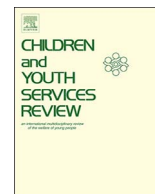




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Exploring national variations in child subjective well-being

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores variation in national levels of subjective well-being (using mean SLSS scores) for children aged 10 and 12 participating in the Children's Worlds survey. We have found it difficult to explain much of the variation in subjective well-being using indicators of the economic, social, political or cultural characteristics of the country. This may be because of the limited number of countries and the fact that Romania is a high outlier and S. Korea a low outlier. However as with the World Happiness Report we did find an association between child SLSS scores and social support as reported by adults in the World Values Survey. Like the World Happiness Report for adults we also found some strong associations between child SLSS scores and other indicators in the Children's Worlds survey, particularly friendliness and choice about time use. We developed explanatory models of SLSS using the Good Childhood framework based on domain satisfaction questions which explained 57% of the variation in SLSS scores of the whole sample. In this model satisfaction with freedom was most salient and satisfaction with home and friends least important. However when the model was applied country by country the proportion of variance explained varied from 36% to 76% and the relative importance of the different explanatory factors also varied. It is probable that multi-level modelling will conclude that most variation in subjective well-being occurs, and can be explained best, at the national level.

1. Introduction

There is clear evidence, mainly from analyses of the Health Behaviour of School Aged Children surveys (HBSC), that the subjective well-being of children varies between countries (Bradshaw, Martorano, Natali, & de Neubourg, 2013; Casas et al., 2011; Casas, Tiliouine, & Figuer, 2014; Currie et al., 2012; 2012; Inchley et al., 2016; Klocke, Clair, & Bradshaw, 2014; UNICEF, 2007, 2010, 2016; OECD, 2009). This finding immediately raises the question why? What are the factors that determine this variation? The ambition is that by answering that question policy makers, parents, teachers, or even children themselves, might be able to make children happier. Some encouragement has come from the study of adult happiness, where Helliwell, Layard, and Sachs (2015) managed to explain 74% of the international variation in national adult life satisfaction. So the objective of this paper is to explore how subjective child well-being is related to other indicators at a country level.

1.1. Previous research

Few previous studies have explored variations in child subjective well-being at the macro country level. Until recently the only available source of international data was the HBSC survey. Using this data,

Bradshaw et al. (2013) found quite strong associations between subjective well-being and all the more objective domains of well-being among OECD countries. Countries that performed better on material well-being, education, health, behaviour, and housing and the environment of children, tended to have children with higher levels of subjective well-being. Fig. 1 shows the association between the z scores of overall objective well-being (a summary of those domains excluding the subjective indicators) and life satisfaction (using Cantril's ladder). The objective domains explain 40% of the variation in life satisfaction, but there are a lot of outliers.

As well as the overall objective domain measure there were also strong associations at the country level with some individual indicators. Thus for example the correlations between mean life satisfaction and the percentage of children lacking three or more deprivation items was $r = -0.70^{**}$, and with the percentage of children with equivalent incomes < 60% of the median is $r = -0.54^{**}$ and with inequality (the Gini coefficient) it was $r = -0.38^*$. However the correlations with GDP per capita, % of GDP spent on family benefits and services in 2011, and the % families headed by a lone parent were not statistically significant (see also Bradshaw, 2015).

Building on the above work, Klocke et al. (2014) developed an index of subjective well-being using HBSC data and tested multilevel models including individual, school and country levels. This study found that

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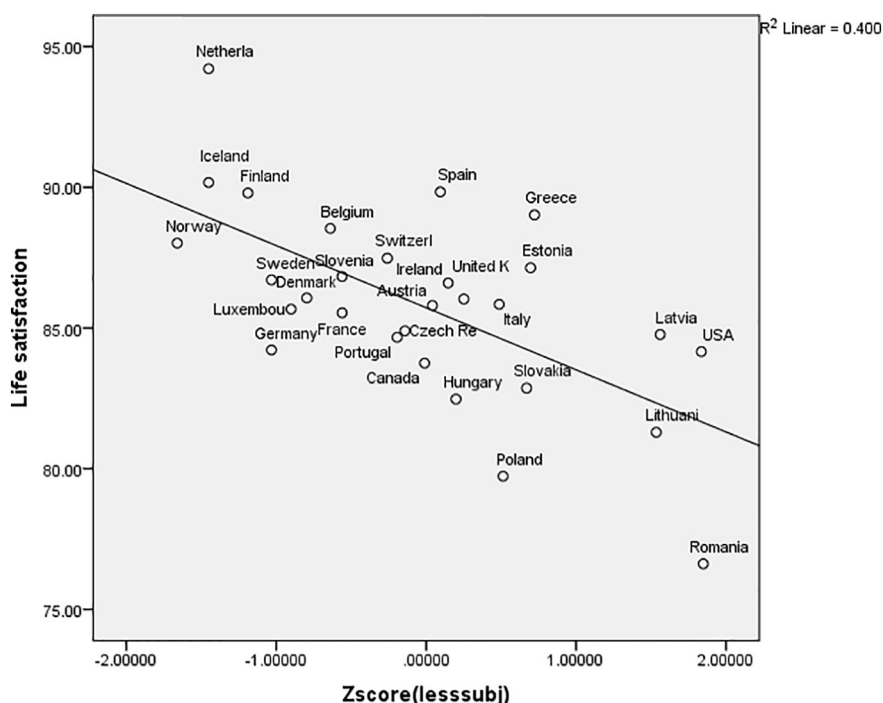


Fig. 1. Association of life satisfaction and overall objective well-being.

Source: Own analysis of data base UNICEF RC11 (2013).

only a small proportion of the total variance in child subjective well-being could be explained at the country level. Further, the country-level variables included in the model – GDP per capita, public spending and youth unemployment – did not make a significant contribution to the model.

Lee and Yoo (2015) used data from the pilot wave of the Children's Worlds study to examine the effects of individual-level and macro-level variables on child subjective well-being using hierarchical linear models. They also found very limited evidence of significant effects of macro-level variables, although the rate of child mortality under 5 did make a small contribution to the model. They found that within-country variance was much larger than between-country variance.

Analysis at the micro level using HBSC has not been so successful. Klocke et al. (2014) multi-level analysis found that, of individual factors, gender and age explained 8% of the variation. Adding family structure, parental employment and family affluence increased this to 12%. Adding bullying, smoking, drinking and exercise increased this to 23%. However it is not clear that behavioural indicators can be regarded as causal factors of subjective well-being, as it is also plausible that levels of subjective well-being may influence these behaviours – for example, children with low subjective well-being may exercise less and smoke or drink more.

In micro analysis of a series of surveys of child subjective well-being in England (the most recent Pople, Rees, Main, and Bradshaw (2015)), we have also struggled to explain much > 10% of the variation in subjective well-being using gender, age, family structure, ethnicity and material deprivation. Recent experience of bullying increases this. Only when personality type (Goswami, 2014) or the child's satisfaction with family, friends, neighbours, school, choice are included does this increase. But these are not necessarily independent of subjective well-being.

1.2. Research questions

In this article we explore these issues further making use of data from Wave 2 of the Children's Worlds study. We seek to answer two questions which are keys to translating research findings on subjective well-being into messages for policy and practice aimed at improving the quality of children's lives:

1. What factors can explain the variations in levels of child subjective well-being between countries?
2. To what extent are the factors that influence child subjective well-being similar or different across countries?

2. Methods

The Children's Worlds survey presents a new opportunity to explore national variations in subjective well-being.

2.1. Sample

The Children's Worlds survey is a comparative school-based survey of representative samples of circa 3000 children per country aged 8, 10 and 12 in 15 countries carried out with the support of the Jacobs Foundation in 2013 to 2015. Malta was added later and is included in some analyses below. Country reports have been published on the website (www.isciweb.org) and there are descriptive comparative overview reports on the 10- and 12-years-old age groups (Rees & Main, 2015) and on the 8-years-old age group (Rees, Andresen, & Bradshaw, 2016).

In relation to our research questions, the Children's Worlds survey has two major advantages over previous international child self-report surveys such as the HBSC: first, it is focused on subjective well-being and contains many more questions on the topic; second, it covers a wider range of types of countries across four continents and includes poor and rich countries. The age range of the children is younger, though the number of countries is fewer than the HBSC.

In this article we have made use of data for 34,000 children from the 10- and 12-years-old surveys only, because these incorporate a wider range of questions than the 8-years-old survey, which also uses different response formats for some questions.

2.2. Measures

In terms of measures of overall subjective well-being, the survey questionnaire includes one single-item question about satisfaction with life as a whole (OLS) and three multi-item scales of subjective well-being – a modified version of the Student Life Satisfaction scale (SLSS)

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