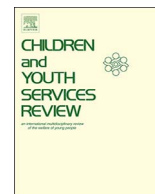




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Material well-being and social exclusion association with children's subjective Well-being: Cross-national analysis of 14 countries

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ABSTRACT

The relationship between material situation and happiness is hardly examined among children, perhaps because of the almost exclusive use of household income as a proxy for material situation. This article aims to fill this gap by examining the link between material situation and subjective well-being (SWB) from children's perspectives, cross-nationally. Two preliminary measures that reflect children's material situation were developed: Material Resources State (MRS) measure and Social Exclusion measure. They were found to be valid in 13 countries out of the 14 tested, using the 12-year-olds' sample in the second wave of the Children's Worlds survey ($N = 16,967$). These measures' association with affective and cognitive SWB was then tested, cross-nationally. Findings show both lower MRS and higher social exclusion are associated with lower SWB. However, regression models showed that Social Exclusion has a much greater ability to explain the variance in children's SWB, even after controlling for demographic variables and countries' economic indices, and in the vast majority of the countries. The prominent place of social exclusion was even more salient compared to economic indices (such as GDP and Gini) that showed only very low ability to explain children's SWB; the association between MRS and Social Exclusion with SWB was not found to be stronger in countries with lower GDP and higher inequality as suggested by some of the literature. The findings are discussed in the context of the general debate of the relation between material situation and happiness, bringing also some possible implications for social policy.

1. Introduction

This article ties together two aspects that come from two different research fields pertaining to children's lives. The first field is the area of child poverty and material disadvantage, and the second is the study of children's happiness and subjective well-being (SWB). Although each of these fields is important on its own, the association between them has rarely been studied in the context of children and adolescents. In general, the relation between material situation and happiness is complex, with much debate in the literature (Biswas-Diener, 2008). Studies indicate a significant association between income and SWB but it is not as strong as expected (Diener & Biswas-Diener, 2002; Easterlin, 2001). SWB was found to be consistently stable in countries like the US and Japan, even though their economies grew rapidly after the Second World War (Diener & Oishi, 2000). Also, wealthy industrial societies with similar levels of income per person have very different levels of SWB (Offer, 2000). The economist Richard Easterlin (Easterlin, 1974) has called these contradictions the Easterlin Paradox (Easterlin, 1974). According to the 'absolute explanation' for this paradox, income matters to SWB only to the level of satisfying a basic standard of living. It

implies the existence of a threshold beyond which the impact of income disappears (Diener & Biswas-Diener, 2002). Thus, at the individual level, increasing income has a diminishing effect on well-being, and at the national level the correlation between income and SWB appears to be higher for poor nations (Diener & Oishi, 2000; Schyns, 2002). However, some recent attempts to find the specific point where income does not matter have failed (Stevenson & Wolfers, 2013).

The paradox can be explained by some theories, while other theories claim the paradox is non-existent when referring to income inequality and not income, due to income equality being a better predictor of nations' and people's SWB (Clark, Frijters, & Shields, 2008). However, empirical findings on the association of income inequality and SWB are mixed (Berg & Veenhoven, 2010; Di Tella, MacCulloch, & Oswald, 2003; Oishi, Kesebir, & Diener, 2011; Senik, 2002).

Though widely studied and discussed among adults, the relationship between material situation (both in the individual and country levels) and happiness is hardly examined among children, perhaps because of the almost exclusive use of household income as a proxy for material situation. This article aims to fill this gap by examining the material

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situation–SWB link from children's perspectives cross-nationally. Today it is clear that children should be treated as a unique social category (Prout & James, 2005; Qvortrup, 2002) and examined as a group in its own right (Ben-Arieh, 2010; Frønes, Jenks, Qvortrup, Rizzini, & Thorne, 1999). Furthermore, as happiness is considered an appropriate aim of social policies (Bok, 2010; Duncan, 2005), identifying how children's material disadvantages relate to happiness may help improve child policies.

The most common measure for child poverty, and poverty in general, is household income (Bradbury, 2003; White, Leavy, & Masters, 2003), chiefly because income can be measured easily and continuously. However, measures based on household income, such as poverty thresholds, have various limitations (Gordon, 2006; Middleton & Adelman, 2003; Saunders & Naidoo, 2009). They lack comprehensiveness because they do not reflect other sources of income such as inheritance or resources that are borrowed or given by friends and family. They overlook the needs of complex families (e.g., household members with special needs). Furthermore, they provide only a narrow picture of people's lives given that they do not reflect disadvantaged circumstance in a broader sense than economics. With regard to children, household income is even more limited as we know little of how income is distributed within the household (Main & Bradshaw, 2012). Moreover, if we wish to study children's perspectives, this measure is even less relevant as it is something most children do not know how to answer (Knies, 2011).

Accordingly, in this study we used two alternative measures that can reflect children's economic situation. The first measure refers to children's Material Resources State (MRS) as can be learned from the material resources they report having access to (similar to Main, Montserrat, Andresen, Bradshaw, & Lee, forthcoming), together with their subjective perspective regarding money and things they have. The second measure focuses on two aspects that indicate social exclusion. Social Exclusion (Evans, Walraven, Parsons, van Veen, & Day, 2000; Room, 1998) is a framework that has often been used together with income poverty (Burchardt, Le Grand, & Piachaud, 1999) but has rarely been measured separately. More specifically, social exclusion was hardly measured from a child's perspective, and here we followed one of the first attempts by Gross-Manos (2015).

The measures were developed using data collected from 12-year-olds in the second wave of the Children's Worlds survey (www.isciweb.org). The measures' validity was tested across representative samples of 14 countries. After the measures were established, we tested the measures' association with two different measures of children's SWB (cognitive and affective) in a series of correlations. We also compared the nature of these correlations between countries with higher and lower inequality, GDP, material resources, and social exclusion. Finally, we compared the ability of MRS and Social Exclusion to explain SWB variation using a series of regression models, controlling for demographic variables and country's economic indices. The findings are discussed first in an effort to evaluate the validity of the measures. Then, we attempt to follow the association of each measure with children's happiness and the contribution of the country's economic indices, also in light of the long-debated issue of the relationship between material situations with happiness. Finally, after a brief reference to the differences between cognitive and affective SWB, the limitations and implications for social policy are discussed.

2. Literature review

2.1. Alternative measures of material situation

2.1.1. Material resources measurement

“While money-metric indicators of poverty give an indication of the financial means of the household to satisfy its needs, deprivation indicators provide information on the degree to which some of these needs are actually met” (De Neubourg et al., 2012, p. 1). Following this

view, in the past three decades the use of material resources indices has developed significantly. Townsend (1979) pioneered a relative deprivation index under the claim that “Poverty can be defined objectively and applied consistently only in terms of the concept of relative deprivation” (p. 31). He tried to create a new measure that is socially and politically credible, as well as demonstrable in terms of social conditions.

Even though, later on, the technique for adjusting the list of necessities was advanced to include what is perceived as a necessity in a society (Mack & Lansley, 1985), in many cases there is use of a simple index of common possessions and activities that people are asked whether they have or lack. Here we refer to these indices as “material resources” indices to differentiate them from those tested for their perceived necessity what make them more clearly an indicator of deprivation. Generally, these indices are considered to provide a more direct measure of poverty, allowing analysis at the individual level and not at the household level and thus drawing on actual living standards (Main, 2013).

In the context of adolescents, a commonly used measure—which, although different in some aspects, can be considered a kind of material resources index—is the Family Affluence Scale (FAS). This measure has been developed by the World Health Organization (WHO) using six items that relate to family wealth. In its updated version it asks about the number of cars, computers, annual vacations for the household, and about the existence of dishwasher, bathroom, and child's own bedroom (Torsheim et al., 2016). Countries' FAS levels were found to reflect economic attributes and to correlate with macro-economic indicators. A similar material resources index is in the EU Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC), which uses a broader index also including outdoor leisure activity, indoor games, and festivity on special occasions (De Neubourg et al., 2012). The OECD's PISA tests (OECD, 2013) base its definition of the child's socioeconomic status also partly on the reported lack of educational possessions in the child's household such as books, desk, dictionary, internet connection, and DVD.

Aside from measuring material resources by deprivation or material resources indices, another common measure is asking for the subjective perspective of people regarding their material state. This kind of measurement is claimed to be important even in the context of very poor countries, especially as it avoids the value judgement that is usually needed when forming a measure or an index of poverty (Kingdon & Knight, 2006).

Subjective material resources measurement was found to be a cognitive average of socioeconomic markers that is free of psychological biases (Singh-Manoux, Adler, & Marmot, 2003). Subjective appreciation by individuals of their own ability to satisfy basic needs was developed to address the limitations of income measure by providing a description of individual's ability to enjoy an “acceptable” life (Boarini & d'Ercole, 2006). Thus, according to the authors, surveys such as those of the OECD ask individuals about their perceptions of their financial stress and ability to make ends meet and whether they consider themselves as poor. These subjective perspectives are combined with other objective measures. In many surveys children are also asked about their subjective perception on matters regarding their material resources (Bradshaw & Finch, 2003; The Children's Society, 2014). In the Children's Worlds survey used here, children were asked about their satisfaction from the things they have and the frequency they worried about money.

2.1.2. Social exclusion

René Lenoir originally used the phrase *social exclusion* in the 1970s to refer to the most marginalized groups in society; describing people who lack basic citizenship rights and were not covered by the social protection system (Evans et al., 2000). Since then, the term has widened and while it has many definitions it can be generally considered to refer to the dynamic process that produces inequality (Levitas, 1998) whereby people are denied benefits that the majority enjoy, affecting

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