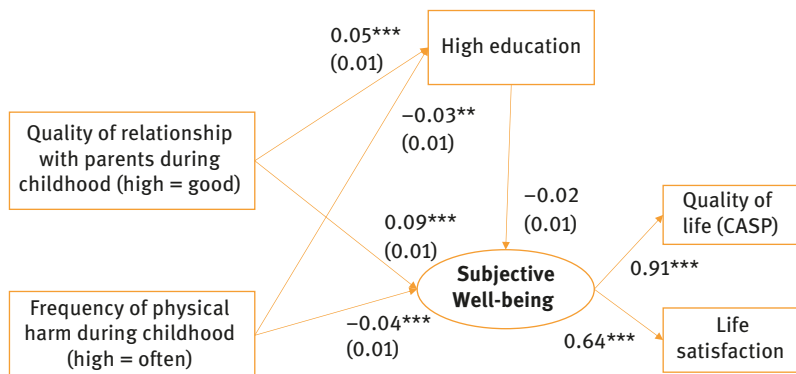


Figure 5.6: Well-being, relationship with parents and years of education.

Note: Weighted data.

Standard coefficients (std. error in parenthesis).

Fit statistics: $\chi^2 (36) = 30837.6^{***}$, $df = 36$, comparative fit index (CFI) = 0.976; root mean squared error of approximation (RMSEA) = 0.051; standardized root mean squared residual (SRMR) = 0.011.

Model also controls for age, gender, self-perceived health, physical limitations, ease of making ends meet, years of education, social activity, employment status, living with a partner and number of children.

*** $p < 0.001$. ** $p < 0.01$.

Source: Wave 7 release 0.

The current study affirms this notion and demonstrates the importance of the familial environment during childhood. Our study results suggest that, among older Europeans today, those who were raised in a supportive environment, had a good relationship with their parents and felt that their parents understood them during their childhood show higher scores in current well-being measures. In contrast, those who were subject to physical abuse from their parents present lower scores in the quality of life measure, on average.

The implication of our findings for policy and practice are that the childhood interpersonal environment of older people needs to be addressed when dealing with ways to maintain or promote well-being in late life. Although past events, whether positive or negative, cannot be undone, they certainly can be processed and used as a means to reflect upon one's past. Such an intervention can potentially aid social and healthcare professionals in addressing the lingering effects of interpersonal deficits during the childhoods of their older clients.

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