

What Makes a Successful Life?

Evidence from Cohort Studies

Nick Powdthavee

Warwick Business School

**Allow me to begin with an anecdote
about two economists and a dentist**



**It's extremely difficult to predict
the future***

*Extremely difficult, but not entirely impossible.

What do we mean by “a successful life”?



Emotional Health



**But perhaps the ultimate goal is
to be completely satisfied with
one's life**

**"IT IS THE CHILD WHO
MAKES THE MAN, AND
NO MAN EXISTS WHO
WAS NOT MADE BY THE
CHILD HE ONCE WAS."
MARIA MONTESSORI**



Made with  by canva.com



**The idea is to build a life-course
model of adult life satisfaction**

*Family and
schooling*

*Child
outcomes*

*Adult
outcomes*

*Adult life-
satisfaction*

Income
Parenting
Family break-up
Mother's mental
health
Schooling



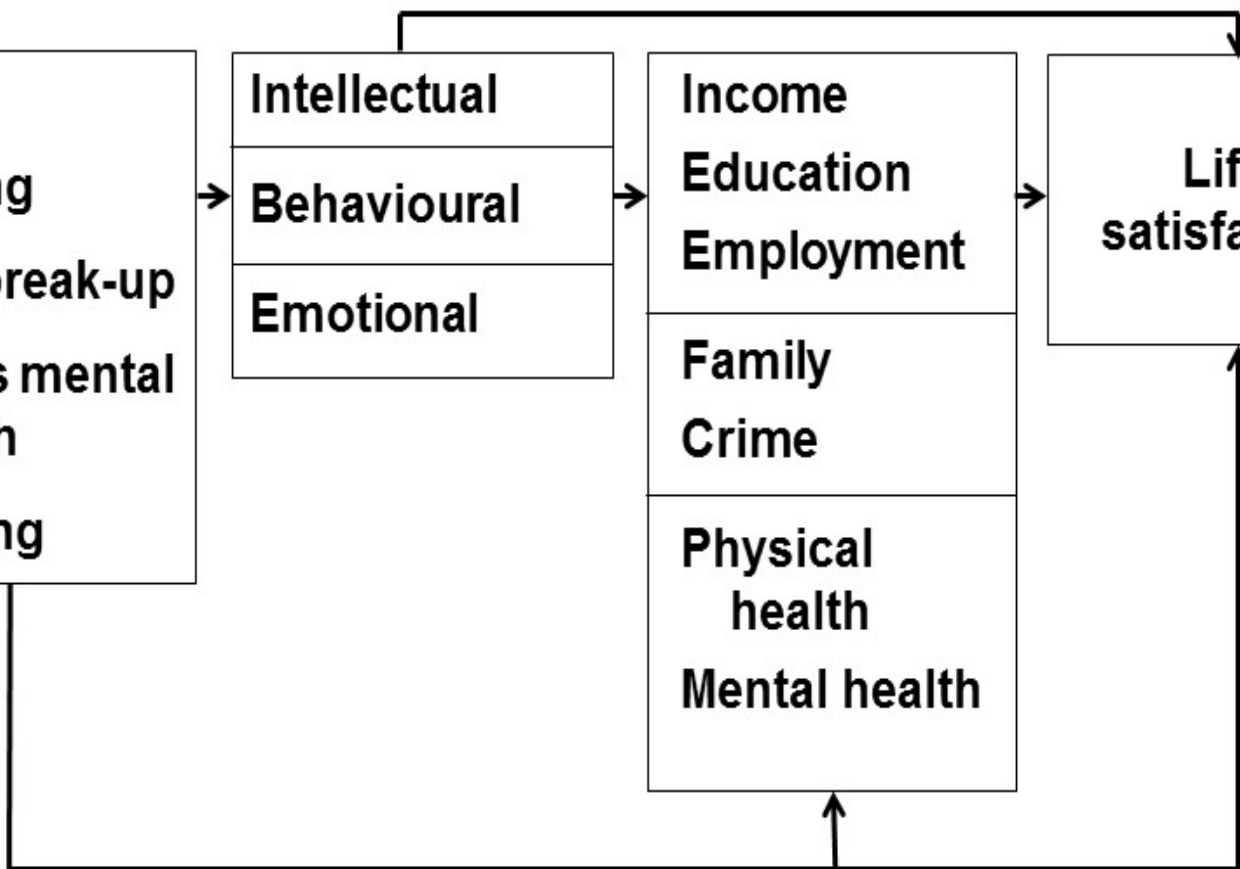
Intellectual
Behavioural
Emotional



Income
Education
Employment
Family
Crime
Physical
health
Mental health



Life-
satisfaction



The kind of data we need

- Would be one that follows a random sample of individuals from...



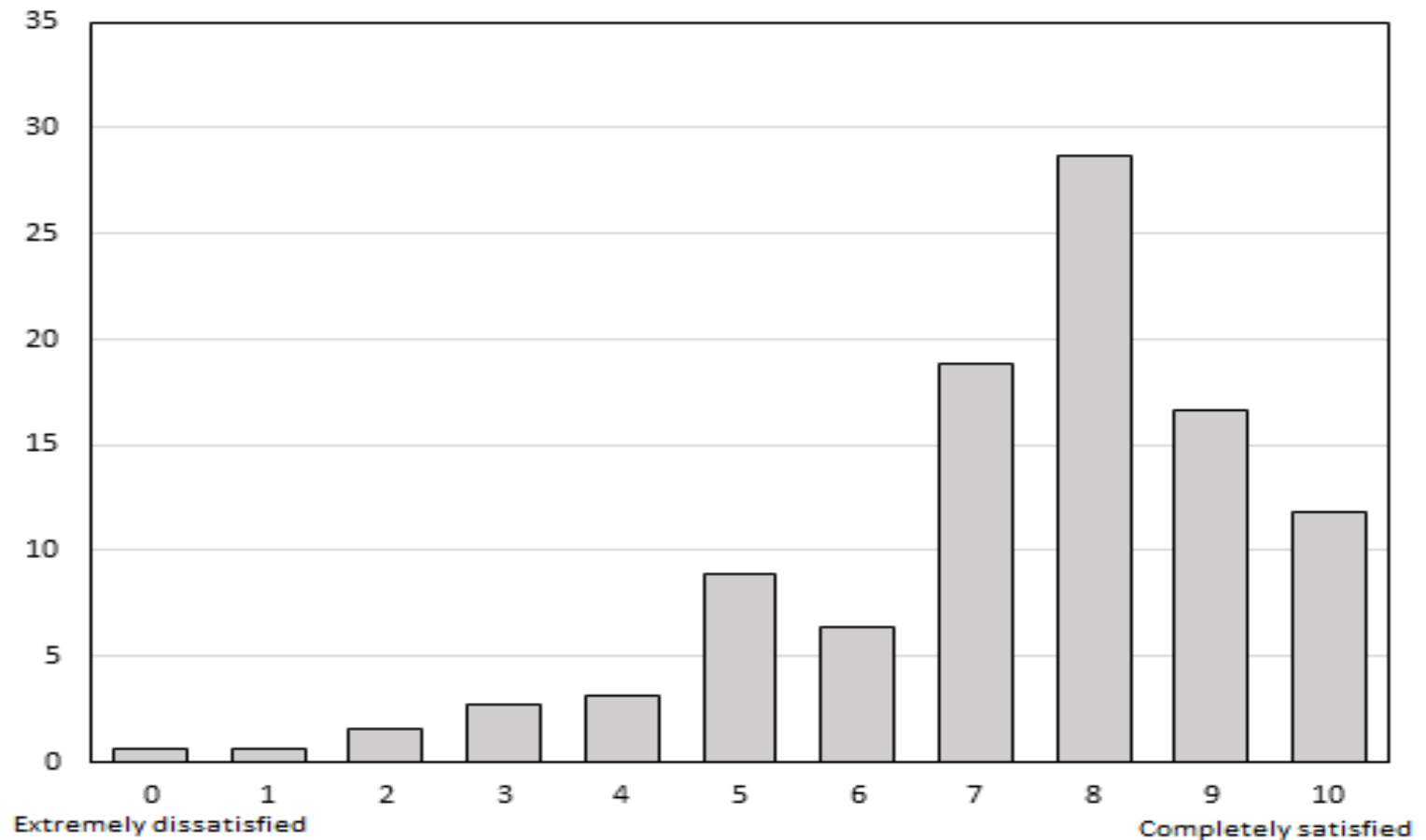
...to



British Cohort Surveys

- National Child Development Study (NCDS)
 - Follow the lives of 17,0000 people born in the UK in a single week of 1958
- British Cohort Study (BCS)
 - Follow the cohort of 1970
- Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children (ALSPAC)
 - Follow the lives of children born in the Avon area in the early 90s
- Millennium Cohort Study (MCS)
 - Follow the lives of children born in the year 2000

Distribution of life-satisfaction (0-10) at ages 34 and 42 (BCS)



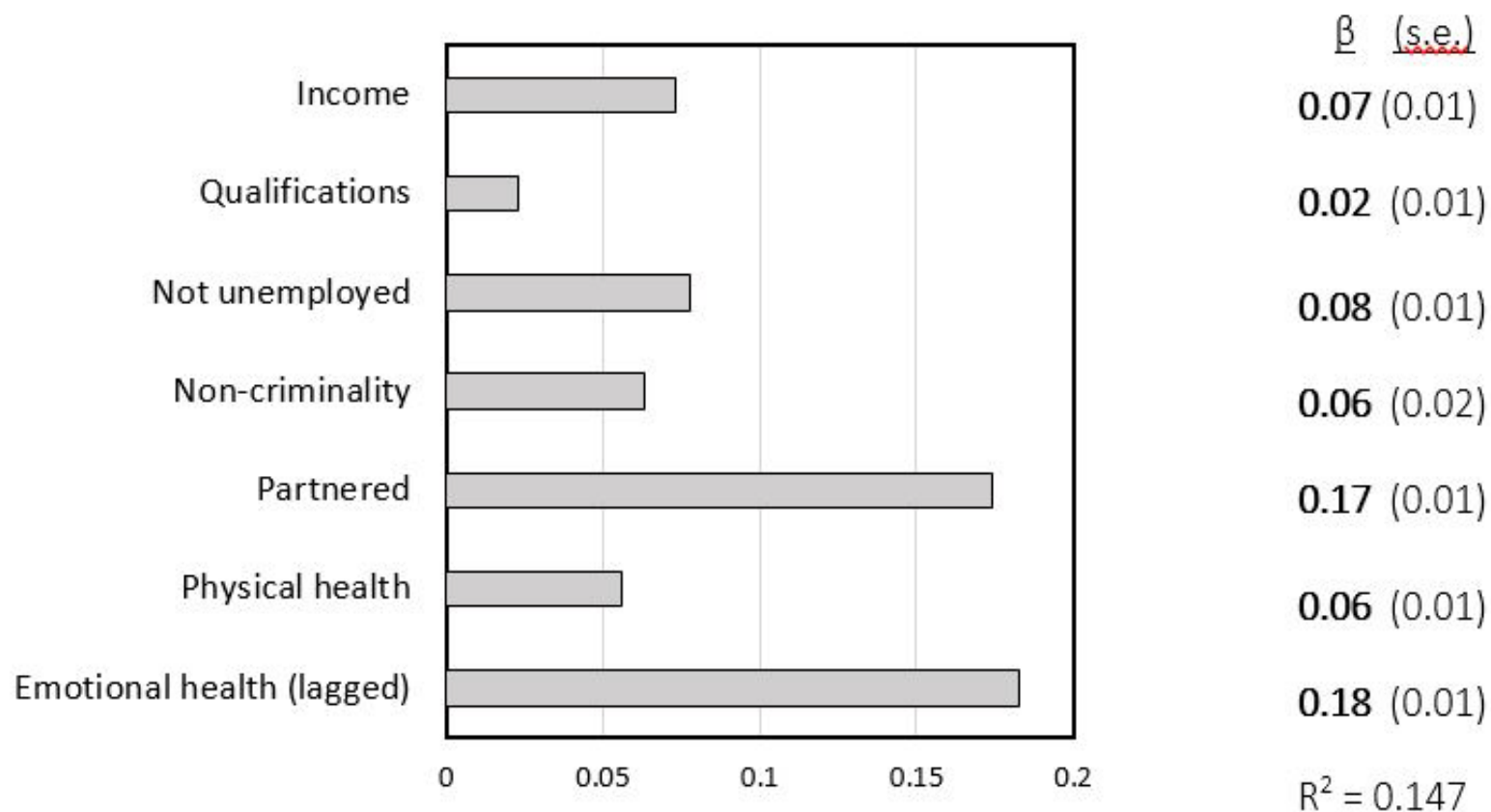
The kind of “successful” equations we run

- Adult outcomes = $f(\text{pre-birth information, early childhood experiences})$
- Adult life satisfaction = $g(\text{adult outcomes, pre-birth information, early childhood experiences})$

We then run standardized multiple regressions in which both dependent and independent variables are standardized to have zero mean and a standard deviation of 1

**So what have we learned so far
about the contemporaneous
correlations between adult
outcomes and adult life
satisfaction?**

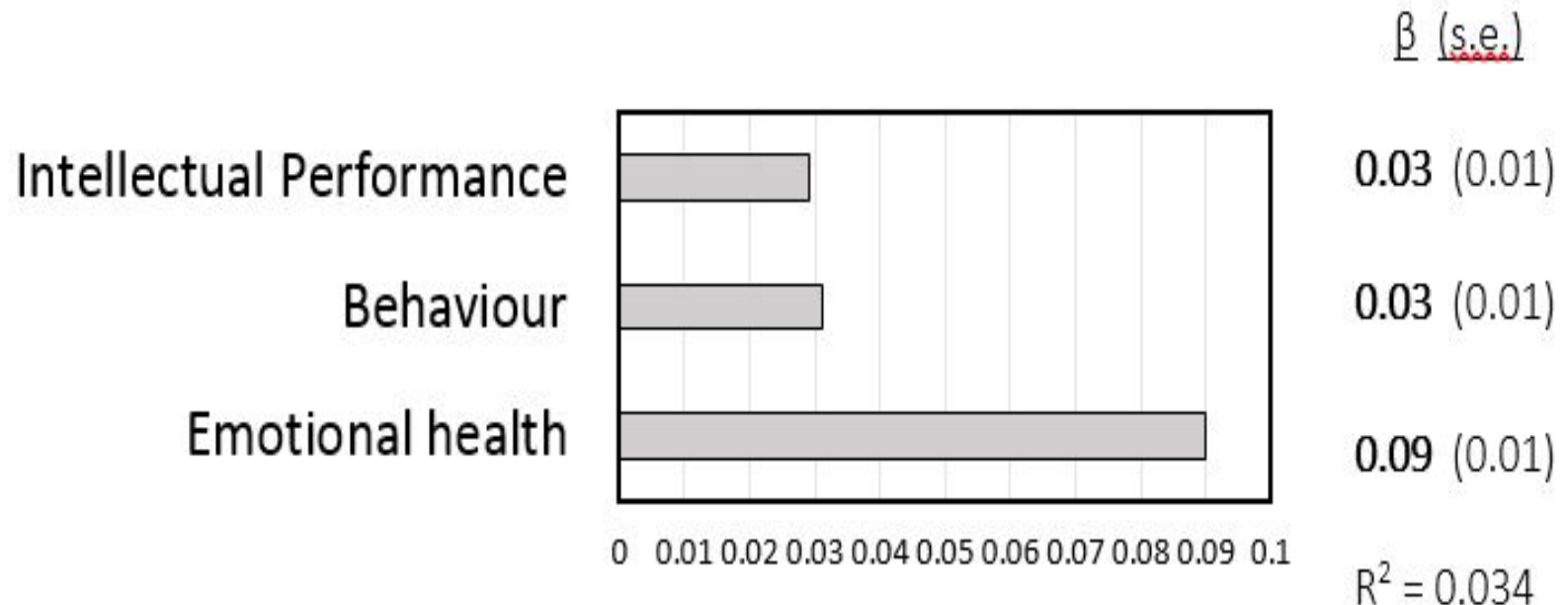
How adult life-satisfaction at 34 and 42 is explained by adult outcomes at these ages



Notes: Other controls include child intellectual performance, behavioural and emotional health outcomes at age 16, parents' education, family income, parental involvement, mother's mental health, family break-up, mother's work, father unemployment, number of siblings, post-marital conception, gender, ethnicity, low birth weight and age dummy(42). Robust standard errors in parentheses.

**To what extent can we explain
variation in adult life satisfaction
using information on life up to aged
16?**

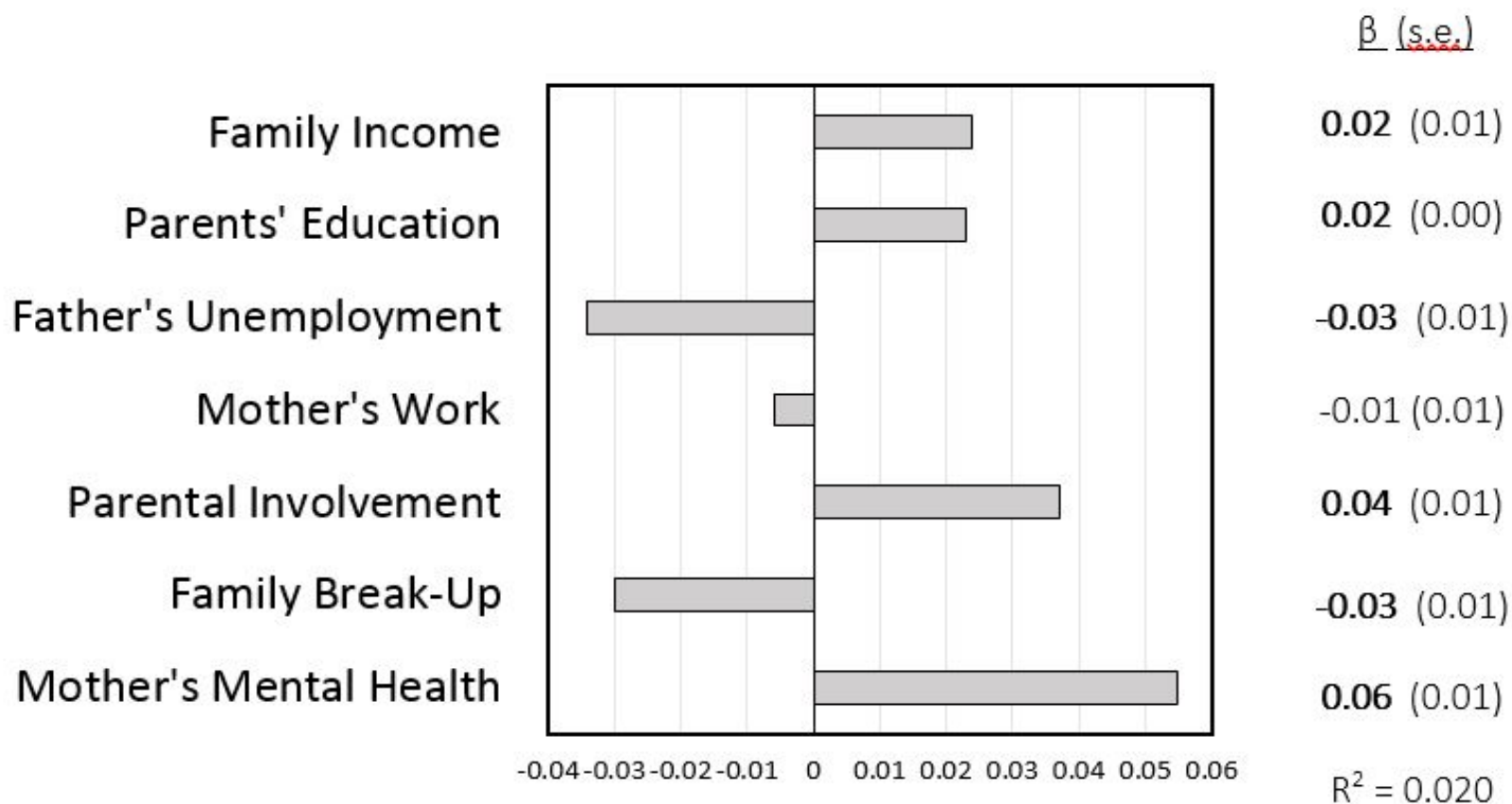
How adult life-satisfaction is predicted by child outcomes at 16



Notes: Partial correlation coefficients. Information from BCS respondents at ages 34 and 42. Other controls include parents' education, family income, parental involvement, mother's mental health, family break-up, mother's work, father unemployment, number of siblings, post-marital conception, gender, ethnicity, low birth weight, and age dummy (42). Robust standard errors in parentheses.

BCS also allows us to look further back to the effect of a person's family working its way through everything that follows

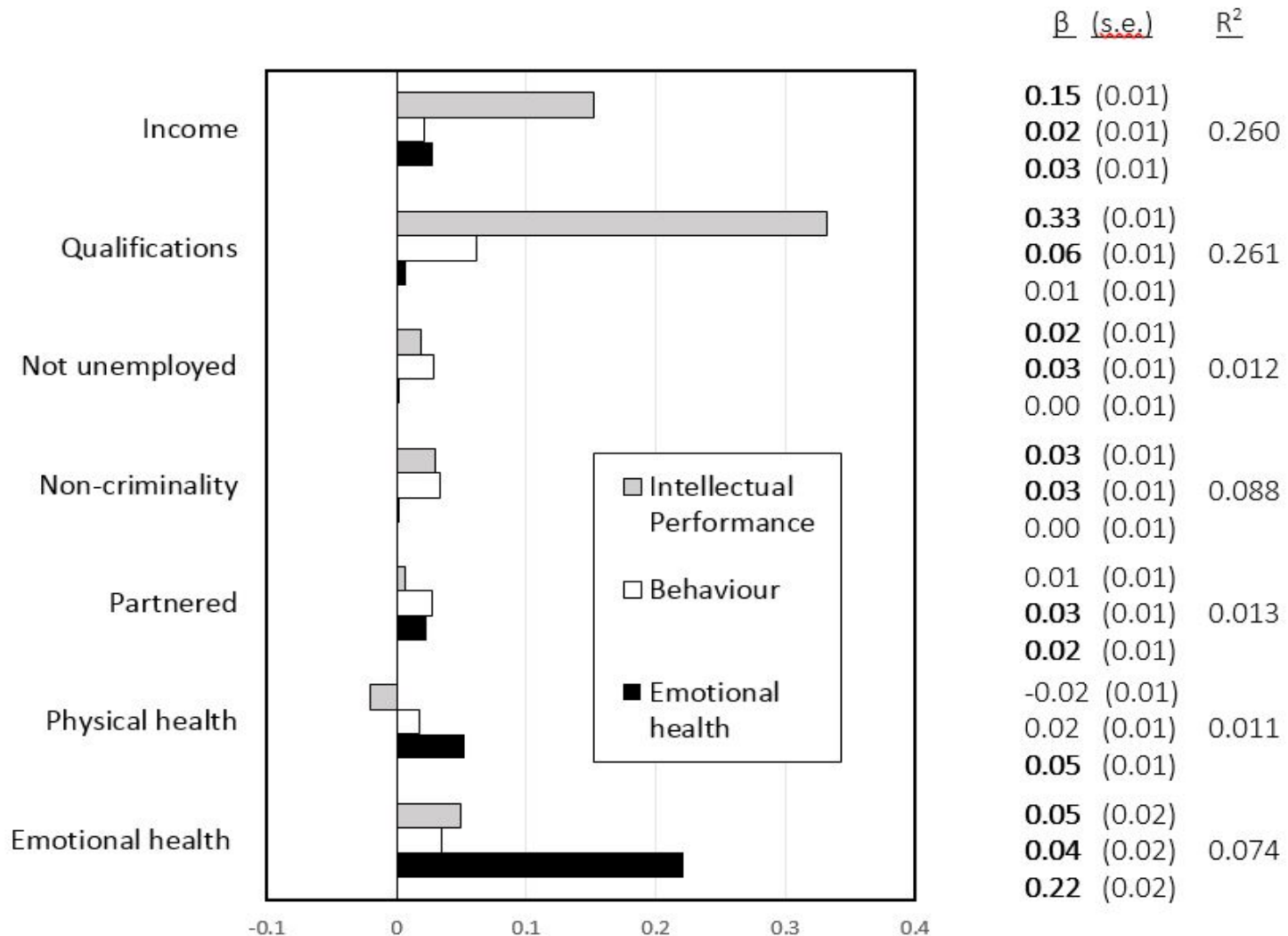
How adult life-satisfaction is predicted by family background



Notes: Partial correlation coefficients, Information from BCS respondents at ages 34 and 42. Other controls include gender, ethnicity, low birth weight, and age dummy (42). Robust standard errors in parentheses.

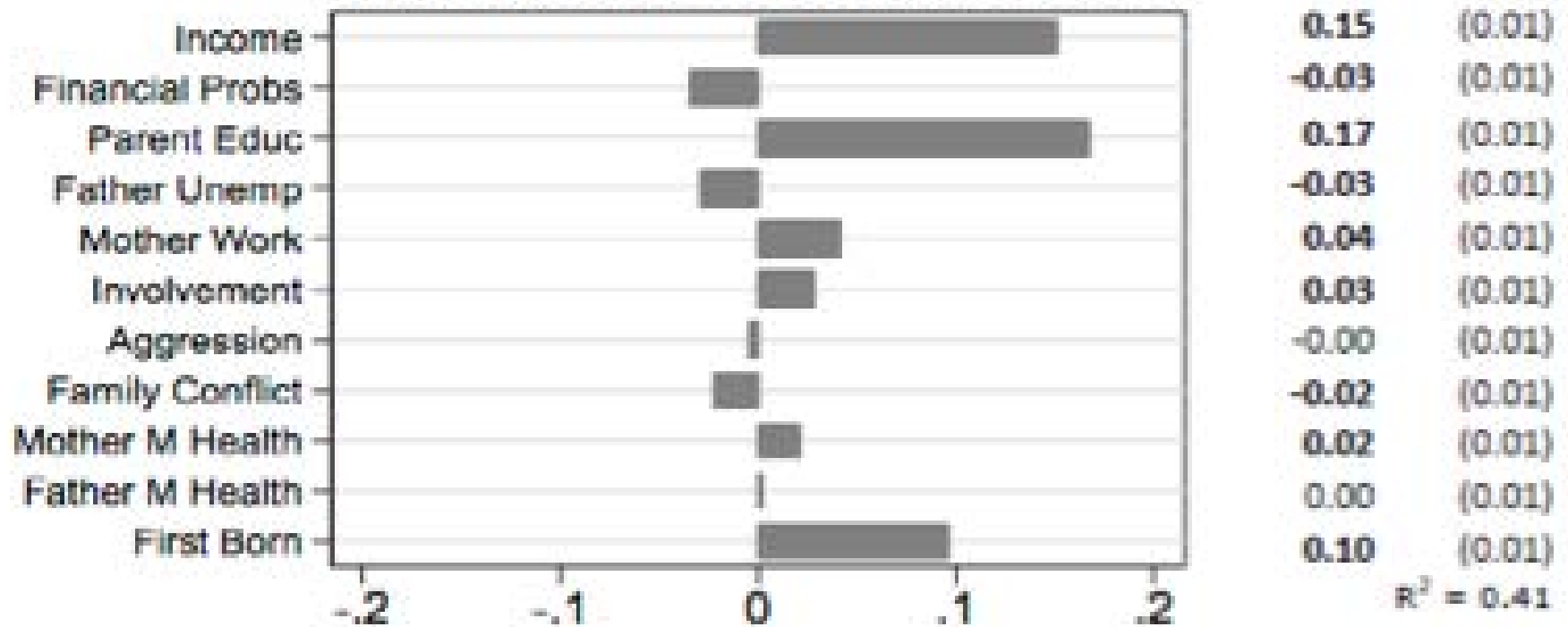
Causes of adult outcomes

How adult outcomes are predicted by child outcomes

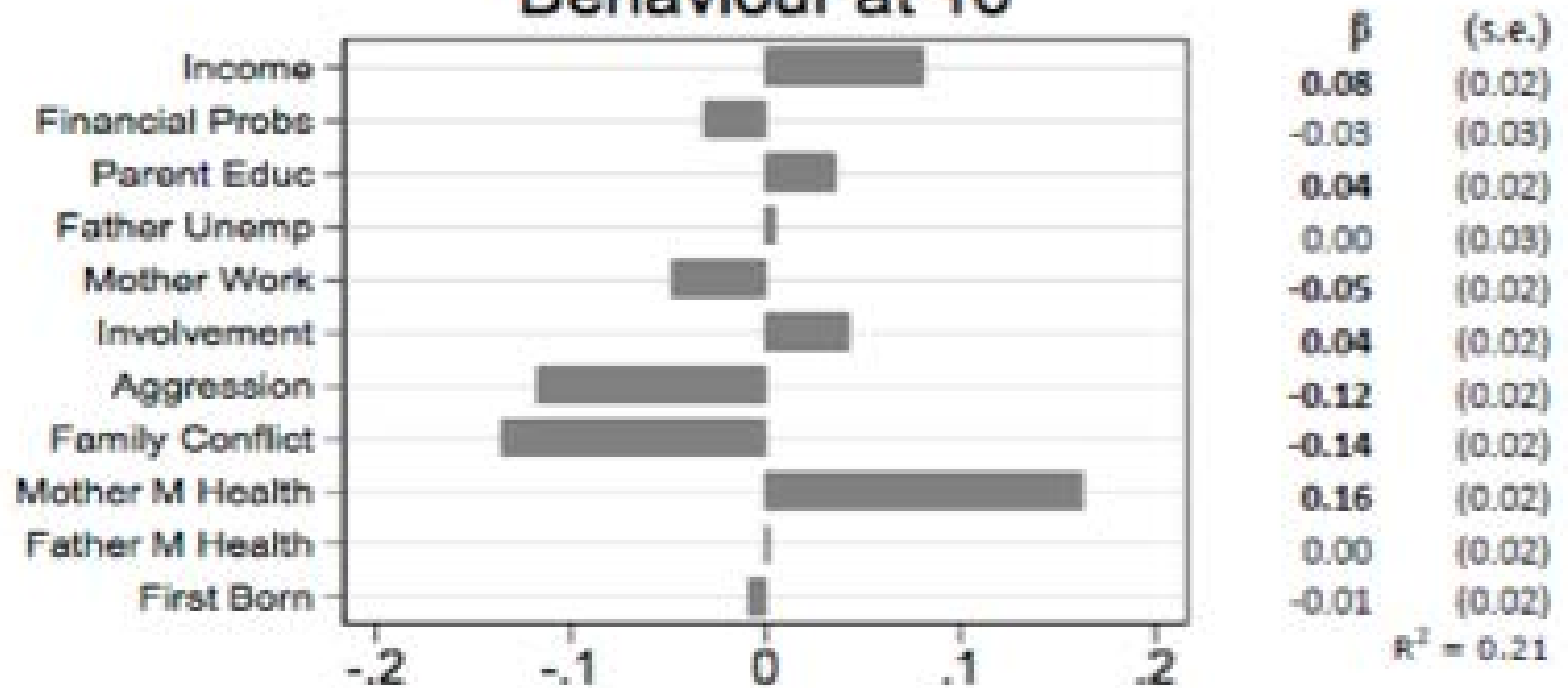


Causes of child outcomes

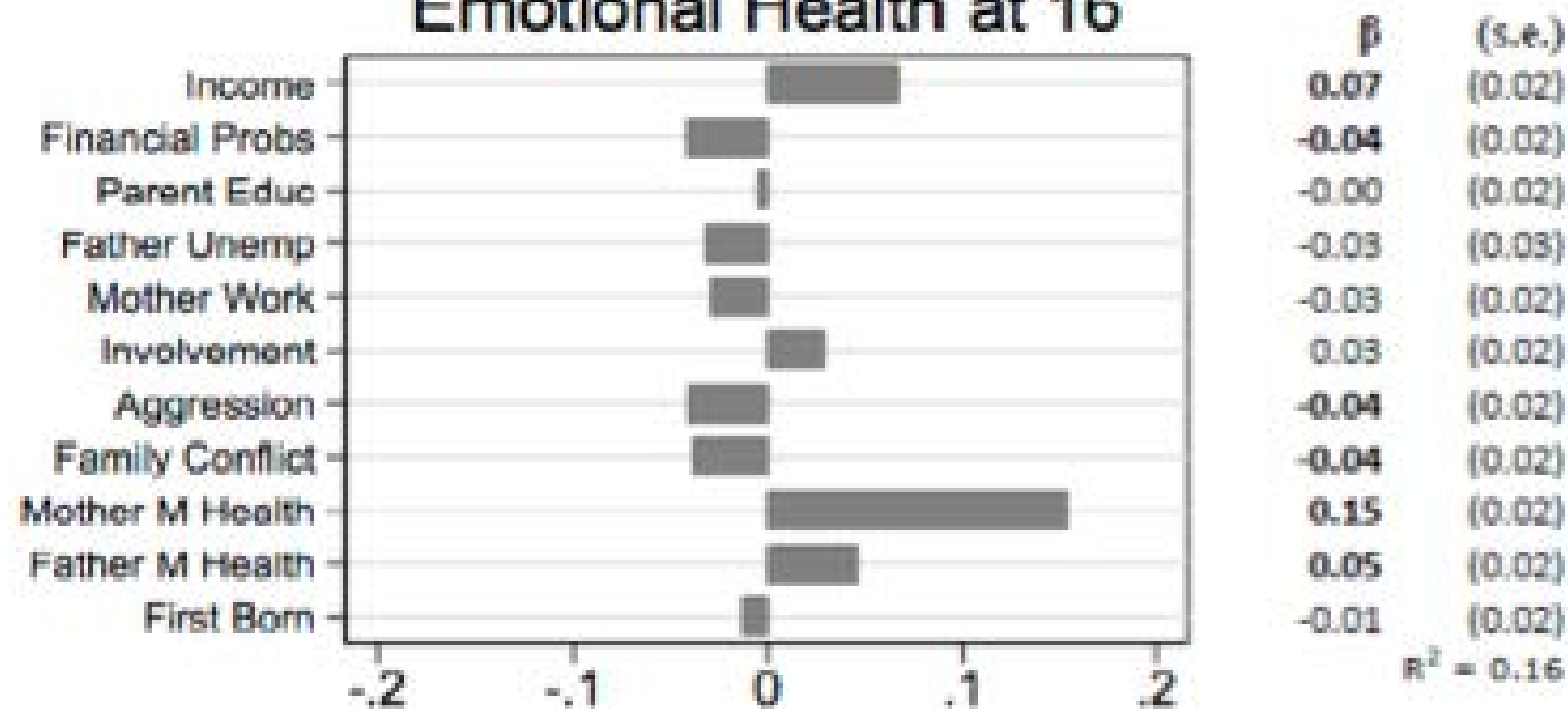
Intellectual Performance at 16



Behaviour at 16

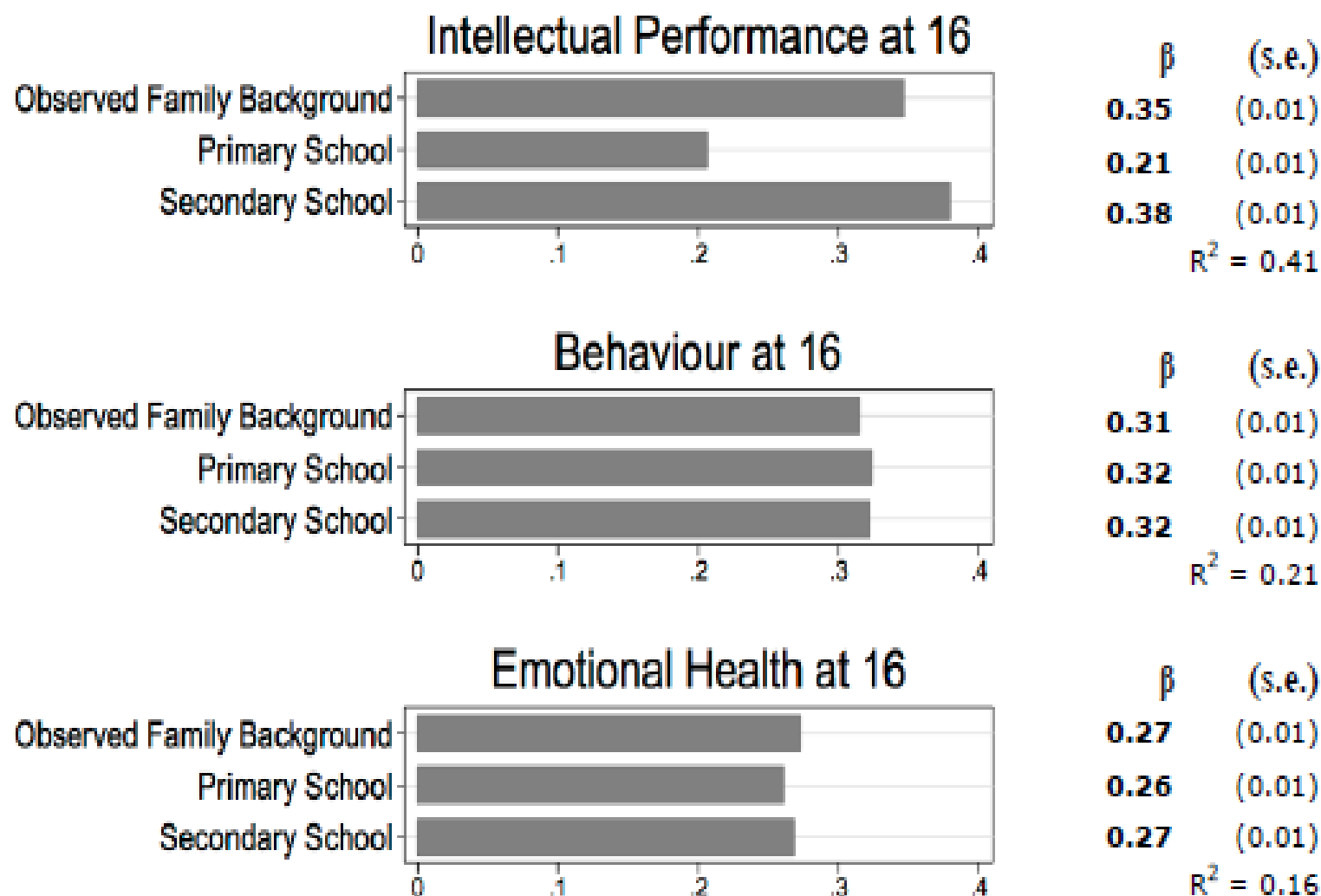


Emotional Health at 16



**School also explains a lot of
variation in child outcomes**

Table 5(b) - How child outcomes are predicted by family and schooling



What we still know less about...

- ...is the importance of genetics in the life-course model of well-being



Knowing when and where to intervene

- Which areas of life require more intervention or less – for children is it their emotional, behavioural or intellectual life, and for adults is it income support, employment or family support?
- If intervene during childhood, how long would the effects last?

In summary

- Child emotional health is more important than child intellectual performance as a predictor of adult life satisfaction

In summary

- Child intellectual performance is the most important predictor of adult incomes, although adult incomes explain only 0.5% of the variation in adult life satisfaction

**An emotionally successful child
tends to reveal a completely
satisfied with life adult**



Thank you!