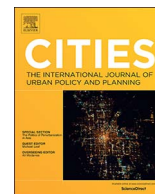




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Does satisfactory neighbourhood environment lead to a satisfying life? An investigation of the association between neighbourhood environment and life satisfaction in Beijing[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Associated with the dramatic expansion of Chinese cities are the unprecedented scale and pace of changes to urban living environment. There is an imperative to assess residents' perceptions of neighbourhood environment and the impacts on life satisfaction. Drawing on a large-scale residential satisfaction survey conducted in Beijing in 2013, we examine the fine-grained spatial distribution and determinants of residents' life satisfaction. A multilevel ordinal response model is employed to investigate the roles of neighbourhood satisfaction, perceived relative income, socio-demographic characteristics, and contextual factors in predicting life satisfaction. Results show that satisfaction with key neighbourhood characteristics including safety, physical and social environments, and travel convenience is statistically significantly associated with life satisfaction. Income relative to that of peers in local areas or to that in the past is a more important predictor of life satisfaction than absolute income. Other individual-level variables, such as age, family structure, *hukou* status, health, commuting time, and housing-related variables including housing tenure and floor space, are significant correlates of life satisfaction.

1. Introduction

In the past three decades China has witnessed remarkable economic growth and dramatic urban expansion and regeneration, resulting in massive changes to both the macro-scale landscapes and micro-scale neighbourhood environment in cities (Chen & Chen, 2015). In contrast with the economic prosperity and improved living conditions is a steady decline of life satisfaction among the general population (Li & Raine, 2014). This reflects the Easterline Paradox which refutes the positive relationship between economic growth and life satisfaction (Easterlin, Morgan, Switek, & Wang, 2012). The declining trend of life satisfaction is likely to be exacerbated by the documented steady increase of income inequality in China (Xie & Zhou, 2014), which has been identified as a potential predictor of life satisfaction (Dolan, Peasegood, & White, 2008).

This raises an important question about the key determinants of life satisfaction, defined as the cognitive assessment of one's life conditions based on the comparison between aspirations and achievements

(Fernandez-Portero, Alarcon, & Padura, 2017). As life satisfaction is an essential component of subjective wellbeing, a better understanding of its determinants can help inform policies aimed at enhancing human welfare (Diener, Oishi, & Lucas, 2012). Neighbourhood environment is an important domain relevant to life satisfaction, as people spend a large proportion of time in neighbourhoods for physical activities and social interaction. With massive neighbourhood changes in Chinese cities over recent years, there is an imperative to explore residents' perception or assessment of their neighbourhood environment, as well as its impacts on life satisfaction. Whilst the socio-demographic, economic and institutional correlates of life satisfaction at the city scale have been discussed extensively in China (e.g. Appleton & Song, 2008; Bian, Zhang, Yang, Guo, et al., 2015; Li & Wu, 2013), relatively few studies focus on the physical and social aspects of residential environment at the district or neighbourhood scale (e.g. Dong & Qin, 2017; Liu, Zhang, Wu, Liu, & Li, 2017). Even fewer studies examine the fine-grained spatial variations of life satisfaction in a Chinese megacity, and the role of subjective evaluation on the multiple facets of

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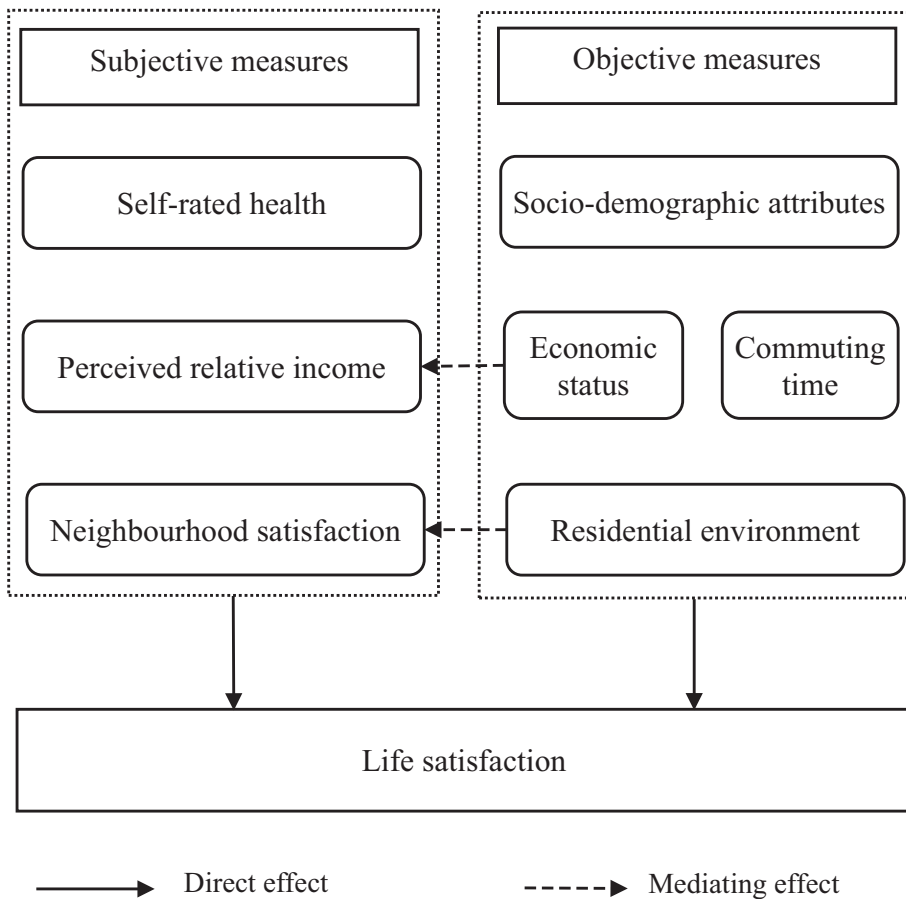


Fig. 1. Conceptual framework of the study.

neighbourhood environment and income inequality.

This paper aims to extend the literature by exploring the socio-spatial variations of life satisfaction in urban Beijing and developing a broad conceptual framework to examine its determinants. Drawing upon a large-scale residential satisfaction survey conducted in Beijing in 2013, we for the first time present the geographical distributions of residential environment evaluation and life satisfaction at the sub-district or *jiedao* level. We then investigate the impacts on life satisfaction of both objective and subjective measures, including socio-demographics, economic attributes, health status, commuting time, locational and contextual variables, and most importantly, the subjective evaluation of neighbourhood environment and perceived relative income. In particular, we address the following research questions: whether and to what extent satisfaction with a variety of neighbourhood characteristics and perceived relative income are associated with life satisfaction; and how these subjective measures mediate the relationship between life satisfaction and objective residential environment and absolute income.

The paper contributes to the literature in three aspects. First, existing studies on residential environment and life satisfaction focus on the roles of objective neighbourhood characteristics, such as accessibility to urban amenities and public transport. The mediating role of the subjective evaluation of these characteristics is largely ignored. Perceived neighbourhood environment might have a direct and possibly larger effect on life satisfaction than objective measures, and it might mediate the effect of built environment on life satisfaction. We examine the impacts on life satisfaction of both objective residential environment and subjective evaluations of four core neighbourhood environment: safety, physical environment, social environment and travel convenience. Second, we extend the debate on Easterlin paradox by incorporating perceived relative income into the life satisfaction research. Relative income has been found to be significantly associated

with subjective wellbeing in Western literature, and is proposed to explain the Easterlin paradox. However, it has been argued that individuals only respond to their perceived inequality rather than the factual one (Schneider, 2016). We explicitly examine the roles of perceived relative income in the Chinese context, and investigate how it might mediate the relationship between absolute income and life satisfaction. Last but not the least, as life satisfaction may be influenced by residential environment at different geographical scales, we employ a rigorous multilevel ordinal response model to capture the unobserved influences of geographical contexts upon individuals, as well as the ordinal nature of self-rated life satisfaction responses and the hierarchical structure of our survey data. Overall, this paper presents a solid empirical study with rigorous statistical analyses under a comprehensively theoretical framework, and makes a timely contribution to better understanding of life satisfaction in urban China.

The rest of the paper is structured as follows. We begin with a brief review of previous studies on life satisfaction, and then present our theoretical framework. This is followed by the discussions of the data, model specification, and results of multilevel models. We conclude the paper with a summary of key findings and policy implications.

2. Literature review

As life satisfaction is an important indicator of human welfare, both theoretical and empirical studies have been conducted to understand its concept and determinants. The need satisfaction theory maintains that satisfaction with life is contingent on the extent to which individuals' needs are fulfilled (Diener et al., 2012). According to the need hierarchy theory (Maslow, 1970), people have different kinds of needs (e.g. decent housing, adequate living materials, safety, social interaction), and individuals may feel satisfied with life when their needs are met. The goal satisfaction theory states that individuals set their goals, and

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