

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Happiness as fairness: The relationship between national life satisfaction and social justice in EU countries

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Email: salvatore.dimartino@unina.it**Abstract**

Despite growing interest in the relation between social justice and life satisfaction, there is a paucity of quantitative investigations linking these two constructs, even in the field of Community Psychology. To bridge this gap, we tested the relationship between the EU Social Justice Index (SJI; 2008–2017) and life satisfaction across 28 European Union (EU) countries, in a series of multilevel multinomial logistic regression models with cumulative logit link function. The SJI proved one of the strongest predictors of national life satisfaction, after controlling for time variation and other well-established country-level determinants. Our findings lend support to the hypothesis that social justice is highly related to life satisfaction. We invite scholars to explore this relationship further. We also recommend that EU governments strive to promote fairer social conditions to increase national happiness.

KEYWORDS

distributive justice, fairness, happiness, life satisfaction, multilevel multinomial logistic regression, procedural justice, social justice, well-being

1 | INTRODUCTION

Over the last few decades, an increasing number of governments around the world have put the maximization of national life satisfaction on their political agenda. Recent attempts to replace gross domestic product (GDP) with

other measures that better capture national welfare are driving attention towards subjective measures of well-being. Some examples include the well-known Stiglitz report (Stiglitz, Sen, & Fitoussi, 2012) and the Gross National Happiness Index proposed by the state of Bhutan (Ura & Galay, 2004).

This surge of interest is also prompting the production of ever more accurate explanations of what predicts life satisfaction to guide public policy (Dolan, Layard, & Metcalfe, 2011). A portion of the mainstream happiness literature—which has largely been led by Positive Psychology—considers internal and interpersonal resources such as character strengths, social relations, and motivation as key elements of long-lasting life fulfillment (Lyubomirsky, 2008; Seligman, 2011, 2002). However, some have been very critical of this approach to happiness for neglecting the fundamental effect that conditions of social justice, inequality, and power have on people's happiness and well-being (Arcidiacono & Di Martino, 2016; Di Martino, Eiroa-Orosa, & Arcidiacono, 2017). Indeed, an increasing number of studies offer evidence that sociopolitical conditions related to social justice play a strong role in shaping people's life satisfaction (Radcliff, 2013).

Community Psychology (CP) has always distinguished itself for considering social justice as one of its core elements in the struggle to promote well-being for individuals, communities, and society at large (Kloos et al., 2012; Prilleltensky, 2001; Prilleltensky & Nelson, 1997). From the perspective of CP, social justice pertains to the “people's right to self-determination; to a fair allocation of resources; to live in peace, with freedom from constraints, and to be treated fairly and equitably” (Kagan, Burton, Duckett, Lawthom, & Siddiquee, 2011, p. 37). This vision is also deeply rooted in CP practice, which is aimed at promoting primary prevention and empowerment (Fondacaro & Weinberg, 2002), as well as attending to the most vulnerable sectors of society (García-Ramírez, Balcázar, & de Freitas, 2014).

Given these premises, it will come as a surprise to learn that CP lacks substantial quantitative evidence to demonstrate a direct link between social justice and life satisfaction, particularly at the macrolevel of analysis. Except for a few examples at the microlevel (see Capone, Donizzetti, & Petrillo, 2018; Paloma, García-Ramírez, & Camacho, 2014) it is hard to find quantitative studies in CP, which place social justice in relation to happiness or well-being. As Prilleltensky (2012) has pointed out: “After all, researchers studying subjective well-being rarely if ever invoke justice in their explanations. In most cases, culture, age, marriage, social support, unemployment, and adaptation figure prominently on the list of well-being predictors; justice, however, does not” (p. 2).

A possible reason for this is that the value of social justice has been so ingrained in the ethos and practice of CP so as to become *self-evident* (Fondacaro & Weinberg, 2002). Although this has undoubtedly contributed to the promotion of well-being through social change (Evans, Rosen, & Nelson, 2014), it has resulted in paucity of investigations on the very nature of social justice (Drew, Bishop, & Syme, 2002). One of the questions left unanswered is how much societal gain in terms of happiness and well-being can be obtained when conditions of social justice are improved in society.

Other scholarships—particularly economy and sociology—have done little more to shed light on the relationship between social justice and life satisfaction at the macrolevel. Some general aspects of social justice such as freedom of choice and capabilities (Bavetta, Navarra, & Maimone, 2014; Veenhoven, 2010), as well as satisfaction of basic human needs (Tay & Diener, 2011), have been linked to the experience of happiness around the world.

Other studies have focused on specific elements of social justice such as income inequality (Berg & Veenhoven, 2010; Ngamaba, 2017; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2018) and quality of governance (Helliwell & Huang, 2008; Ott, 2010).

However, those studies have employed only a small set of variables that account for social justice. The literature has repeatedly suggested that social justice is a multidimensional construct encompassing many aspects of what constitutes a fair society (Tyler, Boeckmann, Smith, & Huo, 1997). As such, a few selected indicators are not sufficient to unfold the complex relationship between social justice and national life satisfaction. For instance, Ngamaba, Panagioti, and Armitage (2018) have found in a recent systematic and meta-analytic review of the literature that one of the aspects of social justice, namely income inequality, does not constitute on its own a strong determinant of people's life satisfaction and happiness worldwide. In that regard, Schneider (2016) suggests

drawing from the wider social justice literature to better understand how people evaluate inequality and how they respond to it both emotionally and behaviourally (p. 15).

In addition, most studies at the macrolevel have primarily relied on objective measures of social justice. However, as Tyler et al. (1997) eloquently pointed out, “justice is not just a set of principles derived from objective sources ... it is also an idea that exists within the minds of all individuals” (p. 4). Therefore, subjective indicators of social justice also deserve consideration.

To bridge a gap in the academic literature, this study will compare a composite index of social justice with the life satisfaction of individuals at the macrolevel of analysis. Our goal is to show the unexplored link between people's life satisfaction and fair conditions in society.

2 | METHOD

This section describes the main variables employed in our study, along with the theory underlying their operationalisation as well as the characteristics of the sample collected and results of preliminary analyses.

2.1 | Social justice

Justice is one of the fundamental drivers of our thoughts, feelings and behaviours (Tyler et al., 1997). However, our judgment of what is just or unjust extends to a great variety of settings, from law, to education, to organisations, and potentially to any situation involving social interactions (Miller, 2017). What differentiates social justice from other types of justice is what Rawls defined as a concern for the basic structure of society, which is “the way in which the major social institutions distribute fundamental rights and duties and determine the division of advantages from social cooperation” (p. 7). Rawls's theory of justice has laid the philosophical ground for social scientists to empirically investigate two types of social justice, namely distributive justice, which is the extent to which each person has access to resources in a fair and equitable manner; and procedural justice, which refers to everyone having an opportunity to participate in decisions affecting their lives and expressing their voice (Miller, 1999).

However, we must bear in mind that social justice never happens in a vacuum and therefore abstract principles of distributive and procedural justice do not apply to every situation equally (Tyler et al., 1997). In terms of distributive justice, the allocation of benefits, harms, rewards and costs across society usually follows criteria of equity (those who contribute or merit more received more), need (those most vulnerable or in need receive more), and equality (everyone receives the same amount). These criteria depend on the social goal set out to achieve. For example, Deutsch (1975) argued that the principle of equity is often applied to economic decisions to improve productivity, whereas the principle of equality is useful to foster and maintain social harmony and the principle of need is used to promote personal development and individual welfare.

Another vision of social justice that is closely related to the promotion of happiness and well-being has been championed in recent years by the capabilities approach, or human development approach, as it is sometimes referred (Nussbaum & Sen, 1993).

Despite some differences over the theoretical and empirical development of the approach, the two founders, Martha Nussbaum and Amartya Sen, share the core idea that capabilities are a means to an end. In fact, they constitute the freedom and opportunity for people to realize functionings; that is, their state of being and doing. In other words, they are the answer to the question “What is this person able to do and to be?” (Nussbaum, 2011, p. 20). Functionings can vary from the satisfaction of basic needs such as being nourished and sheltered to more complex accomplishments such as self-realization or feeling integrated into the social fabric of a community (Sen, 1999).

As a theory aiming to embrace human diversity, the capabilities approach is particularly concerned with the inclusion of minorities such as people with disability, women, migrants, and even the animal kingdom, to which previous normative theories of justice have failed to give proper recognition (Nussbaum, 2009).

Drawing from both the Rawlsian vision of justice and the capabilities approach, the Bertelsmann Stiftung Institute has operationalised social justice through the Social Justice Index (SJI) with “the aim of realizing equal opportunities and life chances” (distributive justice) and “guaranteeing each individual genuinely equal opportunities for self-realization through the targeted investment in the development of individual capabilities” (capabilities approach) (Schraad-Tischler, Schiller, Heller, & Siemer, 2017, p. 80). Following a multidimensional approach, the index builds on the theoretical and empirical work of Wolfgang (2001), who has posited six domains of social justice. The first three domains, namely poverty prevention, equitable education, and labor market access account for equal distribution of primary good whereas social cohesion and nondiscrimination, health, and interpersonal justice refer to equal opportunity in developing capabilities (Merkel & Giebler, 2009; see Figure 1).

The six domains of the SJI draw from a total of 30 quantitative and 8 qualitative indicators. The quantitative indicators are derived primarily from Eurostat and the European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC). The qualitative indicators have been developed as part of the Sustainable Governance Indicators by more than 100 international experts, who have assessed the state of affairs of various policies throughout the OECD and the EU (for a full list see https://www.sgi-network.org/2019/Expert_Network).

A graphical representation of the SJI structure is available in Figure 2. For a full description of domains and indicators, we refer readers to Social Justice in the EU—Index Report 2017 (pp. 146–149).

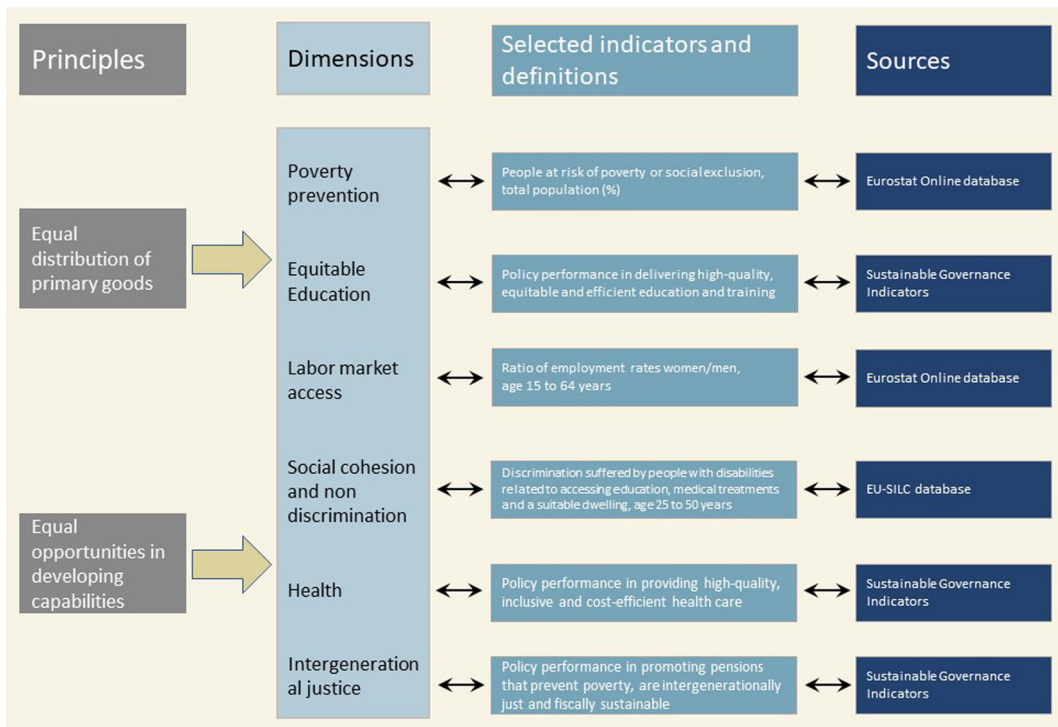


FIGURE 1 Principles, dimensions, indicators, and sources of the Social Justice Index. *Source:* Adapted from Merkel and Giebler (2009)

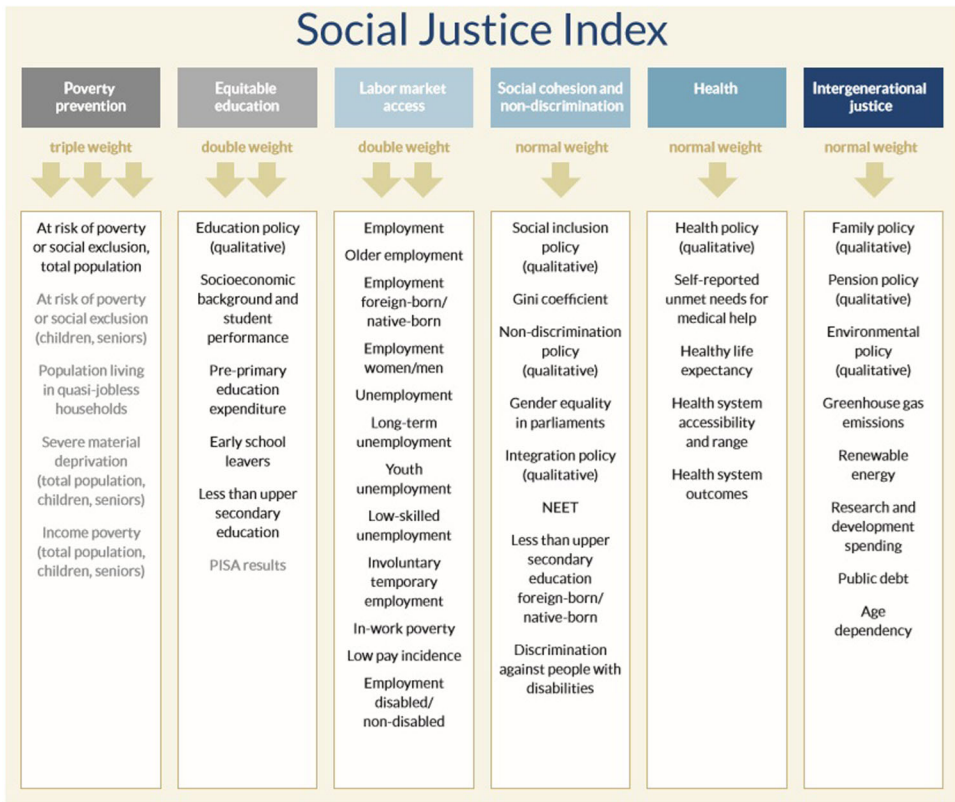


FIGURE 2 Domains and indicators of the Social Justice Index. *Source:* Reproduced from Schraad-Tischler et al. (2017)

In line with the key principles of distributive justice, indicators such as the “low pay incidence” and “socioeconomic background and student performance” account for the principle of equity, whereas “education policy” and “employment rate” answer to the principle of equality and “less than upper secondary education” and “at risk of poverty or social exclusion, total population” and “in-work poverty rate” refer to the principle of need. In the same vein, capabilities-based indicators cover functionings aspects of “being” (i.e., “healthy life expectancy” and “self-reported unmet needs for medical help”) and “doing” (i.e., “gender equality in parliaments” and “family policy”). In addition, indicators such as “nondiscrimination,” “integration policy,” and “discrimination against people with disabilities” reflect those elements of inclusivity and acceptance of human diversity that the capabilities approach strongly advocates.

2.2 | Life satisfaction

Life satisfaction has been conceptualized as the degree to which individuals judge their own life as a whole (Argyle, 2001; Diener, Scollon, & Lucas, 2009). Life satisfaction is often referred interchangeably as happiness or subjective well-being, and although the literature widely accepts them as synonyms (Veenhoven, 2012), some argue that the distinction between these constructs has implications reaching beyond theoretical speculation (Haybron, 2007). For instance, Ngamaba (2017) has empirically demonstrated that an aspect of social justice, namely freedom of choice, is significantly related to the experience of life satisfaction but not happiness. However, our main data source, namely the Standard Eurobarometer, includes only a question for life satisfaction; as such any comparison with the variable happiness were not possible in this study.

For reasons of readability, we follow the mainstream literature in using the term happiness, subjective well-being, and life satisfaction interchangeably throughout this paper; however, we invite the readers to refer exclusively to the variable life satisfaction when interpreting the results of our analyses. Based on the aforementioned definition, the Eurobarometer has operationalized the construct of life satisfaction through the following question: "On the whole, are you very satisfied, fairly satisfied, not very satisfied or not at all satisfied with the life you lead?"

2.3 | Individual level controlling variables

The literature has identified multiple predictors of happiness at the individual level. These have been grouped by Dolan, Peasgood, and White (2008) under the following seven categories: income, personal characteristics, socially developed characteristics, how we spend our time, attitudes and beliefs towards self/others/life, relationships, and the wider economic, social and political environment. In addition, some have empirically investigated aspects of social justice related to race, class and social status, which are usually unexplored in relation to people's experience of life satisfaction (Barger, Donoho, & Wayment, 2009). However, the Standard Eurobarometer includes only a limited number of the above variables. Therefore, we could include in this study only the following combination of individual-level continuous and categorical controlling variables: gender, age, occupation, civil status, and personal issues.

2.4 | Country level controlling variables

Following the approach used for individual-level variables, we selected a series of macrolevel variables that the literature has identified as amongst the strongest predictors of national life satisfaction. Overall, the literature has found that both the quality and quantity of governmental practices are linked to the experience of national happiness (Helliwell & Huang, 2008; Ott, 2010). However, several of those aspects are already covered by the SJI. Therefore, we selected only the following indicators because they are conceptually distinct from social justice: GDP, Social Capital, being or not a postcommunist country, and level of individualism (Bjørnskov, 2003; Bjørnskov, Dreher, & Fischer, 2008; Kim & Kim, 2012).

2.5 | Sampling and data

Our study relies on secondary data, which were either directly or indirectly drawn from several international sources (see Table 1). Our choice of datasets and variables was driven by the aim of including the highest possible number of countries and time points covered by the SJI.

The main sample consists of panel data derived from 169,038 individuals nested within 28 EU countries. The latter are in turn measured across seven time points between 2008 and 2017, for a total of 168 observations. Table 1 shows the aggregated average level, proportions, and relevant information related to all the variables employed in this study.

The Eurobarometer reports separated data for Germany East and Germany West, England and Northern Ireland, and Cyprus and Turkish Cypriots. For our study, we aggregated the former into Germany, United Kingdom, and Republic of Cyprus, respectively. Missing data were treated with list-wise deletion at both the within and between level of analysis. At the within level the initial sample of 169,038 cases in Model 1 was reduced to 99,093 in the final Model 3 due to 69,945 cases with missing values. At the between level of analysis, the initial sample of 168 observations was reduced to 102 in Model 3, due to 66 cases with missing values.

TABLE 1 Aggregated descriptive statistics and description of life satisfaction, social justice index, and control variables

Variable/time	Statistics ^a	Description	Measurement	Source
Life satisfaction ^a		Answer to the question: "On the whole, are you very satisfied, fairly satisfied, not very satisfied or not at all satisfied with the life you lead?"	Ordinal	Standard Eurobarometer
Very satisfied	38,184 (22.5%)			
Fairly satisfied	92,174 (54.3%)			
Not very satisfied	29,647 (17.5%)			
Not at all satisfied	9,033 (5.3%)			
Gender		Respondent's gender	Nominal	Standard Eurobarometer
Male	77,424 (45.6%)			
Female	92,250 (54.4%)			
Age	49.88 (18.2)	Answer to the question: "How old are you?"	Continuous	Standard Eurobarometer
Civil status		Answer to the question: "Could you give me the letter which corresponds best to your own current situation?"	Nominal	Standard Eurobarometer
With partner	94,842 (55.9%)			
Single	42,211 (24.9%)			
Lost partner	30,752 (18.1%)			
Other	1,343 (0.8%)			
Occupation		Respondents Occupation Scale	Nominal	Standard Eurobarometer
Self-employed	12,279 (7.2%)			
Managers	17,858 (10.5%)			
Other white collars	19,398 (11.4%)			
Manual workers	33,508 (19.7%)			
House persons	9,904 (5.8%)			
Unemployed	12,847 (7.6%)			
Retired	52,210 (30.8%)			
Students	11,670 (6.9%)			

(Continues)

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Variable/time	Statistics ^a	Description	Measurement	Source
Important issues		Answers to the question: "What are the two most important issues you are facing at the moment?"	Nominal	Standard Eurobarometer
Rising prices/inflation	Not mentioned 104,042 (61.3%) Mentioned 51 673 (30.5%)			
Unemployment	Not mentioned 131,918 (77.7%) Mentioned 23 797 (14%)			
Pensions	Not mentioned 129 881 (76.5%) Mentioned 25 834 (15.2%)			
Social Justice Index	5.78 (0.99)	Weighted EU Social Justice Index. Subdomains: poverty prevention, equitable education, labour market access, social cohesion and nondiscrimination, health, and intergenerational justice	Continuous	Bertelsmann Stiftung Institute
GDP per capita	36.97 (15.28)	Purchasing power parity (PPP) adjusted to constant 2011 international dollars	Continuous	World Development Indicators
Social capital	56.62 (11.28)	Legatum prosperity index pillar. subdomains: personal & family relationships, social networks, interpersonal trust, institutional trust, civic and social participation	Continuous	Legatum Prosperity Index
Post-communism		Countries that have transitioned from former communist political and economic governance	Nominal	World Population Review
Yes	17 (60.72%)			
No	11 (39.28%)			
Individualism	36.97 (14.01)	Level of individualism vs. collectivism measured according to Hofstede's cultural dimensions	Continuous	Clearly cultural

^aValues expressed as frequency and percentage for categorical variables, and as mean with standard deviation for continuous variables.

2.6 | Validity and reliability of the SJI

Before the main analyses, we tested the SJI for validity and reliability. Convergent validity was assessed through correlating the SJI with the Human Development Index (HDI). The HDI was designed to operationalise the vision of the capabilities approach into a multidimensional measure of country development by measuring aspects of health disparities, access to education, and living standards (Anand & Sen, 1994). Given its theoretical link with the SJI, the HDI was considered the best choice to assess convergent validity. High and significant positive correlations were found between the SJI and HDI, with a minimum value of 0.710 in 2008 and a maximum of 0.786 in 2014, suggesting an acceptable level of convergent validity.

In terms of internal consistency, Cronbach's alpha coefficients (α)—which were derived from the intercorrelations among the six subindices of SJI for the 6 years considered—reached a minimum value of 0.874 in 2017 and a maximum of 0.913 in 2008. These values are considered adequate for basic and applied research (see Peterson, 1994).

3 | RESULTS

3.1 | Research hypothesis

Our main objective was to test whether the SJI significantly predicts Life Satisfaction across EU Countries, while holding constant time and several relevant covariates at both the within and between-level of analysis. Figure 3 shows our hypothesised model in a graphical format.

3.2 | Data analysis

Since the main outcome variable is measured on an ordinal scale with only four categories and individual data are nested within higher-level categories (i.e., EU countries), we carried out a series of multilevel multinomial logistic

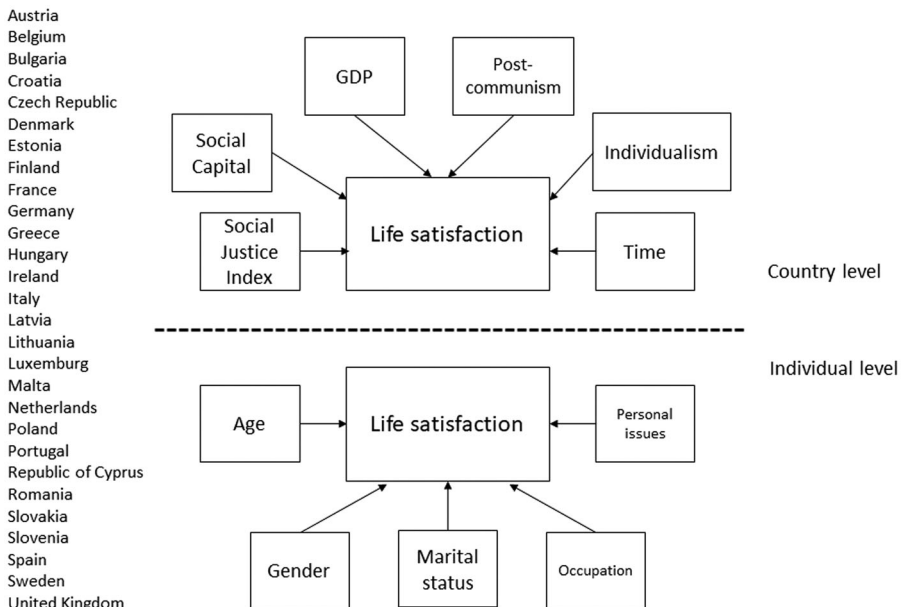


FIGURE 3 Hypothesised model of predictors of life satisfaction at the individual and country level of analysis

regression models, as implemented in Mplus v. 7. As good practice in multilevel modelling, continuous variables were grand-mean centred to facilitate the interpretation of the results (Finch & Bolin, 2017). We started with an unconstrained model with maximum likelihood robust estimator to test a series of models with increased complexity. AIC and BIC values were used to compare not nested models, with smaller information criteria indicating better fit. For the within level of analysis, we will report unstandardized regression coefficients (b) and related odd ratio (OR). Given that at the between level the outcome variable is treated as a continuous latent variable, we will report both unstandardized regression coefficients (b) and standardised regression coefficients (β). In terms of statistical significance, p value and 95% confidence intervals will be reported. Table 2 shows the main results of the multilevel multinomial logistic regression models.

TABLE 2 Results of multilevel multinomial logistic regression analysis of life satisfaction on EU social justice index and control variables at the within and between level

Variable	Unconstrained Model $n = 169,038$	Model 2 (Individual level predictors; $n = 154,687$)		Model 3 (Country level predictors; $n = 99,093$)	
	Threshold (SE)	Threshold (SE)		Threshold (SE)	
Life satisfaction ^a					
Very satisfied	1.49***	1.05***		0.99***	
Fairly satisfied	-1.47***	-2.05***		-2.21***	
Not very satisfied	-3.30***	-3.96***		-4.09***	
<i>Within level variables</i>		<i>b</i> (SE)	OR	<i>b</i> (SE)	OR
Gender					
Female		0.07***	1.07	0.07***	0.99
Age					
		-0.007***	0.99	-0.005***	1.077
Civil status					
Single		-0.24***	0.78	-0.28***	0.75
Lost partner		-0.56***	0.57	-0.62***	0.53
Other		-0.13*	0.87	-0.28***	0.75
Occupation					
Manager		0.20***	1.22	0.14***	1.155
Other white collars		-0.12***	0.88	-0.16***	0.84
Manual workers		-0.37***	0.68	-0.35***	0.70
House persons		-0.40***	0.66	-0.46***	0.64
Unemployed		-1.02***	0.35	-1.12***	0.32
Retired		-0.19***	0.82	-0.20***	0.81
Student		-0.42***	1.527	0.35***	1.425
Personal issues					
Rising prices/ Inflation		-0.19***	0.82	-0.18***	0.83
Unemployment		-0.41***	0.66	-0.38***	0.67
Pensions		-0.29***	0.74	-0.21***	0.80
<i>Between level variables</i>				<i>b</i> (SE)	β (SE)
Time					
2011				-0.04	-0.04
2014				0.27*	0.23*
2015				0.20	0.17

TABLE 2 (Continued)

Variable	Unconstrained Model <i>n</i> = 169,038	Model 2 (Individual level predictors; <i>n</i> = 154,687)	Model 3 (Country level predictors; <i>n</i> = 99,093)	
	Threshold (SE)	Threshold (SE)	Threshold (SE)	
2016			0.21	0.18
2017			0.27	0.18
Social justice			0.27***	0.24***
GDP per capita			0.01**	0.10**
Social capital			0.06***	0.56***
Postcommunism			0.41***	0.13***
Individualism			0.01***	0.23***
<i>R</i> ²		.06	.89	
AIC	341,695.500	302,656.955	185,289.879	
BIC	341,735.651	302,845.989	185,555.986	

Note: Life satisfaction (not at all satisfied), time (2008), gender (male), occupation (self-employed), personal issues (not mentioned), and post-communism (yes) are treated as reference categories and as such their coefficients are set to zero.

**p* < .01.

***p* < .05.

****p* < .001.

A key feature of the unconstrained model is a statistically significant variation in the thresholds of life satisfaction across countries, $\sigma^2 = 1.088$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.88, 1.29]. In addition, intraclass correlation (ICC) shows that about 22.8% of the variability in life satisfaction is accounted by the country-level. These results suggest that a multilevel approach is highly recommended.

The inclusion of within-level covariates in Model 2 improves the general fit (see Table 2). Although all the other variables in this model show significant effects on life satisfaction—a condition that is likely due to the very large sample size—their strength of association is relatively low. Among them, gender shows values too close to 0 to regard its effect as relevant, $b = -0.07$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.04, 0.09], OR = 1.074. This is also reflected in terms of R^2 , which shows that the combined effect of all the variables employed at the within-level, explains only 0.07% of the variance in life satisfaction.

Model 3 introduces the SJI, along with the five controlling macropredictors of life satisfaction, showing an overall improved model fit (see Table 2). Except for the very small significant effect of time (2014), $\beta = .008$, $p = .562$, 90% CI [0.01, 0.16], all the other macro variables included in Model 3 are highly significantly associated to the outcome variable. In terms of standardised coefficient, the SJI proves to be the second strongest significant predictor of life satisfaction, $\beta = .24$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.16, 0.33] after social capital, $\beta = .56$, $p < 0.001$, 95% CI [0.44, 0.66] and followed by individualism, $\beta = .23$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.13, 0.33], and postcommunism, $\beta = .13$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.05, 0.22]. Lastly, our findings revealed GDP to be the weakest between-level predictor of national life satisfaction, $\beta = .10$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.007, 0.20]. One final element worth reporting is that the macrolevel predictors explain a large portion of the variability in life satisfaction, which amounts approximately to 87%.

4 | DISCUSSION

The overall findings support our initial hypothesis that social justice is a significant determinant of life satisfaction at the national level. As we were able to demonstrate, the SJI is one of the strongest predictors

of national happiness. After holding constant both individual and country-level controlling variables, increasing the level of social justice across the EU member states also increases the level of national life satisfaction.

At the individual level of analysis, all the variables employed were found statistically related to life satisfaction, although their relative low strength of association advises caution in interpreting those results. In particular, the extremely small effect of gender is supported by a recent meta-analytic review conducted by Batz-Barbarich, Tay, Kuykendall, and Cheung (2018), which has concluded that gender differences in terms of life satisfaction can be considered negligible.

At the between level of analysis, all the predictors included in the final model were found highly related to life satisfaction, except for the effect of time. This suggests that the countries analysed by the Eurobarometer reported similar levels of life satisfaction over the years. Social capital is the variable that shows the highest effect on life satisfaction. This is strongly supported by the literature, which has acknowledged the strong link between this variable and national happiness (Radcliff, 2013). In addition, studies have demonstrated that social capital and social justice are both stronger predictors of national life satisfaction than mere economic conditions as measured by GDP (Bjørnskov, 2003; Ott, 2010).

It is also worth noticing that the correlation matrix (see Appendix 1) shows that social capital is highly correlated to both the SJI, $r = 0.70$ and GDP, $r = .75$. These findings suggest that the relationship between those variables might be more complex than what we could explore in this study.

4.1 | Limitations and future perspectives

The results obtained in this study should be considered in the context of some limitations. The first is that the indicators composing the SJI have been selected based on a normative/theoretical approach, which is not adequately supported by statistical evidence to confirm the proposed unidimensional construct of social justice. This leaves unexplored, among other things, the statistical relation between life satisfaction and six subdomains of the SJI.

Although, as we have demonstrated, the index presents a high level of convergent validity and reliability, it might still be argued that not all its indicators have enough theoretical and/or statistical ground to account for the main tenets of social justice identified by the literature. For instance, while the index gives prominence to indicators of distributive justice, it falls short of those measuring procedural justice.

The SJI also covers only 28 EU countries, which limited our analyses to a small number of predictors at the macrolevel. Although the panel data analyses allowed us to pool together 102 observations in Model 3, these were still not sufficient to test more complex hypotheses without potentially incurring a type II error. For example, we could not answer the question of whether the strong effect of social capital on life satisfaction might be mediated or moderated by SJI and GDP.

The Eurobarometer also presents limitations. Although all the individual variables used in this study were highly significantly related to life satisfaction, their strength of association and the very small amount of variance explained, suggest that the Eurobarometer lacks several important predictors. Among these, we remind the readers that the literature has identified personality factors, socioeconomic conditions, social relationships, and health as among the strongest determinants of individual happiness (Diener, Oishi, & Tay, 2018).

In terms of the generalizability of the results, we also need to be mindful that although the overall sample includes a very large number of observations, the number of people surveyed in each country every year accounts for a limited percentage of the whole population. Therefore, we advise caution in generalising the results to the whole of the European Union and beyond.

5 | CONCLUSIONS

While the literature has focused on many determinants of individual and national happiness, the role played by social justice has not received enough consideration. Despite some efforts to consider conditions of fairness, several bodies of knowledge, even in CP, have neglected to draw a quantitative link between social justice and life satisfaction at the macrolevel of analysis. To bridge this gap, we employed the EU SJI to demonstrate that social justice is an important determinant of life satisfaction. Although we lack elements to draw definitive conclusions, this study provides initial evidence to place social justice among the most influential predictors of national life satisfaction.

We believe that these findings are of great relevance to CP. In an increasingly more complex and globalised world, CP is faced with emerging challenges that are steering the wheel of research and action towards new directions (Marsella, 1998). We agree with those who believe that the future of the discipline lies in forging new alliances with other fields as well as expanding its sphere of action beyond the micro and meso to the macro/global level (Stark, 2012). The social justice scholarship can be a great ally in that regard. For example, we believe some questions raised from CP on how to tackle pressing global issues such as climate change (Riemer & Reich, 2011) and the aging population (Cheng & Heller, 2009) can be better understood if framed in terms of environmental and intergenerational justice. The findings presented in this study—with particular regard to intergenerational justice—suggest that the happiness of today's societies is intrinsically linked to the attempts of national policies to ensure, amongst other things, the welfare of present and future generations.

Another important task for CP is to find new alternatives to the present state of the economy worldwide. The excessive reliance on GDP by many governments around the world has led to neglecting other fundamental aspects of the welfare state (Radcliff, 2013). Conversely, as Stark (2012) eloquently reminds us “For the future of our world, well-being, individual and collective happiness and social justice will become important elements of a currency which should be more important than money” (p. 43). Our findings encourage CP efforts to go beyond GDP as the only indicator of country welfare and promote those conditions of social justice that bring about individual and collective well-being (Natale, Di Martino, Procentese, & Arcidiacono, 2016).

We also think it would be important to use the various domains of the SJI to think how CP can contribute to their realization. For example, how can CP, as a discipline, contribute to poverty reduction, access to healthcare, and to intergenerational justice? While there are various frameworks for organizing human well-being—the SJI, the HDI and the capabilities approach, among them—CP can choose one and begin a systematic process of contributing to their realization at the macrolevel.

Lastly, with regard to our overall contribution to the science of wellness, this paper reinforces the need to pay attention not only to psychological dynamics at the individual level, but also to social, political, and economic conditions as well as aspects of good governance that, as we attempted to demonstrate here, are highly related to the experience of national life satisfaction. We hope to support all those within and outside the field of CP, who are trying to design new social policies and interventions, which today are so much needed to create happier societies.

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