



The subjective wellbeing of migrants in Guangzhou, China: The impacts of the social and physical environment

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 6 July 2016

Received in revised form 6 October 2016

Accepted 10 October 2016

Available online 22 October 2016

Keywords:

Subjective wellbeing

Migrants

Social support

Neighbourhood social environment

Neighbourhood amenities

China

ABSTRACT

China has witnessed a surge of rural-urban migrants over the past three decades. Although a plethora of literature has shed light on the low quality of migrants' lives, little research has been done to understand how migrants evaluate their own lives in host cities, and no study has been undertaken to link migrants' subjective wellbeing with their residential environments. Using the data collected from a questionnaire survey in Guangzhou and multilevel linear models, this paper examines the determinants of migrants' subjective wellbeing in host cities. It particularly focuses on the extent to which and the ways in which migrants' social ties and residential environment influence their subjective wellbeing. The results indicate that, in general, migrants have a lower level of subjective wellbeing than local residents, and the cognitive and emotional components of migrants' subjective wellbeing are influenced by different factors. The sense of relative deprivation, social support, and neighbourhood social environment matter in determining the cognitive component of migrants' wellbeing (life satisfaction) but have no impact on the emotional component of their wellbeing (positive and negative affect). No evidence shows that neighbourhood cleanliness and neighbourhood amenities influence the level of migrants' subjective wellbeing.

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1. Introduction

Subjective wellbeing (SWB) refers to how people experience the quality of their life and is composed of life satisfaction and affect (comprising positive and negative affect) (Diener, 1984; Diener, Sapryta, & Suh, 1998). Life satisfaction represents the cognitive evaluation of one's life circumstances in the long run, while affect reveals one's emotional responses to ongoing events in the short term (Diener, 1984; Diener et al., 1998). Over the past decades, social scientists have devoted a considerable amount of effort to unravel the mystery of SWB (for example, Ballas & Tranmer, 2012; Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999; Easterlin, 2001; Florida, Mellander, & Rentfrow, 2013; Glaeser, Gottlieb, & Ziv, 2014; Helliwell & Putnam, 2004; Veenhoven, 2008). One of the fastest-growing sub-fields of SWB research is the understanding of the impact of one's residential environment on his or her SWB (Helliwell & Putnam, 2004; Brereton, Clinch, & Ferreira, 2008; Berry & Okulicz-Kozaryn, 2011; Morrison, 2011; Florida et al., 2013; Glaeser et al., 2014; Cao, 2016). For one thing, environmental

psychologists and urban geographers have paid increasing attention to the effects of environmental stressors and residential amenities on mental wellbeing (Ambrey & Fleming, 2013; Berry & Okulicz-Kozaryn, 2011; Ellaway, Macintyre, & Kearns, 2001; Macintyre, Ellaway, & Cummins, 2002; Morrison, 2011; Van Den Berg, Maas, Verheij, & Groenewegen, 2010). For another, a growing body of psychological and epidemiological literature has examined the association between neighbourhood cohesion and residents' SWB (Fone et al., 2007; O'campo, Salmon, & Burke, 2009). The continued interest in enhancing residents' SWB through community development and environmental improvement in Western countries reflects the importance of this issue to public policy (Elliott, Gale, Parsons, & Kuh, 2014; Pfeiffer & Cloutier, 2016).

Recent years have seen a surge of interest in what makes a good life for Chinese people (Appleton & Song, 2008; Bian, Zhang, Yang, Guo, & Lei, 2015; Brockmann, Delhey, Welzel, & Yuan, 2009; Easterlin, 2014; Steele & Lynch, 2013). The majority of relevant studies have focused on the association between one's SWB and his or her socioeconomic status (Li & Zhu, 2006; Appleton & Song, 2008; Brockmann et al., 2009). So far, only a handful of studies have attempted to investigate the effects of some dimensions of residential environment, in particular physical environment, on SWB in the Chinese context (Liu, Dijst, & Geertman, 2016a; Liu, Liu, Feng, & Li, 2016b; Wang & Wang, 2016; Wen & Wang,

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2009). The dearth of in-depth research on the effect of neighbourhood social environment requires more attention to this issue. In this study, we take into account not only the physical aspect but also the social aspect of residential surroundings when understanding the determinants of SWB.

Most previous studies on the SWB of Chinese people have focused on either urban residents or rural residents only, neglecting migrants who have left their place of origin and currently live in a new place (Knight, Song, & Gunatilaka, 2009; Yip, Leung, & Huang, 2013). A plethora of literature has indicated that most migrants, especially rural migrant workers, have a low standard of living in host cities (Fan, 2008; Gui, Berry, & Zheng, 2012; Li & Wu, 2013a; Liu & Xu, 2015; Wang & Fan, 2012). It is only recently that migrants' evaluation of the quality of their lives has received academic attention (Cheng, Wang, & Smyth, 2014; Jin, Wen, Fan, & Wang, 2012; Knight & Gunatilaka, 2010). However, what is missing in the literature is the link between migrants' SWB and their residential surroundings. Is migrants' SWB associated with the physical and social environment of neighbourhoods where they live? What kinds of environmental factors make them feel happy/unhappy? The present study manages to answer these questions by incorporating the analysis of migrants' SWB within a multilevel framework.

To fill in these knowledge gaps, this paper investigates the factors that influence migrants' SWB in a Chinese city, Guangzhou, through a multilevel perspective. It particularly focuses on the extent to which, and the ways in which migrants' social ties and residential environment influence their SWB. Empirically, we treat SWB as a multidimensional concept that comprises life satisfaction, positive affect, and negative affect. We use multilevel linear models to identify the factors significantly influencing each component of migrants' SWB based on questionnaire data collected in 23 neighbourhoods in Guangzhou. This study goes beyond earlier studies on SWB in China by focusing particularly on migrants temporarily living in host cities and examining the effect of migrants' residential environment on their SWB.

The rest of this paper is organised as follows. Section 2 provides a brief overview of literature on the SWB and its association with migrants in Chinese cities and, based on this, proposes several working hypotheses. In Section 3, we introduce data, measurements, and models used in this study. Section 4 presents the results of both a descriptive analysis and multilevel models on migrants' SWB. Section 5 summarises the main findings of this paper and discusses their policy implications.

2. Literature review

2.1. Research on subjective wellbeing

The effects of personal factors on SWB have been investigated extensively in a range of academic disciplines. Some research has shown that demographic characteristics, socioeconomic status, and social supports have a significant impact on one's SWB (Diener et al., 1999; Easterlin, 2001; Helliwell & Putnam, 2004). A large body of research has focused on the relationship between one's income and SWB. It is commonly believed that people with higher incomes are more likely to report being happy (Clark, Frijters, & Shields, 2008; Kahneman & Deaton, 2010). Some other scholars pointed out that a sense of relative deprivation may result in a decrease in happiness (Bellani & D'ambrosio, 2011; McBride, 2001; Runciman, 1972; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2007). For instance, Wilkinson and Pickett (2007) found that people who considered themselves as the underclass based on their comparison with the rest of society tended to suffer from chronic stress and mental problems.

Another strand of literature has indicated that social ties and social support contribute substantially to one's SWB (Cohen & Wills, 1985; Helliwell & Putnam, 2004; Mair, Diez Roux, & Morenoff, 2010; Schwanen & Wang, 2014). Cohen and Wills (1985) argued that social support was positively related to SWB, as one's social support not only protected himself or herself from the adverse influences of stressful events but also offered positive experiences and a sense of stability

('buffer effect' hypothesis). Helliwell and Putnam (2004) found that interactions with neighbours and friends have a positive impact on individuals' SWB, and especially on their life satisfaction. Schwanen and Wang (2014) in particular shed light on factors influencing positive affect and negative affect, finding that one's participation in non-employment activities with relatives, friends, and neighbours helps increase his or her immediate positive affect.

Scholarship on the impact of residential environments on residents' SWB has been growing over the past decade. Research has shown that an individual's SWB is influenced by his/her physical surroundings and social milieu. On the impacts from physical surroundings, Berry and Okulicz-Kozaryn (2011) and Florida et al. (2013) found that the SWB of residents in the populated metropolitan area was lower than that of residents in rural or suburban areas in the United States. In a study of six cities in New Zealand, Morrison (2011) emphasized that residents' accessibility to shops, education, and public transportation was positively associated with their SWB. With the research of Twin City in United States, Cao (2016) emphasized the significance of neighbourhood design and further indicated that high population density and poor street connectivity of neighbourhoods were detrimental to residents' SWB. Vemuri, Grove, Wilson, and Burch (2009)'s research on Metropolitan Baltimore suggested that a clean and uncontaminated neighbourhood built environment had a significant positive impact on residents' SWB. Concerning social milieu, Ballas and Tranmer (2012) studied the happiness and wellbeing of people in the United Kingdom. Their findings indicated that the variation in happiness scores was partly attributable to income inequality within neighbourhoods. Ettema and Schekkerman (2016)'s research of neighbourhoods in Netherlands indicated that neighbourly mutual support and neighbourhood safety were positively associated with residents' SWB. Overall, one's residential environment exerts a significant influence on his or her life satisfaction, positive affect, and negative affect.

International literature on migrants' SWB has suggested that migrants tend to have a lower level of happiness than ever before after migration (Ek, Koironen, Raatikka, Järvelin, & Taanila, 2008; Nowok, Van Ham, Findlay, & Gayle, 2013). Migrants generally have a lower level of SWB than local residents (Hendriks, Ludwigs, & Veenhoven, 2016). Nowok et al. (2013) found that migrants had a low level of SWB due to their difficulty in adapting to the host city. Hendriks et al. (2016) pointed out that migrants in Germany suffered from considerable pressure, as they had to adapt to new social circumstance and build up new social ties after their arrivals. Korinek, Entwisle, and Jampaklay (2005)'s research on migrants in Thailand led to the same conclusion that migrants released the pressure and developed a sense of security when interacting with their neighbours.

Another stream of literature has argued that migrants would experience an increase in SWB after their arrivals in the host city (Mitra, 2010; Switek, 2016). Based on research in Indian slums, Mitra (2010) pointed out that migrants who had achieved upward social mobility in the host city had a feeling of achievement and thus a higher level of SWB than their peers. Switek (2016)'s research on Swedish internal migration indicated that migrant's realisation of their personal goals, especially goals of career development, led to a lasting increase in their SWB. In most cases, migration is associated with an increase in social status, which results in the rise in migrants' SWB.

2.2. The subjective wellbeing of migrants in urban China

There is an extensive literature on the understanding of migrants' objective wellbeing such as housing and social welfare in Chinese cities (Fan, 2008; Huang, Dijst, Van Weesep, Jiao, & Sun, 2016; Li, 2006; Li & Wu, 2013b; Shen, 2016). However, only a handful of studies have examined how migrants evaluate the quality of their life. Existing studies have compared migrants with urban residents, indicating that migrants are in general less happy than urban residents (Knight & Gunatilaka, 2010). Another strand of literature has shown that migrants who are

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