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## Evaluation of Subjective and Objective Aspects of Russian Students' Well-Being

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### Abstract

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We conducted an online research using a questionnaire and a case study in order to reveal how objective aspects, such as income, consumer assets, positive and negative events, correspond to self-reported subjective well-being of Tomsk students. The result of the study is that non-economic aspects (family and health) are more valuable for respondents. Most of them underestimate their health status and do not see any gains in getting useless good available for free.

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**Keywords:** Subjective well-being, objective well-being, quality of life, happiness, well-being indicators.

### 1. Introduction

Rate of development in modern economy allows a constant increase not only in standards of consumer's life, but also in their quality of life. Nowadays most of Russian households have a house, a car, a summer house, one or more mobile phone. However the growth of private and public goods does not guarantee happiness and well-being.

From an external point of view the consumer may seem a very fortunate person, but his own estimate can differ from public opinion. Even a completely satisfied person could have tendency to depression, and could stay in uncertainty for a long time. This is especially common for modern students.

Student status usually implies a limited capacity to earn their own money but at the same time public consumption standards create more and more new requirements. If a student can satisfy some of

his/her needs out of the earnings or free-obtained consumer goods, then what about needs that are difficult to meet for money? What is the relationship between objective and subjective factors of human well-being?

Considering money, consumer goods, and the past events occurred in the respondent's family as objective indicators of well-being, we decided to investigate **whether and how the amount of material value is associated with subjective well-being in Russian students.**

To achieve the goal of this study, we developed a questionnaire, which was posted on the Internet platform "SurveyMonkey" from May 12 to May 22, 2014. The questionnaire included questions about subjective and objective well-being. Respondents were recruited by the social network "VKontakte" with the "snowball sampling" method and by sending invitations to the communities of Tomsk university students.

221 students took part in this study, whose average age was 21 years old. Most of participants said that at the time of the survey they were students.

For many years outstanding researchers have tried to identify adequate well-being indicators. The most obvious approach is a regression model with the aim to find good regressors in the equation where well-being is a regressand. So the usual approach is to measure well-being in terms of changes in total wealth per capita (OECD Better Life Index, 2013; Howell & Howell, 2008), natural capital per capita (Engelbrecht, 2009; World Health Organization, 2005), the level of country's development (Isham, 2002; Sacks, 2010) and other macro-level indicators (for a review see Diener at al., 1999). Alternatively some separate individual indicators may be viewed as a proxy for well-being, like for example income (Diener & Oishi, 2000; Ferrer-i-Carbonell, 2005; Kahneman & Deaton, 2010), age (Currie, 2012; Axford, Jodrell & Hobbs, 2014), and health (Diener at al., 1999, Diener & Biswas-Diener, 2008; Currie, 2012).

Some systematic approaches tried to integrate and systematize the connection between objective indicators and subjective well-being.

For example, Costanza and colleagues (2007) proposed an integrative measure of Quality of Life (QOL) as a system of objective indicators of human needs, which include subsistence, reproduction, security, affection, understanding, participation, leisure, spirituality, creativity, identity, freedom. The connection between objective indicators and subjective well-being estimates the degree of satisfaction and the relative importance of every kind of needs. This approach in terms of subjective and objective well-being allows authors to find policy implications and strategies for QOL enhancement.

A slightly different research approach to the connection between objective and subjective well-being was proposed by Oswald and Wu (2010). As objective well-being measure they adopted the system of indicators included in Quality of Life Index from USA statistical data and as subjective well-being the life satisfaction ranking from questionnaire they adopt. The question item was "In general, how satisfied are you with your life?" with a 4-point Likert scale from "very satisfied" to "very dissatisfied". Surprisingly, the correlation between Quality of Life and Life Satisfaction is not so strong, but it is slightly positive and statistically significant. However, in other papers a weak correlation between objective indicators and subjective well-being was found (see e.g. Cummins, 2000).

A very interesting idea is presented in the paper of De Neve, Diener, Tay and Xuereb (2013). It is not only objective circumstances that influence well-being but well-being itself as a degree of happiness influences the quality of human life.

The originality of our approach is that we have attempted to link the objective and subjective assessment of well-being in their individual components. First of all, it is necessary to define two main concepts: subjective and objective measures of well-being.

**Subjective measure** is an individual's opinion or judgment about the value of material and non-material goods, based on personal beliefs. This type of measure can be obtained from the respondent directly through interview or questionnaire. Two types of questions are used to assess subjective well-being. In "open-ended questions" respondents can formulate their own answer; in a "closed-ended question respondents can select among a given set of options. Moreover, in some closed-ended questions the answers were given in the form of a Likert scale and respondent gave his own evaluation, based on the internal feelings, and his own specific understanding of the question. In the present study were used closed-ended questions and Likert scale. We did not use open-ended questions because of the nature of the Internet survey and free-of-charge involvement of respondents in our research.

**Objective measure** is a conventional view, based on society's view of individual's welfare in different aspects: family, political rights and freedom, physical health, income, economic goods. This type of well-being measure can be obtained from the respondent by means of specific questions about these aspects of his life. There is the possibility that respondents misunderstood the questions. However, given the online administration of our survey, we did not have the possibility to control this aspect of the research. Comparing these two estimates for different areas, it is possible to understand how subjective evaluation correspond the objective one.

## **2. Russian students' well-being: hypotheses testing**

In this study we aimed to test the following hypotheses:

**H.1:** Non-economic aspects are more important than the economic aspects in human well-being.

**H.2:** Respondents make "a poor mouth", i.e. underestimate their real position in the different social spheres.

This hypothesis is followed by several sub-hypotheses:

*H.2.1:* People underestimate well-being in the family;

*H.2.2:* People underestimate observance of their human rights and political freedoms;

*H.2.3:* People underestimate their physical health;

*H.2.4:* People underestimate the satisfaction with their income.

**H.3:** Receiving of free-of-charge "useless" goods influence respondent's well-being.

Consider the results of hypothesis testing in the order of the questionnaire structure.

The questionnaire consisted of three sections. In the first section questions aimed to determine if the respondent consider more important the economics or the non-economics aspects.

The economic aspects included in our questionnaire were "high income" (high salary or other earnings), "necessary economic goods" (those goods that are needed for a comfortable life). To non-economic aspects we refer "well-being in the family" (favorable material and moral family

atmosphere), "political rights and freedoms" (freedom of speech, freedom of choice, human and property rights protection), "good physical health" (standard of health that allows to live fully). Each item was rated by respondents on the 5-point Likert scale, where 1 indicates that the item was very important in determining well-being and 5 indicates that the item was not important. The analysis was performed in two steps. In the first step, the average rating of the economic aspect was calculated, that was compared with the average rating of non-economic aspects for each respondent. In the second step, we counted the number of respondents who have an average rating of non-economic aspect more than economic one.

Answers to the questions of the first section were used to test hypothesis H.1: Non-economic aspects are relatively more important than the economic aspects of human well-being.

It was found that 75.6% of respondents believe that their well-being is mainly due to non-economic aspects. The majority of respondents (78.8%) selected "well-being in the family" in the first place and "good physical health" in the second (49.3% of respondents). Non-economic aspect ("political rights and freedoms") was for respondents not so important, they put it in the last place (47.93% of respondents). Economic aspects rated third and fourth place, although the distribution of estimates showed that people do not have clear preferences on these aspects. "Necessary for life goods" was for respondents relatively more important than a high income. Some respondents (24.42%) believe that economic aspects are the basis of human well-being.

So, non-economic aspects are more important for people, than economic ones. The H.1 hypothesis was confirmed. The second hypothesis was evaluated in the second section of the questionnaire. Respondents ranked necessary economic goods, well-being in the family, political rights and freedoms, and physical health on a 10-point Likert scale. After that they were offered to select the events that happened to them. The aim is to identify issues of objective evaluation. A half of the events suggests a positive effect on well-being and another half affects negatively. Each event is estimated at 1 point. From the neutral value (5 points) we subtracted points of negative events and added points of positive events. The total score compared with the subjective evaluation. If the estimates are the same, the respondent assesses the actual well-being correctly. If the total score is less than subjective score, respondent overestimates the importance of this component. If on the contrary, it underestimates.

191 respondents answered the questionnaire and 30 respondents refused to answer these questions. The most frequently mentioned event is "disease of a relative" (34.03%), in the second place there is "improving the financial position" (29.84%), in third place "promoting of a family member" and "visit of a long-awaited family member" (24.61%), followed by "death of a relative" (24.08%), "birth of a child" (13.61%), "wedding" (12.04%), "loss or damage to valuable property" (12.04%), "dismissal of a relative" (9.95%) and "divorce" (3.66%).

The sub-hypothesis H.2.1 (people underestimate the evaluation of well-being in the family) was tested first. Based on these results it can be concluded that 83.9% of respondents overestimate the evaluation of well-being of their family, 9.7% assess the actual well-being and 6.5% underestimate. Also the correlation between the respondent's subjective evaluation and the number of events that occurred in his last year was calculated. The coefficient of correlation was 0,26. This result shows that there is no stable connection between the number of the occurred events and the well-being in the

family. Thus, respondents overestimate the evaluation of well-being in the family. The conclusion is that H.2.1 hypothesis was not confirmed. The opposite assumption (Students overestimate the evaluation of well-being in the family) turned to be correct.

The next tested sub-hypothesis was H.2.2: People underestimate the evaluation of observance of their human rights and political freedoms. The analysis of the human rights and freedoms was done in the same manner as for the question of family's well-being. Seventy-four point seven percent of respondents overestimated their evaluation of observance of their human rights and political freedoms. Perhaps, students came up against situations of violation of the rights not so often because of the lack of social experience. This is indirectly confirmed by the fact that 41 respondents skipped this question. Also, nearly one half chose the answer "other rights and freedoms are respected." This indicates that most respondents do not claim to comply with the law against them. The variant of the answer "freedom of speech in social networks. You can write everything you want" is in the second place, behind the first place by only two votes. Respondents think that they have freedom of speech, and actively use it. Seventeen respondents answered that they have been took to trial, and 12 of them were resolved in respondent's favor when he was right. However, 41 respondents believed that they become victims of a crime in the last year, but only in eight cases the offender was found and punished; 14 respondents said that last year they bribed somebody. Moreover the variant "other your rights and freedoms were restrained " collected one third of votes indicating inefficiency of the laws.

Only 12,9% of respondents estimated the level of the political rights and freedoms in the same vein as the events happened, 12,4% of respondents underestimated, all others overestimated their rights and political freedoms. In the life of respondents adverse events occur that do not fall in the estimate of respondents' well-being, they just do not realize that their political rights and freedoms are violated; participants often consider this not relevant to their well-being. **H.2.2 hypothesis was not confirmed.**

Physical health was analyzed as follows. First, respondents had to indicate their physical state of health on a 10-point Likert scale, based on subjective feeling. This was followed by a question about the diseases respondents had. Each disease was equal to 1 point. The scores for all diseases of the respondent summed and subtracted from 10. The final score was compared to the subjective score, i.e. to the score, which put the respondent about his physical health. If the result was identical, we considered that the respondent valued his physical health correctly. If the total score was less than subjective estimate, we considered that the respondent overestimated his physical health and vice versa. Results showed that 52.1% of respondents underestimated their physical health; whereas 28.1% of respondents overestimated their physical health, and 19.8% of them estimated correctly. It should be noted that the majority of respondents were students aged 21. Thus, more than one half of them believe that their health is worse than it actually is, i.e. they reported some chronic diseases in the relevant section of the questionnaire (on average, 5.5 from 10 possible diseases), but did not consider themselves as completely healthy (average rating of subjective state of physical health is only 6.9 points out of 10). More than one half (95 respondents) reported that they experience sometimes depression or stress. Fifty-nine respondents are overweight. Fifty-one respondents said that they have gastritis or ulcer, followed by more serious diseases of eyes, teeth, digestive system, and urogenital system. Oddly, viral diseases were in the penultimate place, reported by only 33 respondents. Only 36

respondents did not choose any disease from the list. So people systematically make "a poor mouth" in assessing physical health. **H.2.3 hypothesis was confirmed.**

The satisfaction with "high income" was analyzed as follows. Firstly, the respondent reported their satisfaction with income on a 10-point Likert scale divided into four intervals. Then, there was a question, which helped to clarify what he can afford on his income as on the figure 1. Each variant of answers to this question had the valuation interval. If the income interval was higher than the subjective evaluation of satisfaction with the income, the respondent underestimated his income and vice versa.

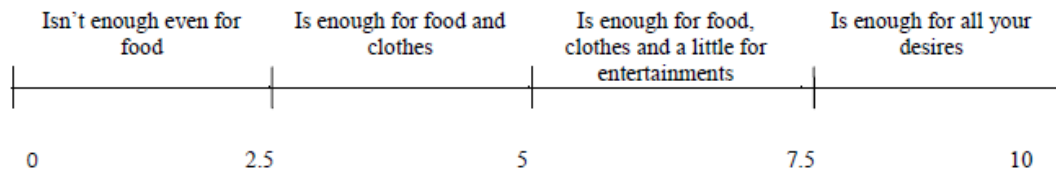


Figure 1. The rating scale of the "high income" evaluation

Half of respondents (101 persons) reported that they have enough money for food, clothes and entertainment. Forty-eight respondents say that they have money only for food and clothes. An interesting result is that among our respondents 27 have enough money for all their desires and the same number of those who has money only for food and nothing more. Thus, 45% of respondents estimate their income correctly; 33.2% of them underestimate their income and 21.8% overestimate. So, people tend to overestimate the satisfaction with their income. **The hypothesis of H.2.4 wasn't confirmed.**

In the third section of the questionnaire we analyzed the relationship between well-being and free-of-charge received goods. It was done by means of special tasks ("cases"). These tasks contain unusual situations in which respondents are asked to assess the situation to get free goods in a special condition. The aim of these tasks was to determine whether an increase in the amount of consumer goods would cause an increase of well-being, in case the good is useless for the respondent. This included getting books in English, if the respondent cannot read in English; an iPhone 3G, if the respondent already possesses iPhone 5S; an expensive cheese for the respondent with milk protein allergy; jeans of smaller size; a ticket to a concert of classical music for rock fans. The respondents had two options: accept or reject the good.

197 people answered to the case study tasks. Most of them accepted everything was offered to them for free. Fifty-seven point eight percent of respondents accepted the book; the iPhone 3G was accepted by the 50.76% of respondents; 57.87% of respondents preferred to receive jeans; and the ticket for a concert has been accepted by the 76.65% of the sample. Only on one question about the French cheese there were more than one half of rejections (74.11%). People don't want to take something what can harm them, but they agree to accept something that cannot bring them any benefit. Most people told that they would "regift" a useless thing or leave it "for better times", when this thing will be needed. Also we analyzed the correlation matrix of answers to the cases, in particular the correlation between respondents' subjective evaluations about the family, political rights and freedoms, income, and physical health and the answers to the cases; also answers of cases were compared with each other.

As a result, the desire to take unnecessary items is largely independent from the desire to take another unnecessary item, i.e. in general, people do not abuse of the opportunity to receive free goods. However, a weak correlation was found between accepting and iPhone 3G and accepting other goods. It means that respondents who wished to take an outdated model of iPhone will be to some extent inclined to take cheese (correlation = 0.33), and jeans (0.18), and a ticket to the concert (0.15). It is possible to draw a conclusion that the desire to take a useless free good could not be associated with well-being. **H.3 hypothesis was not confirmed.**

### **3. Conclusion**

Having considered such concepts as subjective and objective well-being and having analyzed their interrelations, we can suggest that the internal human estimate does not always coincide with reality. People either under- or overestimate phenomena influencing their well-being.

Well-being in the family, political rights and freedoms are rated by students higher than these components actually matter. This attitude can be the basis for long-term economic growth not only on a regional economy level but also for Russian society as a whole. If a person, in his opinion, has a happy family, whatever would happen, in order to improve the material conditions he will try to earn or obtain goods by another way to bring them to the family. If a person feels that his rights are protected, regardless of the actual situation in the country's political system, there will be no situation for rebellion, revolution and other instability. All this also leads to stable economic development.

52.1% of respondents underestimate the physical health. This is not surprising, since 60.54% of the respondents felt anxiety and dejection, depression and stress. Such a mood strongly influences the self-reported health. But for the economy it has a twofold effect: on the one hand, it inhibits labor and consumer activity of economic agents, on the other, forces them to go to the health care system, supporting its development. But the majority of respondents (45%) objectively evaluate their income. The vast majority of respondents in our study are students, people who basically do not work and are dependent on the family budget. We argue that the family provides a livelihood to the children so that they almost want for nothing. They have almost enough for everything they need and even a little more than that. It can be assumed that students are sensitive to the financial position of their families.

Main findings of our research could be put as follows. Firstly, 75.58% of people believe that non-economic aspects play a greater role in their well-being than economic. Secondly, a simple increase in the quantity of goods does not lead to an increase in well-being, useless, even free goods does not make our life better.

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