



The relationship between perceptions of insecurity, social capital and subjective well-being: Empirical evidences from areas of rural conflict in Colombia

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ABSTRACT

Subjective well-being (SWB), the evaluation that people carry out of their lives, has been proposed as an alternative measure of tracking the development of communities instead of economic growth. As part of a more general research question, in which we tested the impact of subjective insecurity on the choice of hybrid organizational modes, we hypothesized that subjective insecurity does negatively correlate with SWB and that subjective and objective insecurities are not significantly correlated. Subjective insecurity consisted of three items: perceptions of political, economic and communitarian insecurity. We proposed that the relationship between insecurity and SWB is moderated by the level of social capital found in the region. Social capital was defined as inter-personal trust as well as the frequency of participation of producers in voluntary associations. We used multiple and multilevel regression models to test the hypotheses. Based on a survey of 742 rural producers in five conflicted areas we found that the perceptions of insecurity do correlate significantly (negatively) with levels of SWB and we also found a significant contribution of social capital to levels of SWB. Significant correlations between demographic variables and SWB corroborated results of previous research. These results have important implications for public policy and future research.

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“Security must be measured in the lives of the people, not by the weaponry of State” Mahbub-ul Haq

1. Introduction

Development studies have suffered from a materialistic bias (Easterlin, 1995, 2001). For instance, the predominant emphasis on economic growth has neglected other important issues such as peace and security which have been previously studied as public goods, not as commodities, and thus have not been measured as contributing to development. In contrast to seeing societal development as economic growth, other conceptual streams, such as the human development movement (Sen, 1999; Haq, 1999) refer to development “of, by and for the people”. This approach understands societal development as the promotion and advance of human and social well-being. Subjective well-being (SWB) explores the self-evaluations carried out by people of how satisfied they are with their lives including both positive and negative evaluations. It is a subjective appraisal which includes a cognitive and an affective dimension (Wills, 2009). For instance, individuals measure their SWB in a number of different ways (Kim-Prieto et al., 2005) rat-

ing their satisfaction with different life domains in a bottom-up procedure (Cummins, 1996; Brief et al., 1993). Individuals evaluate their well-being in different setting and contexts including their subjective evaluation of security (Wills-Herrera et al., 2009). In this paper we argue that the perception of satisfaction with security is one of the important life domains which influence evaluations of subjective well-being. We also state that social connections, social capital, plays an important role in influencing perceptions of insecurity. Belongingness to social networks is one of the main facets of social capital. Social capital entails the capital that can be accumulated in social relationships and can be conceptualized as a resource for action (Coleman, 1988). Social capital flows through social connections and individuals' potential to make connections.

Prior to the emergence of the human development concept (Sen, 2006; Jolly and Ray, 2007), development largely meant progress. Well-being was related to a person's income levels and other non-material values such as belonging to social networks and social connections were not taken into account. Under the human development approach (Gasper, 2005), the definition of well-being includes particular facets or dimensions of life, including feelings of security. Feelings of security can be seen as part of a human security concept which has been proposed as an individual centered process diverging from the security notion derived from the military forces available to protect a specific nation or country (Gasper et al., 2008; Gasper, 2010). For instance, the commission on human security (Ogata and Sen, 2003) defines it as “protecting the vital

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core of all humans' lives in ways that enhance human freedoms and human fulfillment". So, human security is not limited to the negative dimension of the absence of violent conflict but includes safeguarding opportunities for people to build their strengths and aspirations. We distinguish insecurity as the opposite variable of security. It is a people-centered and multi-dimensional concept. We explore this concept in rural settings of conflictive Colombia where political and social conflict has pervaded the economic activity over the last 50 years. We hypothesize that subjective insecurity is a different variable from objective facts of violent conflict, and state that subjective perception of insecurity is negatively correlated with an individual's well-being. We propose that social capital as personal connections and a sense of belonging to social networks moderates the relationship between subjective insecurity and subjective well-being. Thus:

H1. Perceptions of security are a different construct than objective indicators of insecurity and both constructs are poorly correlated.

H2. SWB is negatively influenced by levels of perceived insecurity (personal, community and political).

H3. Social capital, as membership of voluntary associations, and trust and reciprocity is positively associated with subjective well-being and it moderates the relationship between perceptions of insecurity and SWB.

H4. SWB is significantly different for women as compared to men, to highly educated individuals as compared to less educated individuals, to married couples as compared to other marital status, and is positively associated with income.

This research is important because it tests with empirical evidence from a conflictive environment, how subjective insecurity as a component of human security influences SWB and how such relationship is moderated by social capital. It is also important because it states that people construct safeguards against violence and conflict through participation in community networks and activities (social capital) which generates feelings of protection for the individual. Results of this relationship have both theoretical and practical implications for public policy.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Subjective well-being

Subjective well-being, the self-evaluation that people carry out of their lives, has been proposed (Diener, 1984, 2000; Cummins et al., 2003) as an alternative measure to track the development of societies instead of economic growth and other related objective indicators such as population health, crime and objective security. SWB as a subjective appraisal from people themselves includes cognitive judgments and affective reactions. People rate their satisfaction with life as a whole or in relation with specific life domains such as family life, goal pursuit, social relationships, security and many others (Diener and Seligman, 2004). SWB is a multi-dimensional construct and it is influenced by individual, social, cultural and environmental variables (Wills et al., 2009). SWB has been measured in the literature as a top-down global measure, satisfaction with life as a whole (SWLS) (Diener et al., 1985) a five-item scale as well as a bottom-up measure (Cummins et al., 2003) by which different facets of life satisfaction are considered to add significantly to the overall level of SWB. Cummins et al. (2003) have proposed the Personal Wellbeing Index (PWI) which consists of seven facets which have been consistently tested in 19 waves in Australia in order to perform inter-temporal and inter-personal comparisons. The seven facets that have shown a significant contribution to the PWI are: (i) satisfaction with health, (ii) personal

relationships, (iii) safety, (iv) standard of living, (v) achieving goals, (vi) community connectedness, and (vii) future security. Other authors have replicated and validated the PWI in different contexts such as urban Bogotá, Colombia, showing a significant contribution of other facets such as—satisfaction with religiosity/spirituality (Wills, 2009). In this paper we are interested in exploring the influence of community connectedness and perceptions of insecurity on SWB under extreme conditions of objective insecurity. We propose in accordance to Cummins et al. (2003) that despite the occurrence of a conflictive scenario, individuals held a fairly constant level of SWB that is influenced by contextual and social variables. Perceptions of insecurity influence SWB because insecurity manifests a lack of control or autonomy of the person in relation to managing his environment. Perceptions of insecurity are manifested to the person as fears of losing control of their lives, loss of property, loss of social relationships or even their life. Presence of present dangers and lack of control affects SWB. However, an adaptation process may also occur under severe environmental conditions. Many people live under violent circumstances yet are able to maintain a stable level of SWB or they develop strategies to reduce its impact. This stable level may be influenced by variables such as community connectedness and social capital. We researched the influence of subjective insecurity on SWB in areas of rural conflict in Colombia that have maintained a prolonged social and political conflict over the last 50 years. Therefore, we hypothesize that subjective perceptions of insecurity are a better predictor of SWB than objective measures of crime and insecurity.

2.2. Objective/subjective security

The discourse about security has evolved from an external, objective view to one which considers personal and social insecurities. The definition of objective security prevailed with an emphasis on national security from a military point of view. This vision expressed security/insecurity through objective indicators of crime and events that threatened societies or communities. On the other hand, the concept of human security has been proposed as an umbrella concept to emphasize the relationship between individual and social insecurities in the tradition of the human development discourse (Sen, 1988). Mahbub-ul Haq introduced this concept in the Human Development Reports (UNDP, 2000) in order to humanize the treatment of security, distinguishing the security of nations or regions from the security of individuals. It is an integrative rather than a defensive concept. He proposed not to focus on the physical aspect of personal security but to redefine it to include the capacity and abilities of individuals and communities to control their environments and secure basic conditions for a good life. Human security refers to confident social actors who possess enough capabilities and freedoms and whose agency enables them to successfully operate in the public domain. The idea is to liberate the individual from fears about harm and consequent ill-being. In that order of ideas, human security is a concept that is essentially subjective. It expresses the abilities of an individual to withstand threats arising from social conflict, political repression and crime. It is measured by asking people directly how they feel in terms of handling and controlling their basic conditions for life, expressing their political views and having the freedom to meet and associate to pursue their own interests.

In the Colombian context, objective indicators of violence have been proposed for security/insecurity at both the municipal and national levels including indexes of homicides by 100,000 inhabitants, number of events related to kidnappings, clashes of legal military groups with illegal armed groups (guerrilla and paramilitary), number of displaced individuals from municipality. We consider that perceptions of insecurity will closely predict SWB rather than objective measures of security, because "objective"

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