Title: Explaining women’s subjective well-being: the role of the reference group

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Abstract:

We test the hypothesis that women report higher subjective well-being when they compare themselves with other women. We measure subjective well-being as satisfaction about health, income, leisure and life overall. We implement a randomized control trial on a large nationally representative sample of UK respondents, which prompts some respondents to compare themselves with people of the same gender, and leaves the reference group of others unconstrained. When they are prompted to compare themselves with other women, women report higher satisfaction in income and leisure: the domains where women are perceived to be more disadvantaged than men. We provide evidence that the treatment effect increases with the perceived gender gap. Evaluating satisfaction in relation to a given reference group is cognitively demanding. We introduce a new estimator (MIOP) to correct for possible bias stemming from an increase in cognitive load due to the treatment. Results using the MIOP suggest the treatment also increases women’s satisfaction about health. No effects are found for men when they compare themselves with other men.