



# Are rural residents happier? A quantitative analysis of subjective wellbeing in Scotland



Alana Gilbert <sup>a</sup>, Kathryn Colley <sup>a</sup>, Deborah Roberts <sup>a, b, \*</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Social, Economic and Geographical Sciences Group, The James Hutton Institute, Craigiebuckler, Aberdeen, AB15 8QH, UK

<sup>b</sup> University of Aberdeen Business School, Edward Wright Building, Dunbar Street, Aberdeen, AB24 3QY, UK

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## ABSTRACT

This paper uses ordered logit models to test for evidence of systematically higher levels of subjective wellbeing in rural Scotland, differentiating between remote rural and accessible rural areas. Data are drawn from the 2008/9 wave of the BHPS covering a sample of almost 2150 Scottish residents. Two alternative quantitative measures of subjective wellbeing are used in the analysis, one based on life satisfaction, the other on mental wellbeing. The results find statistically significant evidence of higher life satisfaction in remote (but not accessible) rural Scotland after having controlled for the individual characteristics of respondents. In contrast, the mental wellbeing measure is not found to vary across rural-urban space. The paper concludes by suggesting several areas for further analysis emphasising how such research could support Scottish Government policy.

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## 1. Introduction

Human wellbeing is about how well the needs of people in a society are met across various domains - the physical, economic, social, environmental, emotional, and spiritual – as well as individuals' evaluations of their own lives and the way that their society operates (Levy and Guttman, 1975; Levy and Sabbagh, 2008; Costanza et al., 2007; Jowell and Eva, 2009).

Two types of indicators of wellbeing are distinguished: objective measures of wellbeing which are based on the resources and opportunities that people have access to, and subjective measures of wellbeing which relate to an individual's own evaluation of their life circumstances. While the policy relevance of the former are generally accepted, subjective measures of wellbeing provide complementary insights into the experience of individuals which are arguably of policy relevance. For example, some have argued that higher levels of subjective wellbeing are linked to positive societal outcomes and thus should be a focus of policy (Cummins et al., 2009; Stiglitz et al., 2009). Others debate whether it is a government's role to consider subjective wellbeing with concerns

expressed in relation to perpetuating social injustice (Sen, 2009), and the inherent difficulties in measuring subjective wellbeing (Kahneman and Krueger, 2006).

There have been a number of studies which have considered differences in subjective wellbeing across space, particularly in terms of disparities in the wellbeing of urban and rural residents. These studies are often motivated by the structural disadvantages associated with rural economies including limited labour market opportunities, limited availability and/or access to health services, training and education (Shucksmith et al., 2009; Commission for Rural Communities, 2010; Scottish Government, 2015). However there are also non-material characteristics of rural areas which positively affect wellbeing, such as supportive communities and positive environmental externalities, and the possibility that rural residents value things differently. In particular, in relation to the latter, it is argued that, just as "rurality" is conceived as imbued with past ways of life (Ray and Ward, 2006), rural residents tend to consider wellbeing in relation to times past rather than in relation to the opportunities or modern lifestyles of others (Shucksmith et al., 1996).

Relative levels of subjective wellbeing across rural and urban areas are therefore difficult to predict. Consistent with this, empirical evidence on the geographic pattern of subjective wellbeing is mixed and inconclusive (Dolan et al., 2008), in part due to

\* Corresponding author. Social, Economic and Geographical Sciences Group, The James Hutton Institute, Craigiebuckler, Aberdeen, AB15 8QH, UK.

E-mail address: [deb.roberts@hutton.ac.uk](mailto:deb.roberts@hutton.ac.uk) (D. Roberts).

differences in research methods across studies, differences in the way in which researchers have conceptualised rurality, and different scales of analysis (national, regional or subregional).

One dimension which has received less attention is the potential difference in subjective wellbeing between accessible and remote rural areas associated with material differences between the two areas. Those living in accessible rural areas have better access to urban facilities including, for example, leisure activities and health care, and compete in the same labour and housing markets as their urban peers. In contrast, the economic and social structure of remote rural areas is more distinct from that of urban (non-rural) areas (Commission for Rural Communities, 2010; Skerratt et al., 2012). As a result we might anticipate differences in subjective wellbeing between remote and accessible areas.

Against this background, this paper explores whether there is evidence of higher levels of subjective wellbeing in rural areas of Scotland after controlling for individual characteristics of residents and by distinguishing between residents in accessible and remote rural parts of the country. Two alternative quantitative measures of subjective wellbeing are adopted in the analysis: one is based on the response given to a question asking respondents to indicate their level of life satisfaction on a scale of 1 (“not satisfied at all”) to 7 (“completely satisfied”); the other uses the 12 item GHQ12 scale as a measure of mental wellbeing. These measures are taken to represent different dimensions of subjectively assessed wellbeing - hedonic and eudaimonic - which may exhibit different patterns across space.

In both cases, data are drawn from the British Household Panel Survey. The comparison of results from two measures of subjectively-assessed wellbeing provides a means of testing for the robustness of the results but also a means of understanding better the nature of any differences in wellbeing observed. While the analysis is descriptive only, it gives rise to several suggestions for areas requiring further research, and is argued to provide a useful benchmark against which the impact of policies can be monitored.

## 2. Conceptualising wellbeing

Indicators from social, economic, physical and other easily quantifiable domains can be used to gauge the resources and opportunities that people have access to and are generally referred to as objective measures of wellbeing. This is the prevailing method of comparing human wellbeing across populations. Recently, there has been considerable interest from governments and international agencies in the development of robust measures for tracking objective wellbeing and its determinants at the societal level, often referred to as quality of life (QOL) indicators (Dasgupta and Weale, 1992). QOL or objective wellbeing indicators, such as those developed by the OECD and the UK Office for National Statistics, commonly draw together a suite of indicators derived from public data covering domains such as employment, education, housing, health, environment, safety and access to services (OECD, 2014; ONS, 2015).

Whilst the measurement of objective wellbeing concerns aspects of quality of life and what constitutes a decent standard of living for citizens, subjective wellbeing on the other hand concerns an individual's own self-assessments of how they are doing in life. Subjective wellbeing may be considered as a complex of attitudes, values and perceptions rooted in a person's own experience (Jowell and Eva, 2009). It is often conceptualised as encompassing aspects of happiness, life satisfaction, engagement and meaning (Eckersley, 2009; Vella-Brodrick et al., 2009). Some economists have long argued that in many developed nations, levels of life satisfaction barely changed throughout the latter half of the 20th century, despite large increases in incomes and living standards (Easterlin,

1974; Layard, 2011). Concern about this ‘paradox of affluence’ and the influence of high-profile economists such as Richard Layard, Joseph Stiglitz and Amartya Sen has driven policy interest in subjective wellbeing within the UK (NEF, 2012).

Within the economic literature, subjective wellbeing is most often measured as individuals' ratings of life satisfaction, either using single-item (e.g. Andrews and Withey, 1976) or multi-item (e.g. Diener et al., 1985) self-report scales. This focus on the hedonic aspects of the subjective experience of wellbeing has been a source of criticism, notably from psychologists (Johns and Ormerod, 2007; Seligman, 2011). Psychological perspectives on the subjective dimensions of wellbeing often emphasise not only the hedonic aspects (happiness, pleasure and satisfaction) captured within the narrower conceptualisation of subjective wellbeing, but also eudaimonic dimensions of wellbeing. Keyes and Annas (2009) characterise eudaimonic wellbeing as ‘functioning well’ as opposed to simply just ‘feeling good’. Researchers in the field of positive psychology have argued that wellbeing or ‘flourishing’ consists of multiple dimensions which include aspects of psychological functioning as well as social relationships, levels of engagement, meaning, and self-realisation (Seligman, 2011; Ryan and Deci, 2001).

In terms of the role of wellbeing in public policy, the relevance of objective wellbeing measures are clear as a means of setting government targets and monitoring change. It can, however, be argued that objective measures of wellbeing on their own fail to capture important experiential aspects of wellbeing. Incorporating subjective measures can therefore help to enrich understanding of societal wellbeing (Shucksmith et al., 2009).

Some have, however, questioned the notion of subjective wellbeing indicators, arguing that subjective wellbeing is too elusive a concept and too relative to lend itself to quantification. Criticisms include concerns that such self-evaluations are subject to instability, memory bias, and to individuals applying their own implicit weightings to different domains (Veenhoven, 2004; Minkov, 2009). In addition, subjective wellbeing evaluations are influenced by individual's own conditioned expectations for their life or ‘adaptive preferences’ (Nussbaum, 2001; Sen, 2009), so that a person whose expectations are low may report high levels of wellbeing whilst experiencing what would be objectively considered as a poor quality of life, which raises questions about implications for social justice. We return to this debate over the appropriateness of subjective wellbeing as a focus for public policy in the discussion section.

## 3. Urban-rural differences in subjective wellbeing

There is a significant body of empirical evidence on the influence of economic factors (e.g. income, employment) and personal characteristics (e.g. age, marital status, and religious participation) on subjective wellbeing (Dolan et al., 2008). Geographical factors have received less attention overall (Schwanen and Wang, 2014), although the wellbeing effects of particular environmental characteristics such as access to greenspace have been researched extensively. The existing literature highlights a wide range of geographical factors that are thought relevant to wellbeing. These include area deprivation, access to services and amenities, access to greenspace and nature, pollution and environmental hazards, crime and safety, and aspects of the social environment relevant to place (Helburn, 1982; Brereton et al., 2011; Schwanen and Wang, 2014).

Rural areas are, from an economic, social and environmental perspective different from urban areas in several ways which might be expected to lead to spatial differences in measures of objective wellbeing. However the overall impact on subjective wellbeing is

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