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Happiness in the arts—International evidence on artists' job satisfaction



Trine Bille^a, Cecilie Bryld Fjællegaard^a, Bruno S. Frey^{b,*}, Lasse Steiner^c

^a Department of Innovation and Organizational Economics, Copenhagen Business School, 2000 Frederiksberg, Denmark

^b Warwick Business School, University of Warwick, Coventry CV47AL, UK

^c Department of Economics, University of Zurich, 8023 Zurich, Switzerland

HIGHLIGHTS

- Research links artists with high unemployment, low incomes and mental disorders.
- Despite strong adversities the artistic labor market attracts many young people.
- We show a significantly higher job satisfaction of artists than other occupations.
- The increased job satisfaction is not driven by differences in personality.
- Procedural work aspects are identified as channels of artists' satisfaction.

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ABSTRACT

Many artists are prone to high unemployment and low incomes suggesting low job satisfaction. Our analysis including 49 countries paints a different picture. On average artists enjoy higher job satisfaction than other employees, mainly due to more autonomy.

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1. Introduction

Artists are often considered to be a group in society characterized by great unhappiness. They appear to be driven by demons and depression, a view which is met with huge fascination in the public and by artists themselves. An example of this is Gustave Courbet's painting of himself as the "Desperate Man" (1844–45), now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. There are many famous artists who were believed to be mentally ill or severely depressed. Among writers there were, for instance, Charles Dickens,

Virginia Woolf, Leo Tolstoy, John Keats, and Tennessee Williams; in music, Schubert, Rossini, Tchaikovsky, Mozart, and Beethoven; and among painters, Gauguin, Munch, O'Keefe, Rothko, and earlier, Michelangelo and Goya. The correlation between artists and unhappiness grows even greater in interest when artists commit suicide, such as Vincent van Gogh, as evidenced in the famous film "Lust for Life" by Vincente and Cukor (1956). In art history and philosophy, the view of mentally ill and unhappy artists has also received attention (Becker, 1978; Jamison, 1994; Ludwig, 1995; Rothenberg, 1990).

2. Literature

These findings are supported by psychiatric and medical research (Andreasen and Glick, 1988; Ludwig, 1992; Preti and Miotto,

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +41 44 634 37 30; fax: +41 44 634 35 99.

E-mail addresses: bruno.frey@econ.uzh.ch (B.S. Frey), lasse.steiner@econ.uzh.ch (L. Steiner).

1999; Stack, 1997; Waddell, 1998). Creativity, a defining feature of artists, has been linked to mental illness. Some studies report a considerably higher suicide risk in the artistic professions. These studies, however, were not able to find completely conclusive evidence that artists are more prone to mental illness and suicide than those in other professions (Wittkower and Wittkower, 1963).

Economic research (Abbing, 2002; Alper and Wassall, 2006; Haak, 2005; Menger, 2001) suggests that the objective conditions under which artists live are depressing. Artists suffer a substantial earnings penalty even when individual characteristics such as level of education and age are controlled for. Unemployment is almost 1.5 times higher than in other professions. The artistic labor market is characterized by permanent excess supply—there is always a pool of young and talented artists waiting for their breakthrough, which in most cases does not happen.

There are two (non-exclusive) standard explanations why, despite the low incomes and high risk of unemployment in the artistic market, there are still so many people entering the market. One is that it is a “superstar market” (Rosen, 1981) in which very few lucky artists become famous and rich while the rest fail. Artists may be particularly risk loving persons willing to engage in this gamble. The other explanation (Towse, 2006) assumes that would-be artists are irrational and systematically overestimate the chance of their own success in the market.

International cross-section studies reveal a third explanation mainly studied in the economics of the arts (Cowen and Tabarrok, 2000; Throsby, 1994). Artists are taken to have a “work preference” to be active in the art market. The inferior economic outcomes in terms of income for artists may be compensated for by higher utility gained. They enjoy their work and are not subject to disutility from work as assumed in standard economics. This view has been subject to some isolated studies for particular countries (Bille et al., 2012; Rose, 2007; Steiner and Schneider, 2013) lending some support to the work preference model.

3. Data

The results presented in this paper are based on happiness research (Boes et al., 2010; Frey and Stutzer, 2002; Luechinger, 2010; Oswald, 2008). In contrast to previous studies utility is directly captured by using surveys. The question asked is: “Overall, how satisfied are you with your job?” This measure of happiness is confirmed by objective measures of wellbeing (Oswald and Wu, 2010). We use the third (1999) and fourth (2008) waves of the European Value Survey. The results are further supported by data from the British Household Panel (2001–2008) and the Swiss Household Panel (1999–2010) allowing us to examine whether the difference between artists and other workers is due to personality factors. There are many possible definitions of what an “artist” is ranging from purely subjective (“I consider myself to be an artist”) to more objective (e.g. having a diploma from a school of art) criteria. This study considers individuals with an artistic occupation as artists (i.e. performing and visual artists, see Table S1, Appendix).

4. Results

Descriptive statistics reveal that artists exhibit significantly higher job satisfaction, or happiness with their work, than non-artists (Table 1). On a scale from one (totally unhappy) to ten (totally happy), artists on average indicate a level of 7.7 in contrast to non-artists with 7.3 in Europe. These results are mirrored in individual countries such as the United Kingdom and Switzerland. In Europe overall, the artists’ satisfaction level is statistically significantly higher at the 1% level (tested with a two-sided *t*-test). The same can be said for Switzerland. In the UK, the difference is quite small.

Table 1
Average job satisfaction.

	Non-artists	Artists
<i>International data</i>		
EUROPE (47 countries)	7.32	7.70***
<i>Country data</i>		
UK	5.45	5.49
SWITZERLAND	8.08	8.23***

Notes: Average job satisfaction on a scale from 1 (total dissatisfaction) to 10 (total satisfaction), in the UK, the scale is from 1 to 7.

***, **, * denotes significance at the 1%, 5%, and 10% level respectively.

Table 2
Cross-section estimation of artists’ job satisfaction.

	(1) Europe	(2) UK	(3) Switzerland
Artists	0.289*** (2.709)	0.148** (2.182)	0.163* (1.773)
Constant	7.176 (53.41)	4.982 (32.42)	8.755 (90.50)
Socio-economic controls	Yes	Yes	Yes
Wave fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes
Country fixed effects	Yes	–	–
Observations	41,899	63,857	23,950
R-squared	0.080	0.028	0.036

Notes: The dependent variable is respondents’ job satisfaction; *t*-statistics are in parentheses. The OLS regressions include controls for age, gender, tenure, education, and personal monthly income, time fixed effects and in European country fixed effects. The pooled cross-section estimations for the UK and Switzerland are conducted with robust standard errors (corrected for repeated observations of individuals). Data: EVS 1999 and 2008, BHPS 2001–2008 and SHP 1999–2010.

***, **, * denotes significance at the 1%, 5%, and 10% level respectively.

Table 3
Fixed-effect estimation of artists’ job satisfaction.

	(4) UK	(5) Switzerland
Artists	0.226*** (2.790)	0.365* (1.923)
Constant	5.083 (34.93)	9.576 (32.30)
Socio-economic controls	Yes	Yes
Observations	63,857	23,950
Number of individuals	14,039	8763
R-squared	0.028	0.007

Notes: The dependent variable is respondents’ job satisfaction; *t*-statistics are in parentheses. OLS regressions are estimated with fixed effects. Controls include age, gender, tenure, education, and personal and monthly income. Data: BHPS 2001–2008 and SHP 1999–2010.

***, **, * denotes significance at the 1%, 5%, and 10% level respectively.

These raw figures may reflect many characteristics that distinguish artists from non-artists. A multivariate regression allows us to control for differences in income, working hours, gender, and age (Table 2). The regression results confirm that artists are more satisfied with their jobs than non-artists even when controlling for socio-economic influences. The effect is sizeable. In Europe, the coefficient of roughly 0.3 (on a scale from 1 to 10) is comparable to the coefficient of being self-employed. Self-employment is positively and significantly related to job satisfaction as revealed in earlier studies (see Table 4 and Benz and Frey, 2008).

The observed coefficient between being an artist and job satisfaction in the cross-section estimate might suffer from endogeneity biases. Special personality traits – or other omitted time invariant factors – might cause individuals in the arts sector to be happier with their jobs irrespective of the occupation they have. The estimation results (Table 3) indicate that higher job satisfac-

Table 4
Procedural characteristics as channels of artists' job satisfaction.

	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)	(11)
Artists	0.247*** (2.703)	0.163* (1.773)	0.160* (1.700)	0.233*** (2.596)	0.133 (1.404)	0.0958 (1.016)
Self-employment		0.383*** (10.65)	0.343*** (9.300)	0.352*** (9.930)	0.367*** (9.771)	0.273*** (7.223)
Stressful work			−0.433*** (−20.02)			
Risk of unemployment				−0.134*** (−34.39)		
Flexible working hours and making own decisions					0.00725 (0.323)	
Possibility to work from home						0.285*** (12.39)
Constant	8.807 (90.94)	8.755 (90.50)	8.561 (88.90)	8.743 (91.66)	8.653 (89.85)	8.683 (90.02)
Socio-economic controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Wave fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
N	23,950	23,950	20,297	23,699	20,356	20,376
R2	0.032	0.036	0.056	0.082	0.037	0.044

Notes: The dependent variable is respondents' job satisfaction; *t*-statistics are in parentheses. The pooled cross-section OLS regressions include controls for age, gender, tenure, education, and personal monthly income. The estimations are conducted with robust standard errors (corrected for repeated observations of individuals). Data: SHP 1999–2010.

***, **, * denotes significance at the 1%, 5%, and 10% level respectively.

tion in the artistic sector is a robust phenomenon. OLS regressions with fixed effects reveal that artists are more satisfied with their jobs even if their time invariant characteristics, in particular their personalities, are taken into account. In the UK and Switzerland respectively, artists are 0.226 points (on a scale from 1 to 7) and 0.365 points (on a scale from 1 to 10) more satisfied with their job than are all other workers. This suggests that personality differences (or other omitted time invariant characteristics), which are correlated with increased happiness and lead individuals to become artists, are not causes for artists having higher job satisfaction. It has to be mentioned, that the coefficient is identified by within-person variation in status as an artist. It cannot be excluded that the transitions in status are to some extent endogenous to happiness. Examining whether unhappiness predicts status changes, if artist change their work more often than other professions or exogenous influences on status change provide interesting approaches for future research.

In order to examine the reasons for artists having higher job satisfaction, *work attitudes* are considered. Artists view the process of working to be of special importance (see Table S2, Appendix). They particularly value the opportunity to use initiative in their job, the fact that they have an interesting job, have a job which meets their abilities, and that they can learn new skills on the job. These aspects relate to procedural aspects of work rather than to what is produced. In contrast, artists pay less importance to other aspects, such as job security.

The stated work attitudes may be a reflection of the type of job being done. Therefore, *experienced* work aspects are considered, as have been asked in the Swiss Household Panel (1999–2010). Artists state that their work and private lives tend to overlap more often, that they have a higher risk of becoming unemployed, and that they can be more independent in relation to their working hours and work places. Table 4 shows the regression results, including procedural aspects one by one. The baseline effect on job satisfaction of being an artist is 0.25. Controlling for self-employment reduces the artist-coefficient considerably to 0.16, since being self-employed raises job satisfaction and artists are self-employed more often than other individuals. Holding the risk of unemployment constant the satisfaction difference between artists and non-artists is even larger. Flexible working hours and being able to make one's own decisions about when to work is positively correlated with job satisfaction and drives the artist coefficient to be insignificant. The

same holds for having the possibility to work from home, thus being a second channel for artists' job satisfaction. Even though the procedural explanations and being self-employed explain most of the higher job satisfaction among artists, it does not tell the whole story. The coefficient is still positive (around 0.1), which can be attributed to the satisfaction artists get from creating artworks.

5. Discussion

But why is there evidence that artists are more prone to committing suicide? A possible explanation could be that artists, while exhibiting high job satisfaction on average, over time experience particularly large fluctuations in subjective wellbeing. In the phase in which they are severely depressed, they tend to commit suicide more often than other individuals. In psychiatry, this phenomenon of bi-polarity has been noted to apply to artists and other creative people (Kyaga et al., 2011; Tremblay et al., 2010; Vellante et al., 2011).

The finding that artists are more satisfied with their work than are non-artists may have important policy consequences. It might suggest that to improve the situation of artists, a greater effort should be made in safeguarding their self-determination and autonomy, and that rules and regulations constraining them should be used with care. On the other hand, while supporting artists financially is important, it should not be the major, let alone only consideration.

Appendix. Supplementary data

Supplementary material related to this article can be found online at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.econlet.2013.06.016>.

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