Your Opinion Matters: A Cross-Sectional Study on Happiness among Older Adults in Siberia*

Elena F. Frolova, Galina A. Barysheva, Ekaterina A. Taran
Lifelong Wellbeing Lab, Department of Economics
Tomsk Polytechnic University, TPU
Tomsk, Russia
fea78@mail.ru

Fabio Casati, Giacomo Arrighini
Department of Information Engineering and Computer Science
University of Trento
Trento, Italy
fabio.casati@gmail.com

Abstract—The objective of this work is to explore the condition of older adults in Tomsk and in the broader context of Siberia, considering indicators of health, happiness, and life satisfaction. We conducted a survey on a convenience sample of 500 local older adults (50 years old or older, with an average age of 64) and compared results with other available studies. We found that respondents generally report lower levels of general health, happiness, and life satisfaction than most countries included in the analysis, and that Siberia is in the group of regions and countries where older adults are less happy and less satisfied with their life than younger adults. This is mainly due to health conditions, since only 1 in 5 respondents report their own health, compared to age-mates, to be good or very good. Interestingly, we also found that being a member of a community group in Tomsk is not associated to better health, happiness, or life satisfaction, but if we focus on older adults which are not just members but engaged members, we find a positive association with our well-being indicators expected for community membership.

Keywords—subjective well-being, life satisfaction, health, community membership, old adults

I. OBJECTIVE AND BACKGROUND

The objective of this study is to explore the current condition of older adults in Tomsk and in the broader context of Siberia and of Russian Federation, to understand correlate of happiness and examine differences with respect to well-known worldwide studies. Research on subjective well-being in later life has attracted extensive efforts from scholars and produced a wealth of insights [1, 2]. Most research focused on the description of subjective well-being in older adults and on the definition and measurement of the construct. [3-8]. Different ways of defining subjective well-being (happiness, life satisfaction, and positive affect) have been found to be part of a common construct, their similarities outweighing their dissimilarities (see [9] for a confirmatory factor analysis). Although not central for many scholars, theoretical explanations of well-being in older adults have been advanced. George [2] identifies five different orientations: theories based on the discrepancy between aspirations and achievements; theories based on the comparison between the older adult and a reference group; theories on how older adults strategically adjust their psychological resources to the aging process; theories stressing differences in subjective well-being among groups of older adults with different resources and backgrounds; and macro theories on the associations between social indicators and well-being of older adults at the aggregate level (for example at country level). Sidorenko A., Zaidi A. [10] have described differences between well-being concepts and social policy in CIS countries (employment, social participation policies, promoting independent living). Economic aspects of human well-being, age and pensions in EU are presented at Ageing, Health and Pensions in Europe: An Economic Perspective [11].

Our work seek to add to this research topic focussing on a niche we believed is still understudied. While social integration has been included among the determinant of well-being for some time, more nuanced studies on the role of life participation at the neighborhood or local level are still lacking. Our data collection effort to describe the condition of older adults in Tomsk adds to this larger picture. First we aim at offering a case study of well-being in a geographical and cultural context frequently absent in the literature. Second, using the region or city level we produce data capable of shedding light on the multilevel structure of well-being and life participation of older adults. We try to fulfill our descriptive aims considering indicators of three key dimension of personal well-being: health, happiness, and life satisfaction. Insights from this early exploration are aimed at preparing a large-scale longitudinal study, at getting initial results, at exploring differences between Siberia, Russia, and other parts of the globe.

All standard paper components have been specified for three reasons: (1) ease of use when formatting individual papers, (2) automatic compliance to electronic requirements that facilitate the concurrent or later production of electronic products, and (3)
II. Method

We conducted a survey on a convenience sample of 500 local older adults (50 years old or older, with an average age of 64, age range: 52-91 years) who lived in Tomsk, Russia. Respondents were interviewed face-to-face at their home. The survey was in Russian. We measured subjective well-being of the older adults computing three different indicators based on self-report questions. Each indicator tap a different take on the construct of subjective well-being. A first indicator is based on the respondent’s perceived health. A second indicator is based on overall perceived life satisfaction. A third indicator is based on how frequently the respondent felt happy in the past. The descriptive statistics of the sample is presented in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Means (SD = standard deviation) or percentages (N = number of participants)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Life satisfaction (satisfied)</td>
<td>63% (N=315)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender (male)</td>
<td>32% (N=160)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>64 (SD=7.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education (university or more)</td>
<td>52% (N=260)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From 6 to 12 thousand r.</td>
<td>36% (N=180)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From 13 to 18 thousand r.</td>
<td>24% (N=120)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than 18 thousand r.</td>
<td>33% (N=165)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health (healthy)</td>
<td>21% (N=105)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community membership (yes)</td>
<td>36% (N=180)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Happiness</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Often</td>
<td>23% (N=115)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sometimes</td>
<td>52% (N=260)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very rarely</td>
<td>12% (N=60)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opinion matters for community (yes)</td>
<td>24% (N=120)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occupation (paid work)</td>
<td>33% (N=165)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full time</td>
<td>26% (N=130)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part time (yes)</td>
<td>7% (N=35)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

We also compare this information with available studies such as i) the Gallup World Data and the European Social Survey to contextualise the condition of older adults in the Russian Federation with respect to other countries, and ii) the Russian Federation sample within the European Social Survey to compare the personal well-being of older adults across administrative regions and across cities and rural areas [12].

III. Results

A. Health and happiness

We find that residents of Russian Federation report lower levels of general health, happiness, and life satisfaction than most other countries included in the analysis. In particular, the Russian Federation is the country reporting the lowest percentage of respondents rating their own health to be good or very good. In addition, we find a large gap in perceived health between respondents more than 50 years old and younger respondents. The gap is larger in Russia than in other countries, and is larger in Siberia than the rest of Russia, both because older adults report to be worse off and younger adults report to be better off than the rest of Russia (Fig. 1-4).
The Russian Federation also stands in the group of countries where older adults are less happy (t-val = 7.8, p-val < 0.001, n = 2441) and less satisfied (t-val = 23, p-val < 0.001, n = 2466) with their life than younger adults.

(Source: ESS 2012)

Fig. 1. Percent in very good or good health (country)

Fig. 2. Average score on life satisfaction (0-10)
Among the older adults we interviewed very good. This figure is not far from the "Tomskians" which are in good or very good health feel happy more often (Chisq = 28.044, df = 1, p-val < 0.001, n = 448) and judge their life more satisfactory (Chisq = 17.653, df = 1, p-val < 0.001, n = 491). We find life satisfaction and happiness are positively associated too (Chisq = 40.2, df = 1, p-val < 0.001, n = 455). The association between these three found in our sample support the view holding that health, happiness, and life satisfaction are tightly intertwined and contribute to the broader construct of subjective well-being. We also explored to what extent the penalty in well-being for older adults is a matter of health. Applying linear regression to the Russian sample of the ESS, we tested how the magnitude and significance of the association between being 50+ and life satisfaction/happiness change controlling for perceived health. The age penalty in satisfaction and happiness is severely reduced controlling for perceived health. For happiness, a parameter of -.25 sigma (t-
val = 5.55, n = 2441) is reduced to -.05 sigma and loses significance (t-val = 1.17, n = 2441). We find similar results for life satisfaction.

B. Community participation and happiness

The most surprising result from our study is that being member of a community group in Tomsk is not associated to better health, happiness, or life satisfaction. Interestingly, if we focus on older adults who are not just members but engaged members, then we find a positive associations with our well-being indicators expected for community membership (Fig. 5). A very important result is that older adults involved in community groups believing their opinion matters to the rest of the community are 1.3 times more likely to be very satisfied with their life (Chisq = 6.975, n = 187, p-val < 0.01), 3 times more likely to feel often happy (Chisq = 8.077, n = 172, p-val < 0.01), and 2.5 times more likely to be in good or very good health compared to their fellow members (Chisq = 6.055, n = 187, p-val < 0.02). The importance of “being listened to” is greater than on health, in terms of impact on happiness.

(Source: Tomsk 2014, predicted probabilities from logistic model with main effects)

Older adults offering help to others report to be more satisfied and happy than those helping nobody, and this is true even when controlling for health. If we ask the proximity of the persons the respondent is helping, we find that helping someone outside family members and acquaintances is associated to higher reports of satisfaction with life and happiness. For example, those helping socially distant individuals are almost 2 times more likely than non-helpers to be often happy and 1.3 times more likely to be very satisfied with their life (Fig. 6).
Various studies reported that education has a significant impact on life satisfaction [13, 14, 15]. In our sample, we did not find that education was a significant predictor of happiness and life satisfaction for community participants. Some limitations of this study need to be considered. First, the data for extending this study to different country not available because of lack of raw data about importance the community member’s opinion for community development and satisfaction with life or happiness for people for most developed or less developed countries (ESS, WVS, Gallup, ESQL). Thus the sample is small to make representative conclusion for all countries. Future research also should extend this method for other subnational (comparison between Siberia, Ural, Far East, North Caucasian and others FO) and local areas to capture the difference in happiness between different regions of Russia. Second, the comparison in data should be improved on the basis of collecting longitudinal raw data in Russia and other countries about community membership and matters of personal opinion for other community participants upon sociological surveys. Third, the community membership in Russia need to be more deeply investigated on the basis of collecting and analyzing data about volunteering, charity and nonprofit organizations.

Our results suggest that taking active part in the decision making for community having a higher influence for happiness and life satisfaction for Siberian elderly. Future research should include this factor and further evaluate its effect on life satisfaction for other regions and countries.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

The key takeaways from the study are i) the importance of feeling that our opinion matters and ii) the relative importance of community membership, which contributes to happiness only in case of engaged participation, and iii) the importance of helping others, especially those far away from us. In all these cases, there is the need for a dedicated follow up study focuses on these aspects. Results from the data collected in Tomsk support the idea: interpretation that life satisfaction, happiness, and general health are constituent parts of the construct of subjective well-being: good health, high levels of satisfaction with life, and a frequent feel of happiness comes together. The correlational evidence we collected in Tomsk supports our belief that life participation should be further explored and might be a candidate policy target to impact the condition of the elderly. Active engagement in community groups is associated with higher reported levels of life satisfaction if older adults see purpose and impact in their active participation. Results suggest also that helping persons beyond one’s own family and acquaintances is worth further attention, since it is a practice both associated to better well-being in the person offering help, and a practice capable to improve the wellbeing of others.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

This work was performed by authors in collaboration with Tomsk Polytechnic University within the project in Evaluation and enhancement of social, economic and emotional wellbeing of older adults under the Agreement No.14.Z50.31.0029. (19.03.2014)

REFERENCES


**BIOGRAPHY**

**Elena A. Frolova** is a associate professor of Economics Department and Leader Research Scientist at Lifelong Wellbeing Lab in Institute of Humanities, Social Sciences & Technologies National Research Tomsk Polytechnic University. Dr. Elena Frolova completed PhD in Economics Science at Tomsk State University. She deliver taught courses in economics, national economy, social policy, public economics for BS students in Engineering and Humanities and has over 15 years of experience in teaching. Research interests of Dr. Elena Frolova combine the areas of quality of life, social policy, institutional economics and age.

**Galina A. Barysheva** is professor of the Economic Department, the Institute of Social and Humanitarian Technologies. Barysheva G.A. is the organizer and member of scientific conferences, symposiums of all levels, economic schools; scientific supervisor of the researches performed under state budget and contractual agreements. She regularly participates in affaires of the Dissertation Councils on economic specialties as the official opponent and the reviewer.

**Ekaterina A. Taran** is currently a fulltime senior teacher of Department of Economics at Institute of Humanities, Social Sciences and Technologies in the Tomsk Polytechnic University. She also holds the position of researcher of the International Scientific-educational Laboratory Technologies to Improve the Well-being of Older People (Lifelong Wellbeing Lab). Her research interests include studing of social factors of economic agents behavior, investigation of influence of the existing structure of property redistribution on the socio-economic well-being.

**Fabio Casati** is professor of Social informatics and senator at the University of Trento. Until 2006, he was technical lead for the research program on business process intelligence in Hewlett-Packard USA, where he contributed to several HP commercial products in the area of web services and business process management. He then moved to academia, where he started a research line on technologies for happiness and life participation (lifeparticipation.org), focusing on achieving direct positive impact on society and specifically on older adults. He is co-author of a best-selling book on Web services and author of over 200 peer-reviewed papers. Contact him at fabio.casati@unitn.it

**Giacomo Arrighini** is currently a doctoral student of the Department of Sociology at the Oxford University and he graduated from the University of Trento. His research interests include studing of s sociology factors of agents behavior.