



Geography of urban life satisfaction: An empirical study of Beijing

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ABSTRACT

Recently increased attention has been paid to the subjectively experienced wellbeing in geographical research. Studies have revealed that there are significant spatial variations in people's life satisfaction between places and regions. Studies have been conducted investigating inter-national, inter-regional and inter-city differences in life satisfaction. However, only a limited number of studies have examined the intra-urban variation in life satisfaction. This study aims to fill in this gap by examining the spatial patterns of life satisfaction in a city. The data is derived from a household survey conducted in from 2012 to 2013 in Beijing, China. Several multivariate models are developed to examine the significance of spatial factors in explaining life satisfaction. It is found that inter-district differences account for around 10% of the variations in life satisfaction and there is a significant difference in life satisfaction between urban and suburban residents in Beijing. Findings of this research have important implications for making policies to improve subjective well-being through urban design and community planning.

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1. Introduction

Subjective wellbeing (SWB), also known as happiness, denotes the degree to which an individual judges his/her overall quality of life favorable (Veenhoven, 1991). It is not only an indication of personal subjective welfare and utility (Easterlin, 2001), but also a key factor to assess the welfare of societies (Stiglitz et al., 2009). Measuring and explaining individuals' subjective wellbeing especially life satisfaction and happiness have been the topics of extensive research in disciplines such as psychology, sociology and economics in recent decades (Diener et al., 1999). The socio-economic characteristics of individuals such as age, marital status, sex, and income are often included as independent variables to predict happiness or life satisfaction (ibid.). It is suggested that personality factors and personal socioeconomics account for around 50% and 10% variations of individuals' life satisfaction, respectively (Lyubomirsky et al., 2005).

As an important life domain, travel related subjective wellbeing has also become a hot topic of research in the field of transportation in recent years (Ettema et al., 2010; De Vos et al., 2013). Travel is traditionally considered as disutilities involving time and cost to reach destinations. Recently, more and more scholars recognize that travel can be a pleasing experience itself (e.g. Mokhtarian

and Salomon, 2001) and it may be necessary to examine the positive aspects of travel such as travel related wellbeing. A number of studies have been conducted to measure SWB in daily travel (e.g. Ettema et al., 2011) and examine the patterns and determinants of travel satisfaction (e.g. Bergstad et al., 2011; Cao, 2013). Studies have also investigated the link between travel and life satisfaction (e.g. Bergstad et al., 2011; Choi et al., 2013; Nordbakke and Schwanen, 2013) and revealed that accessibility, mobility and travel behavior are important determinants of life satisfaction (Choi et al., 2013). Though there is hardly any evidence yet, we may argue for a reverse direction of the link, i.e. subjective wellbeing or life satisfaction may influence travel behavior as well. To that end, a good understanding about the patterns of life satisfaction may be conducive to get insight into travel behavior.

Studies have revealed that there are significant variations in life satisfaction among different countries and among different regions of the same country (e.g. Diener et al., 1995; Plaut et al., 2002) and such variations remain even after personal characteristics are controlled for (e.g. Sørensen, 2014). The inter-country differences are evident in the variations of the average level of life satisfaction among nations (e.g. Diener et al., 1995) and the significance of country dummies when modeling individuals' life satisfaction (e.g. Aslam and Corrado, 2012). Through in-depth interviews and comparisons, many researchers have also disclosed that people from different cultures tend to have divergent components of life satisfaction (e.g. Biswas-Diener et al., 2005). Some studies also begin to examine inter-regional variations in life satisfaction.

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Similar to findings at the inter-national scale, it is suggested that people's life satisfaction is regionally patterned or clustered (e.g. [Berry and Okulicz-Kozaryn, 2011](#); [Okulicz-Kozaryn, 2011](#)) and there are great disparities in life satisfaction among regions with different cultural contexts (e.g. [Plaut et al., 2002](#)).

It is estimated that geographical differences account for a share of the variation in individuals' life satisfaction which is "similar in size to the individual cross-sectional effect on life satisfaction" ([Gerstorf et al., 2010](#); [Oswald and Wu, 2010](#)). Some studies have also revealed that the effects of certain determinants on subjective wellbeing are context-dependent and shaped by the particularities of time and place ([Nordbakke and Schwanen, 2013](#)). Empirical evidence shows that the effects of economic development on life satisfaction vary among different countries (e.g. [Aslam and Corrado, 2012](#)).

Most existing studies about spatial variations in subjective wellbeing are at the country- and region-level. Relatively fewer studies have examined the spatial differences in SWB at city level. Little is known about how SWB vary among different areas within a city or how much intra-city differences account for variations in SWB between individuals. Even fewer studies have examined the geographical patterns of SWB in urban China. Since intra-city variation in SWB is predictive of short-distance residential mobility and useful for urban and community planning, it is necessary to pay more attention to spatial differences in SWB at the city level. To that end, this study is designed to investigate the variations in life satisfaction of individuals living in different districts of Beijing, China.

This paper is organized as follows. The next section provides a review of existing studies on geographical differences in SWB and identifies research gaps. The third section explains the concepts related to subjective wellbeing and develops research hypotheses. The fourth section introduces data and research methods. The fifth section presents the results of analysis and discusses research findings. The final section concludes the paper.

2. Literature review

For a long time, SWB has been an important subject in psychology and economy. Theoretically, SWB is considered as an important topic in both psychological and economic study inspired by the thoughts of 'positive psychology' ([Seligman, 1999](#)) and 'experienced utility' ([Kahneman et al., 1997](#)). The empirical studies of SWB mainly focus on three topics: measures, patterns and determinants of SWB. First, SWB as a cognitive judgment of one's life in general is quite difficult to measure. As a result, quite a few of scales have been developed to measure SWB, including the widely used Satisfaction with Life Scale ([Diener et al., 1985](#)), Core Affect Model ([Russell, 1980](#)) and Day Reconstruction Method ([Kahneman et al., 2004](#)). There are also a growing literature testing the validity and reliability of various scales of SWB and their applicability to other cultural contexts (e.g. [Diener, 1994](#); [Kahneman and Krueger, 2006](#); [Krueger and Schkade, 2008](#); [Wang and Wang, 2015](#)). Second, there are many studies examining patterns of SWB in terms of its temporal change, inter-group differences and geographical variation. For example, much effort has been made to test the stability of SWB based on the hedonic adaptation theory ([Frederick and Loewenstein, 1999](#); [Diener et al., 2006](#); [Lyubomirsky, 2010](#)). Third, a large volume of literature tries to identify the determinants of SWB. The early research focused on how demographic factors affected SWB ([Lyubomirsky et al., 2005](#)). However, studies only found small effects of demographic factors on SWB. Therefore, more attention has been paid to the effects of genetic (or personality), behavioral and environmental factors on SWB ([Diener et al., 1999](#); [Dolan et al., 2008](#)).

The empirical studies on the geography of subjective wellbeing have focused on spatial patterns and variations of life satisfaction and happiness at the levels of countries and regions. [Diener et al. \(1995\)](#) compare the aggregated score of different components of subjective wellbeing in different nations and find notable variations between nations. [Aslam and Corrado \(2012\)](#) examine country fixed effects when modeling individuals' life satisfaction and disclose significant country effects. Inter-national variations in the mean levels of reported SWB are usually explained by the geography of economic development and culture ([Diener et al., 2003](#)). For example, it is generally suggested that people in wealthy nations tend to report higher levels of both life satisfaction and happiness than people in poor nations ([Diener et al., 1995](#)). However, findings on the relationship between economic conditions and life satisfaction tend to be mixed. For instance, [Aslam and Corrado \(2012\)](#) and [Pittau et al. \(2010\)](#) show that the correlation between income and life satisfaction is stronger in poorer countries; [Stanca \(2010\)](#) reveals that the effects of income and unemployment on life satisfaction are spatially clustered; [Lin et al. \(2014\)](#) also find significant cross-country spillover effects (group clustering) in happiness and differential determinants of happiness in different groups of countries. Easterlin provides evidence that happiness does not increase as a country's income rises (e.g. [Easterlin et al., 2010](#)). This is usually known as the 'Easterlin paradox'. It is also disclosed that people from different cultures tend to have different understandings and components of SWB (e.g. [Biswas-Diener et al., 2005](#)). Climate and institution are also considered in some studies as factors explaining geographical variations in SWB (e.g. [Rehdanz and Maddison, 2008](#); [Bjørnskov et al., 2010](#)).

There are also a number of studies on geographical variations in life satisfaction at the regional level. For example, [Oswald and Wu \(2010\)](#) have examined regional differences in life satisfaction across U.S. states and reported that states like Louisiana and Washington D.C. have high levels of life satisfaction yet California and West Virginia have low levels of life satisfaction. [Berry and Okulicz-Kozaryn \(2011\)](#) find a gradient of happiness in the United States, where the average self-reported happiness is the highest in small-town/rural periphery and the lowest in large cities. A study conducted by [Morrison \(2011\)](#) also suggests that living in large cities is likely to be associated with lower life satisfaction since the average level of life satisfaction in Auckland ranks at the bottom in New Zealand. On the other hand, it is also interesting to note that households in urban areas tend to have higher levels of life satisfaction than rural areas in developing countries, such as China ([Knight and Gunatilaka, 2010b](#)). [Okulicz-Kozaryn \(2011\)](#) also investigates the inter-province differences in life satisfaction in Europe based on spatial economic techniques and shows large variation in life satisfaction inequality and substantial positive spatial correlation, suggesting that there are clusters of similar values of life satisfaction among different regions.

Some studies have studied the life satisfaction effects of geographical factors at the city level. For example, studies have revealed that people living in or closer to city center tend to have higher level of life satisfaction ([MacKerron and Mourato, 2009](#); [Arifwidodo and Perera, 2011](#)). This is usually because accessibility to urban facilities such as public transport stop is positively associated with life satisfaction (e.g. [Rehdanz and Maddison, 2008](#)) and accessibility to different types of facilities is usually better in the city center. However, there are also adverse aspects for living in city center. For example, population density, which is found a negative contributor to life satisfaction (e.g. [Cramer et al., 2004](#)), is usually higher in city center. In contrast, the level of green space, which is supposed to be conducive to SWB (e.g. [White et al., 2013](#); [Ambrey and Fleming, 2014](#)), is often lower at city center. Nevertheless, [Rehdanz and Maddison \(2008\)](#) suggest that distance to city center does not have significant effects on SWB after other factors are controlled for;

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