

**Subjective Well-Being and Social Capital in Belgian Communities.  
The Impact of Community Characteristics on Subjective Well-Being  
Indicators in Belgium.**

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SUMMARY

**Abstract**

In this article, we investigate the effect of individual and community level characteristics on subjective well-being in Belgium. Various indicators for subjective well-being are being used in a multilevel analysis of the 2009 SCIF survey (n=2,080) and the 2006 Belgian ESS sample (n=1,798). On the individual level, most hypotheses on the determinants of subjective well-being were confirmed. Living with a partner and age were shown to have strong effects, but also social capital indicators had a significant positive effect on subjective well-being. All these effects remained significant controlling for optimism. On the community level, especially unemployment rate had a negative impact on subjective well-being. The analysis further demonstrates that in homogeneous regions, community characteristics have a far weaker impact on subjective well-being indicators than in economically more heterogeneous regions.

**Keywords:** Subjective well-being; Community Characteristics; Belgium; Multi-Level Research; Social Indicators Flanders; European Social Survey

## 1 Introduction

While it can be safely assumed that subjective well-being is determined mainly by individual characteristics (DeNeve & Cooper 1998), research has also confirmed the impact of community characteristics on well-being (Farrell, Aubry & Coulombe 2004). The expectation is that specific features of communities or neighborhoods will have an impact on the quality of life of citizens, even controlling for individual background characteristics (Rahn & Yoon 2009). Recent comparative research suggests that the context of an individual accounts for a substantive part of his or her happiness level (Frey & Stutzer 2000, 2002; Helliwell 2003; Helliwell & Putnam 2004). Societies show strong and persistent differences with regard to their average level of subjective well-being and it is a reasonable expectation that these differences cannot be attributed exclusively to individual psychological differences (Diener, Oishi & Lucas 2003; Christoph & Noll 2003). Less is known, however, about which specific community characteristics could have an impact on subjective well-being. Since most of the currently available studies tend to focus on explaining differences between countries, relatively little attention has been given to the neighborhood or community level (Helliwell 2003). Of the studies that are available on the community level, most are based in the US (Fernandez & Kulik 1981; Subramanian, Kim & Kawachi 2005) and we have access to few studies from a European context.

In this article we report on the distribution of subjective well-being in Belgian communities. The Belgian case is theoretically relevant because, together with the Scandinavian countries, Belgium is one of the countries in the world with the lowest level of income inequality (OECD 2009). While previously it has been demonstrated that community characteristics matter in highly unequal and/or segregated societies, it remains to be ascertained whether community effects can also be detected in more equal and less segregated societies like Belgium. To answer this research question, we will rely on two different datasets. The first one, *Social Cohesion Indicators in Flanders (SCIF)*, has as main advantage that it includes a full battery of questions on subjective well-being and this allows us to cover various dimensions of well-being. The disadvantage, however, is that it only contains data on the Northern and economically rather homogeneous region of

Flanders. The Belgian sample of the European Social Survey-2006, on the other hand offers a less extensive measurement of subjective well-being, but it includes the entire country, thus offering more variance in the independent individual and community level variables. The combination of both datasets, therefore, allows us to solve our research questions in a comprehensive manner.

(...)

## **8 Discussion**

In this article we examined individual and contextual determinants of subjective well-being in Belgium. On the individual level, our findings confirmed earlier research on the importance of living together with a partner. It is important to note, however, that informal networks (e.g., having friends) and generalized trust remain important determinants of subjective well-being, even after including strong control variables like optimism. Access to social capital, therefore, clearly contributes to a feeling of subjective well-being. Hypotheses 1 and 2 were therefore confirmed for the Belgian context. It is important to note here that all these effects remained significant, even after controlling for a general sense of optimism. We can therefore safely conclude that subjective well-being is not just the reflection of a specific optimistic outlook toward life.

In line with earlier research, we also expected communities to have an impact on subjective well-being and for this reason we used multi-level analysis, including both individual level and community level determinants of subjective well-being. In this multi-level analysis, we see a marked difference between the results for the Flemish region, and for Belgium as a whole. For the rather homogeneous Flemish region, we can observe that there is hardly any intra class-correlation, so we can conclude there are no significant community level determinants of subjective well-being. Using data on Belgium on the other hand, led to significant community influences, mainly of the local unemployment rate. Hypothesis 3 therefore received mixed results: communities matter if the structural indicators differ substantively.

The obvious conclusion therefore is that the region of Flanders simply is too homogeneous, both in cultural and structural terms, to detect strong community effects. This might explain some of the confounding conclusions that we encountered in the literature on community level effects on subjective well-being. Contextual explanations for the level of subjective well-being have been found in countries with a substantial economic heterogeneity, such as the US, where there are substantial social and economic differences within the population. Income inequality differences in Flanders are quite limited. Crime levels too, tend to be rather low, while the small scale of the region allows for a good distribution of public services across the territory. Real deprived areas in Flanders do exist, of course, but they tend to be rather small and dispersed across the territory. Apparently under these circumstances of homogeneity, community characteristics do not have an impact at all on subjective well-being. It is only if we are able to include regions with much higher levels of unemployment (and these are typically found in Brussels or in the Walloon region), that we find any intra class-correlation on the community level. This suggests some form of threshold model with regard to community impact. One can assume that well-being is lower in extremely poor, crime-ridden, deprived areas. If such a form of segregation and deprivation does not exist however, apparently marginal differences do not play a role anymore. In a society where all communities reach acceptable levels of material comfort and social cohesion, further gains in standard of living do not seem to have an additional impact on subjective well-being. Our expectation, therefore, is that significant community level determinants of subjective well-being will be found mainly in unequal societies with strong patterns of social and spatial segregation, while the community level might be non-significant in more equal or homogeneous societies. Comparative research, including data from different countries, will have to determine whether this expectation is indeed warranted.