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Abstract: In this chapter, we summarize the literature on the relationship between war and happiness, highlighting the heterogeneity in both estimates and study designs, and the challenges to estimating the causal impact of war on happiness.

Keywords: War, Happiness, Subjective Well-Being (SWB), Causality, Heterogeneity

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In this chapter, we summarize the literature on the relationship between war and happiness, highlighting the heterogeneity in both estimates and study designs, and the challenges to estimating the causal impact of war on happiness.

1. Past: setting the stage

Studying the effect of war on happiness is important for two reasons. First, it helps to illustrate and estimate the broader impact of war, complementing measures such as the number of casualties, the value of the destroyed infrastructure buildings, the money spent on the war, or the GDP lost (see for example, Stiglitz and Bilmes (2012) or Viscusi (2019)). Second, the literature on war and happiness can contribute to the broader discussion about using measures of subjective well-being (SWB) and happiness as substitutes for GDP (Stiglitz, Sen and Fitoussi 2009). After all, if wars would not affect happiness (much), one could wonder whether SWB is really the best way to measure human progress.

When Frey (2011) set out to analyse whether "peace raises the wellbeing of the population", he only found one empirical paper that directly tests the relationship between war and happiness of the population. Welsch (2008) used country-level data for about 40 countries, regressing the average happiness in a country on the number of civil-conflict-related deaths in that country. He found a statistically significant and negative effect of war on happiness, and estimates the average 'happiness cost' of a fatality to be equivalent to a loss of income for a country of $108,000.

Since Frey (2011), the literature linking war and happiness has expanded both in number and in scope. In this chapter, we summarize this new literature, and discuss the main challenges one encounters when estimating the impact of war on happiness: the variety in definitions of happiness and war, the difficulty of obtaining data about happiness in times of war, and the extent to which estimates reflect the causal effect of war on happiness.

2. Present: What do we know about happiness and war?

2.1 Defining happiness and war

To study the effect of war on happiness, one needs to define these two concepts first. What do we consider a war? One could define war broadly and cover the literature on happiness and military spending (that is, preparing for war, like Kwon (2022) or Afia and Harbi (2017)) or include the literature on how terrorist activities affect happiness (see for example, Clark, Doyle et al. (2020) or Coupe (2017)). Instead, here we will focus on relatively large-scale conflicts that went on for a longer period, even though the intensity can vary across these conflicts. This includes both civil wars and wars between nations.

We also need to define happiness. In this overview, we focus on measures of happiness or satisfaction with life as a whole, and do not include literature on the happiness or satisfaction with specific other aspects of life (like Matanov, Giacco et al. (2013) who focus on a quality of life measure which includes life satisfaction and satisfaction with many other aspects of life). Even then, there is a wide variation in how happiness with life is measured. For example, Coupe and Obrizan (2016) use a survey that asked respondents whether they consider themselves a happy person. The survey used in Ford, Jampaklay et al. (2022) instead asks 'at present, at what level are you happy?' and uses a 0 to 10 scale while the survey in Gokmen and

Yakovlev (2018) uses the question ‘To what extent are you satisfied with your life in general at the present time?’ and uses a 1 to 5 scale.

Besides variation in how happiness is measured, there is also variation in whose happiness is measured. Some studies focus on the average happiness of the population in a country (Welsch 2008), others focus on specific regions of countries (Coupe and Obrizan 2016), while yet other studies focus on the happiness of specific groups like holocaust victims (Shmotkin and Lomranz 1998) or students (Sateemae, Abdel-Monem et al. 2022). While most studies focus on the happiness of people who live in a war-affected area, Gokmen and Yakovlev (2018) look at the effect of the Russian invasion of Georgia on Georgians living in Russia.

2.2 Getting the data

At first sight, getting data to analyse empirically the relationship between war and happiness seems straightforward. Most countries now have regular polls that include questions about the subjective well-being of respondents. Similarly, cross-country surveys like the Gallup World Poll or the Eurobarometer survey, include questions on happiness that are comparable across countries. In addition, getting data on the time and location of war is relatively straightforward.

Hence, data for macro studies, like Marcantonio (2017) or Spruk and Keseljević (2016), that link the average happiness in a country to the presence of war in a country are relatively straightforward to obtain. Those attempting to do so, however, should be aware of possible sample selection bias. First, happiness surveys are more frequently done in stable and rich countries, while wars are more likely to happen in less stable and poorer countries. Second, when a war starts, doing surveys becomes more difficult and hence data are more likely to be missing for years a war took place. Third, the higher the intensity of the war in an area of a country, the less likely a survey will take place in that area.[1] Hence, what macro studies will tend to capture is the effect of living in a war-affected country on happiness, rather than the effect of being directly affected by a war.

However, even within a war-affected area, there is a lot of heterogeneity in the extent to which people experience the war. To capture such differences, micro-level studies use surveys that have questions on the extent a respondent has been affected by the war and questions on happiness. For example, the survey used in Sateemae, Abdel-Monem et al. (2022) has questions ranging from whether the respondent was shot at, or saw somebody being killed, to whether the respondent has heard a shooting or a bombing. Similarly, Shemyakina and Plagnol (2013) use a survey that asked respondents whether they live in a house that has war damage or whether they often recall painful events from the war. Note that such micro-level surveys allow distinguishing the effect of experiencing directly the war from the effect of living in a war-affected country (as for example, Coupe and Obrizan, 2016).

Finally, it is important to highlight that no survey will be able to estimate the impact on happiness of those most affected by the war: those who were killed during the war (Frey 2018). Hence, any analysis of the effect of war on happiness is likely to underestimate the total effect, with the underestimation being a function of the number of people killed by the conflict.

2.3 Finding causal effects

[1] If one wants to take into account the intensity of the war, and include data on victims, like Welsch (2008), data availability becomes more of an issue.

Wars do not happen randomly, so macro-level studies that simply compare happiness in countries with and without war run the risk that the estimated effect of war on happiness does not just reflect the effect of war but also the effect of other, observed or unobserved, variables correlated with the occurrence of war. What's more, even the direction of causality is unclear: Marcantonio (2017), for example, tries to estimate the effect of happiness on war, regressing country level indicators, like whether or not there's an armed conflict or the number of armed conflicts, on measures of happiness in that country. At the same time, Spruk and Kešeljević (2016), try to estimate the effect of war on happiness by running the opposite regression, regressing a country level indicator of happiness on whether or not there is a war in the country.

Micro-studies often have a somewhat stronger claim on causality as they can argue that, within a given region, who is affected by war and who is not, is more or less random. That being said, the more questions related to the intensity of war experience are subjective, the more likely unobserved characteristics of respondents will affect both the dependent and the independent variable (Hamermesh 2004).

While some studies just present correlations (Sateemae, Abdel-Monem et al. 2022), others discuss causality explicitly (Shmotkin and Lomranz 1998), use difference-in-difference techniques (Coupe and Obrizan 2016) or extreme bound analysis (Spruk and Kešeljević 2016).

Finally, one should be aware that studies typically use 'absence of war' as counterfactual. One could however argue that alternative counterfactuals might be more likely: if a war had not started, things might not have stayed as before but other things might have happened like economic boycotts or increased political tension, which also could affect happiness.

2.4 Reported Findings

Let us now turn to the findings of the literature of war on happiness. One could argue that war can only have a negative effect, and hence, academics studying the impact of war on happiness should not primarily focus on a test of significance using a null hypothesis of no effect, but rather should focus on the size of the effect.[2]

However, some studies have reported no significant effects of war on happiness. Morina and von Collani (2006) use data from Kosovo and find that among those experiencing a (mostly war-related) traumatic event, the intensity of the trauma was unrelated to satisfaction with life, three years after the conflict. They conclude 'war-related distress did not affect life satisfaction in this study'. Similarly, Shmotkin and Lomranz (1998) do not find significant differences in terms of mean scores on satisfaction with life scale 50 years after WWII, when comparing holocaust survivors and people who migrated to Israel before the war. Seligowski, Pless Kaiser et al. (2012) also find that combat exposure does not affect life satisfaction among retired US veterans. Note, however that Ikin, Sim et al. (2009) found that surviving Australian veterans of the Korean war did have a much lower life satisfaction than similar non-veterans (56% percent on a life satisfaction probability score, compared to 69).

[2] Note however, that some have argued that war could have a positive effect on happiness, through war creating a shared experience, through 'afterglow' (survivors seeing the past in a positive light) or 'combat flow' (soldiers enjoying the war) (Frey 2011, Frey 2012).

Other studies find an insignificant effect for those not directly affected by the conflict, but a significant effect for those exposed personally to the conflict. Shemyakina and Plagnol (2013) using data from Bosnia-Herzegovina 5 to 10 year after the war, find no significant effect on life satisfaction of variables that measure the intensity of the conflict in the area where one lives. However, they find a significant negative effect of variables that measure the personal impact of the war: "for each unit increase in the intensity of recollecting satisfaction with life declines by about 0.17" [on a scale between 1 and 7, with a mean of about 4.5]. Similarly, Coupe and Obrizan (2016) find little evidence that people in regions of Ukraine that were not directly exposed to war, were less likely to consider themselves a happy person after the war started. At the same time, soon after the start of the war, the level of happiness declined substantially in areas that did experience war directly. They estimate that the decline in happiness was 'roughly comparable to the loss of happiness a relatively well-off person would experience if he/she were to become a poor person'.

Most studies do find a negative effect of experiencing war on happiness, like the seminal study cross-country of Welsh (2008) that estimated the 'happiness cost' of a fatality to be equivalent to a loss of income for a country of $108,000. Also using cross-country data, Spruk and Keŝeljević (2016) focus on the relationship between a country's mean individual happiness score (on 10 step scale, with mean 5.8) and the country's level of economic freedom. As a control variable, however, they include a dummy indicating the presence of a civil war in a country, estimating the coefficient to be -0.42 and thus conclude they find a 'large and significant detrimental effects of domestic conflict on subjective well-being'. Using data from 34 mainly European countries, Kijewski (2020) analyses the effect of being injured or having injured or killed parents or grandparents during WWII, on life satisfaction (on a scale of 1 to 10, mean about 5.75) in 2010. She finds that such war experience decreases life satisfaction by about 0.1 even sixty years after WWII. Interestingly, however Djankov, Nikolova et al. (2016) using a similar specification and the same dataset find no significant effect of the same war experience. Obrizan (2019) using a later wave of the same dataset focuses on the effect of more recent conflicts and finds that physical injury, having a household member killed or living in a household displaced due to a conflict is associated with a reduction of the probability of being happy by about 7 percentage points.

Some studies focus on individual countries, rather than using cross-country data. Using a sample of students in Southern Thailand, Sateemae, Abdel-Monem et al. (2022) find a negative, but relatively small (around -0.1) correlation between different types of war-related trauma and both life satisfaction and happiness. Similarly, using a representative sample of data of the population from Southern Thailand, Ford, Jampaklay et al. (2022) found that in villages where war violence occurred, the average happiness score of the people in the area decreases by about 0.15 on a scale of 0 to 10 (mean:7.69). Focusing on Israel, Van Praag, Romanov et al. (2010) find mostly insignificant effects of the 2006 military conflict between Israel and Hezbollah (the Lebanon war) on life satisfactions of the Arab and the Jewish population. Finally, Bove, Salvatore et al. (2022) find that when peacekeepers were deployed in South Sudan, the share of people who answered 7 or more out of 10 on a life satisfaction question, increased by about 5 percentage points in those areas receiving the peace keepers.

3. Future challenges

As the above discussion illustrates, there is substantial heterogeneity in what exactly the various studies estimate, in the estimated effect sizes of those studies, and in how those effect sizes are reported. Overall, the number of studies that relate war to happiness is still limited. Hence, more work needs to be done before a meta-analysis can be conducted to analyse how differences in study design affect study outcomes.

In the meantime, future studies could use existing datasets to investigate how sensitive findings are to different definitions of happiness. For example, the Life in Transition Survey used by Kijewski (2020), Obrizan (2019) and Djankov, Nikolova et al. (2016) has 2 different measures of satisfaction in life, and various measures of exposure to war, so one can analyse how different definitions, and different econometric specifications can influence conclusions about the relationship between war and happiness.

To improve on the current state of the field, future studies could also focus on creating better data, for example, by developing survey instruments that ask detailed questions about respondents' war experience, allowing for better causal identification and analysis that is more comprehensive. The study of happiness and war would also benefit from longitudinal surveys that track respondents during and after the war. Tracking respondents over time will help causal interpretation, as panel data allow to control better for individual characteristics. Such data will also enable studying the immediate, medium and long-term effects of the conflict on happiness. Detailed socio-demographic profiles further could make it possible to compare effects for civilians, internally displaced people and ex-combatants. Finally, surveys that include precise geographic identifiers will allow superimposing individual data with violence intensity by location (which can be obtained by web scraping of social networks, news and official government reports). This will help to distinguish the effect of being personally affected by the war, from living in a war-affected area. Finally, collecting data during periods of intensive conflicts will remain problematic, but may become possible using modern digital technologies. Unfortunately, there will be many more opportunities to collect data relevant to the study of war and happiness.

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