

# The Paradoxical Nature of Well-being under Capitalism: A glimpse from the SEM analysis of the 2012 Australian World Values Survey data into the social determinants of subjective well-being

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## Abstract

This paper briefly presents the results of a quantitative analysis of data collected through the sixth wave of the World Values Survey (WVS) in 2012 in Australia. Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) – a rather sophisticated statistical method to explore interrelated variables/factors and to rule out spurious correlations – is used to explore the social determinants of one of the most routine notions of well-being in the Australian context. The findings, though being based on a rather reductionist measure of Quality of Life, clearly confirm the growing concerns around the inherent paradoxes of ‘being well’ in a society dominated by the social forces of corporate capital.

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## Introduction

This paper briefly presents the results of a quantitative analysis of data collected through the sixth wave of the World Values Survey (WVS) in 2012 in Australia. Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) – a rather sophisticated statistical method to explore interrelated variables/factors and to rule out spurious correlations – is used to explore the social determinants of one of the most routine notions of wellbeing in the Australian context. The findings, though being based on a rather reductionist measure of Quality of Life, clearly confirm the growing concerns around the inherent paradoxes of ‘being well’ in a society dominated by the social forces of corporate capital.

WVS is one of the best-known research tools for measuring social values. It is however not principally designed for measuring sophisticated notions of wellbeing and that the variables we can choose out of the dataset are inadequate for exploring all the major dimensions and determinants of wellbeing. However, the analysis draws on the most recognized elements of subjective well-being and its results are comparable to the findings of more specialized studies. Moreover, it detects the role of less acknowledged factors and highlights what I define as the ‘paradoxical nature of capitalist wellbeing’. As thus, the analysis warrants more comprehensive studies of such relations.

In this study, subjective well-being (SW), i.e. people’s assessment of their overall quality of life, is measured based on three questions about the respondents’ self-assessed *state of health*, *general happiness*, and *overall life satisfaction*.

## Results

The **social factors** with statistically significant influence on SW (as per the SEM analysis) are as follows:

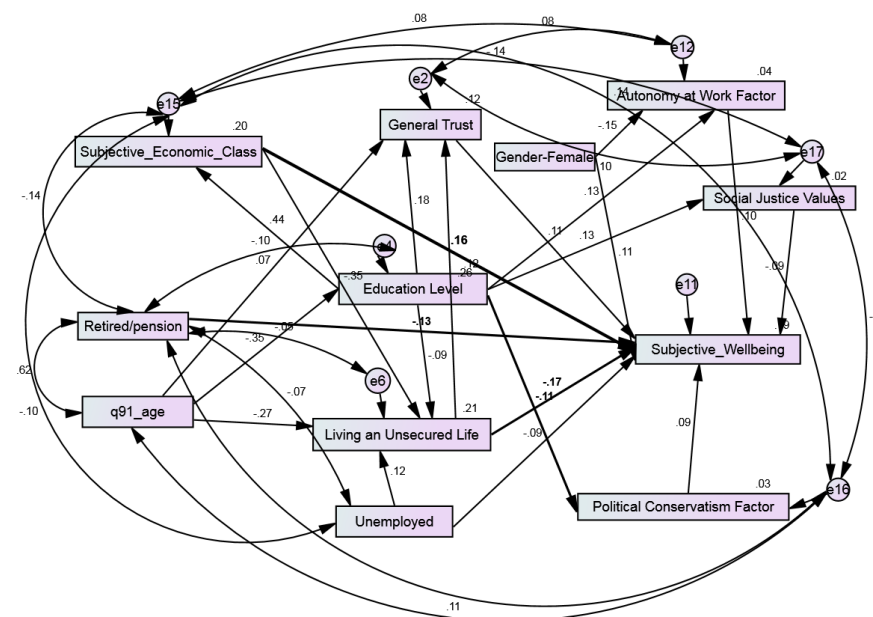
**Unemployment** - According to the SEM analysis results (see Fig. 1), unemployment both directly and indirectly – through increasing our chance of ‘**living an unsecured life**’ – adversely affects our subjective well-being.

**Income** and **social class** have the strongest direct positive impact on SW, meaning the higher the income and the class status, the higher SW.

**Gender** - Australian women on average tend to be more positive in their assessment of their quality of life compared to men. This cannot of course be explained in an essentialist way. Perhaps higher levels of conviviality and sociability among women and/or their optimism, or maybe even their relative exclusion from the torments of working in the heartless competitive conditions of today’s corporatized economy, may account for this positive impact on their SW. This of course requires further speculations and examinations.

**Age** - Aging does not directly affect our SW. It rather indirectly operates in two opposite ways. On the one hand with aging, people’s health deteriorates, and together with that their general sense of wellbeing; but on the other hand, they are more likely to secure a more financially ‘**secured life**’ which may improve their SW. A fact from the results to support this assumption is that those ‘**retired**’ and ‘**dependent on pension**’ are less likely to demonstrate the same level of SW that their generational counterparts enjoy. This would indicate that for the current and future generations, the negative impact of age may become stronger as today’s advanced capitalist economies have significantly moved away from the welfare state models and are struggling to address significant economic challenges since the global financial crisis. Global health and climate crises with their economic consequences would also increasingly pose greater challenges to the capacities of these societies in the provision of care and security for their aging populations.

**Education** - Lower levels of educational attainment which is more common among older people in today’s Australia is associated with a less **social trust** which in turn makes them more anxious, unsatisfied, and unhappy. Higher levels of education make it more likely for citizens to enjoy greater autonomy in their workplaces (where most of us spend most of our daily life). **Autonomy at work** increases our self-satisfaction and happiness but this is less the case with **women** compared to men, and with the people of **lower socio-economic status** since both groups are less likely to enjoy autonomy at work, regardless of their educational achievements.



To this point in our analysis, everything said about the predictors of well-being were almost obvious and

compatible with the findings of many other studies in the literature. But surprisingly, as this SEM analysis reveals, being less '**sensitive toward social injustices**' and less '**sympathetic with social democratic values**', holding politically '**conservative views**' and stronger '**nationalistic sentiments**' (having more confidence in right-wing parties, corporations, and armed forces and being less caring about the climate change) all positively contribute to SW! Interestingly all these factors are associated with lower levels of '**education**' indicating that more education is more harmful to our SW by making us more sensitive to the socio-ecological injustices of the world we all belong to.

## Conclusion

This analysis reveals a paradox in the way we define subjective well-being based on individualist perceptions of satisfaction and happiness. One to achieve greater well-being has to pursue higher levels of wealth and education but in a highly conformist manner in a society where inequalities and injustices are growing fast. The assumptions behind the mainstream notions of subjective well-being are ideologically informed confirming the criticisms of authors like William Davis (the author of *The Happiness Industry*) who argued that the metrics of well-being are "systematically disconnected from meaning and community". Moral and communal elements are needed to be included in our definition of wellbeing to adjust the measurements for the paradox. People with lower moral and aspirational wellbeing should be graded with lower degrees of total well-being.