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Unhappy metropolis (when American city is too big)

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ABSTRACT

Most scholars in urban studies and public policy/administration support city living, that is, they suggest that people are happy in cities or at least they focus on how to make people happy in cities. Planners also largely focus on making cities happy places. Economists emphasize agglomeration economies. Urbanism is popular and fashionable. The goal of this study is to challenge this common wisdom and stimulate discussion. I use the General Social Survey to calculate subjective wellbeing or happiness by size of a place to find out when a place is too big. Malaise or unhappiness increases with size of a place (with a bump around 10k people) and reaches a significant level when population exceeds several hundred thousand. Results are robust to the operationalization of an urban area, and to the elaboration of the model with multiple controls known to predict happiness. This study concerns only the US, and results should not be generalized to other countries or historical contexts. Directions for future research are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Urban scholars, regional scientists, and planners study Quality Of Life (QOL), which is usually defined in a narrow sense as quality of transportation, housing, or some other domain. Psychologists, on the other hand, study Subjective Wellbeing (SWB),¹ which is usually measured with surveys asking respondents about their happiness. SWB is subjective, self-reported, cognitive, and affective evaluation of one's life. SWB can be used to evaluate and direct policy and planning. Ultimately, public policy should make people happy. This idea, to make people happy through policies and planning, is not only the author's or Jeremy Bentham's idea,² but it is also advocated by leading social scientists such as Amartya Sen (Stiglitz, Sen, & Fitoussi, 2009). There is a need to study happiness simply because it is happiness and not income or consumption that is the ultimate goal of broadly understood development

(e.g. Diener, 2012; Easterlin, 2013; Stiglitz et al., 2009). This study draws on sociology, psychology, and geography to investigate the link between size of a place and happiness.

Claude S Fischer, an urban sociologist, asked in 1973, "Does the likelihood of an individual expressing malaise increase with an increase in the urbanism of his place of residence (indexed by size of community)?" For over 40 years nobody has answered this question, that is, no study has investigated the effect of "size of community" (number of people) on happiness. There were only indirect and imprecise answers (Fischer, 1973, 1982; Veenhoven, 1994), often limited to specific groups of people or geographic areas (Adams, 1992; Adams & Serpe, 2000; Amato & Zuo, 1992; Balducci & Checchi, 2009; Evans, 2009; Lu, Schellenberg, Hou, & Helliwell, 2015).³ No study has operationalized urbanism with population size as in Fischer's question. Likewise, a recent review of literature about happiness and cities (Ballas, 2013) does not provide the answer. I have also recently started answering Fischer's question indirectly (Berry & Okulicz-Kozaryn, 2011), but this study is more comprehensive: it uses multiple and elaborated measures of size of a place, explores how exactly happiness declines when size of a

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¹ SWB is, roughly speaking, synonymous with happiness and life satisfaction. I will use these terms interchangeably. In laboratory settings using small samples with many measures, it is possible to differentiate between the concepts, but it is not possible in large scale surveys as used here. Happiness measurement is discussed later.

² Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832), a British philosopher, is a founder of moral utilitarianism—an idea that what makes us happy is the right thing to do. It follows, according to this doctrine, that the role of the public policy should be to maximize the happiness, that is, governments should produce the greatest happiness for the greatest number.

³ Researchers either did not measure happiness, but related concepts (health, income, etc); or they used small-area or unrepresentative samples; or crude measures of urbanicity, either binary or few categories, e.g., cities, towns, and smaller areas.

place increases, and tests directly when a place is too big. The goal of this study is to call attention to the finding that cities are least happy places, challenge contemporary urbanism and stimulate further discussion. Results suggest that people are least happy in cities bigger than hundreds of thousands of people, which may appear as a very imprecise answer. This is an approximate range that is estimated from different regression models, and I do not attempt to narrow it down. I want to be able to provide a statement about relative happiness across places of different size in the US in general. American cities are, of course, very different in about everything, including size at which unhappiness develops.

2. The concept of happiness

For simplicity, the terms happiness, life satisfaction, and Subjective Wellbeing (SWB) are used interchangeably. Ed Diener defined SWB as “both cognitive judgments of one’s life satisfaction in addition to affective evaluations of mood and emotions” (Diener and Lucas 1999, p. 213). This is almost the same as the definition by Ruut Veenhoven (2008, p. 2), another key happiness scholar: “overall judgment of life that draws on two sources of information: cognitive comparison with standards of the good life (contentment) and affective information from how one feels most of the time (hedonic level of affect).” Some scholars use ‘life satisfaction’ to refer to cognition and ‘happiness’ to refer to affect (e.g., Dorahy et al., 1998). This dichotomy is not pursued here, because there is only one survey item, which likely captures mostly life satisfaction but also happiness to some degree. Therefore the SWB definition by Diener and Lucas (1999) and Veenhoven (2008) seems most appropriate, and again, SWB is used interchangeably with “happiness.”

The happiness measure, even though self-reported and subjective, is reliable (precision varies), valid (Di Tella & MacCulloch, 2006; Myers, 2000), and correlated with similar objective measures of wellbeing such as brain waves (Layard, 2005). Unhappiness strongly correlates with suicide incidence and mental health problems (Bray & Gunnell, 2006). Finally, to avoid confusion, this study investigates general/overall happiness, not a domain-specific happiness such as neighborhood or community satisfaction.

Happiness, as any measure, has some limitations. Much of happiness is hereditary or due to genes (Lykken & Tellegen, 1996). We are on so called “hedonic treadmill”—we adapt or get used to both fortune and misfortune, even very major events such as winning millions in a lottery or losing limbs in an accident (Brickman, Coates, & Janoff-Buman, 1978). Happiness is affected by various comparisons (Michalos, 1985)—whatever happens to other people (and whatever happened to ourselves in the past) affects our current happiness. These issues, however, are not critical. Recently, Diener (2009) has provided a good discussion of why potential problems with happiness are not serious enough to make it unusable for interventions, planning, and public policy.

3. Urbanism: happy or unhappy?

Social scientists say or imply that happiness has its place in big cities. While there is no evidence to support it, the proposition that people are happy in the city has been assumed by many to be a self-evident truth, an axiom. Notable enthusiasts of happy city living are Jane Jacobs in her classic “The Death and Life of Great American Cities” ([1961] 1993), and more recently Ed Glaeser in “Triumph of the City: How Our Greatest Invention Makes Us Richer, Smarter, Greener, Healthier, and Happier” (2011):

There is a myth that even if cities enhance prosperity, they will make people miserable. But people report being happier in those countries that are more urban. In those countries where more than half of the population is urban, 30% of people say they are very happy and 17%

say they are not very or not at all happy. [...] Across countries, reported life satisfaction rises with the share of the population that lives in cities, even when controlling for the countries’ income and education.

This is ecological fallacy. People are happier in more urbanized countries than in less urbanized countries, but it does not mean that people are happier in cities than in smaller areas. More urbanized countries are simply richer, healthier, better governed, etc., than less urbanized countries. This is one of the most agreed upon findings in happiness literature: In a cross-section of countries, people are happier in more developed areas (e.g., Okulicz-Kozaryn, 2011). Urbanization leads to economic growth, but economic growth does not lead to much happiness over time, especially in developed countries (Easterlin, 2013). I have discussed these issues in depth elsewhere (Okulicz-Kozaryn, 2015). Glaeser (2011) continues:

Cities and urbanization are not only associated with greater material prosperity. In poorer countries, people in cities also say that they are happier. Throughout a sample of twenty-five poorer countries, where per capita GDP levels are below \$10,000, where I had access to self-reported happiness surveys for urban and non-urban populations, I found that the share of urban people saying that they were very happy was higher in eighteen countries and lower in seven. The share of people saying that they were not at all happy was higher in the non-urban areas in sixteen countries and lower in nine.

This statement is either due to unhappy sampling or cherry picking. Indeed, people are happier in cities in developing countries as shown by Berry and Okulicz-Kozaryn (2009), but in rich countries, it is the other way round—the bigger the area, the lower the happiness (Okulicz-Kozaryn, 2015). The fact that people are happy in cities in poor countries is arguably not due to cities’ “greatness.” It may be simply that life outside of the city in a poor country is unbearable and lacking the necessities, such as food, shelter, sanitation, and transportation. Quality of life or so called “livability” differs greatly between urban and rural areas in developing countries. For instance, urbanites enjoyed three times higher income and consumption than rural dwellers in China in 2000 (Knight, Shi, & Song, 2006). Simply, the urban happiness in developing countries is rather due to unfavorable conditions outside of cities, not due to virtues of cities. Cities have few virtues, but many vices (Park, 1915; Wirth, 1938).

In addition to the positive side, the affirmation of city life, there is a negative side, a condemnation of suburban life—contemporary scholars also build their argument in favor of city living by arguing against suburban living. There are many studies dedicated to condemnation of suburban sprawl (Dreier, Swanstrom, & Mollenkopf, 2005; Duany, Plater-Zyberk, & Speck, 2001; Ewing, 1997; Ewing, Schmid, Killingsworth, Zlot, & Raudenbush, 2003; Frumkin, 2002; Kay, 1997; Kunstler, 2012). There are problems associated with sprawl, but scholars usually overlook that people are least happy in cities. There is a clear discord—residents prefer (Fuguitt & Brown, 1990; Fuguitt & Zuiches, 1975) and are happier in small areas, but academics, policy makers, and planners promote cities as “better” places. In addition, enthusiasts of city living, proponents and opponents of suburban living miss the point that people are happiest neither in cities nor in suburbs, but in small towns and villages.

Of course, the negative side of the city living has been noticed long time ago—it was succinctly summarized by Wirth (1938) over 70 years ago. According to Campbell, Converse, and Rodgers (1976), the first major quantitative study finding happiness to be lower in cities was Gurin, Veroff, and Feld (1960). Many studies followed, notably by Claude S Fischer (1982; 1975; 1973; 1972). The literature has argued many city problems. Cities exemplify a mechanical society without much community (Tönnies [1887] 2002), they overstimulate (Simmel, 1903) and are unhealthy to the brain (Lederbogen et al., 2011). Cities

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