

Perceived Upward Mobility and Happiness Among University Students in Seven Countries

Stephen J.J. McGuire

California State University, Los Angeles, USA

Yang Zhang

University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, USA

Tatiana Goroshnikova

Financial University, under the Government of the Russian Federation, Russia

Carmen Păunescu

Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Romania

Juan Perusquía

Universidad Autónoma de Baja California, Mexico

Eduardo Ahumada-Tello

Universidad Autónoma de Baja California, Mexico

Mansi Rastogi

Amity University Kolkata, India

Robert Tang

De La Salle-College of Saint Benilde, The Philippines

Jinfeng Wang

Shandong Technology and Business University, China

Abstract. The study examined the relationship between perceived upward mobility and happiness with a sample of 1,750 business undergraduate students in China, India, Mexico, Philippines, Romania, Russia, and the United States. Following wellbeing theory and prior research, we

This shortened version of the article is for promotional purposes on publicly accessible databases.

Readers who wish to obtain the full text version of the article can order it via the url

<https://www.neilsonjournals.com/JIBE/abstractjibe21zhangetal.html>

Any enquiries, please contact the Publishing Editor, Peter Neilson pneilson@neilsonjournals.com

© NeilsonJournals Publishing 2026.

hypothesized that both economic and social mobility would explain subjective and psychological wellbeing, for which we found robust support. We then examined the mediating roles of optimism (belief of a favorable future) and responsibility (feeling accountable for outcomes and for others). Results indicate that optimism mediated the relationship between economic mobility and social wellbeing overall and in each country sample, while responsibility mediated the relationship between social mobility and psychological wellbeing. Among university students in the 7 countries, economic and social mobility contribute to increases in happiness – both short term pleasure and a longer term feeling of fulfillment of potential. We discuss avenues for future research as well as pedagogical implications of our findings.

Keywords: happiness, upward mobility, economic mobility, social mobility, wellbeing, optimism, responsibility.

1. Introduction

Economic and social mobility are currently hotly debated topics in many countries around the world. In 2022, the wealthiest 10% controlled over 76% of the wealth of the world. In the United States, in 2025 the gap between the top 1% and the rest of the population was the largest it had been since 1945, with the wealthiest 10% having 17 times the wealth of the middle 50%. In Russia and China, inequality has also sharply increased resulting in a gap of 1 to 14; in India, the gap is even greater, about 1 to 22 (Chancel et al., 2022). In Mexico, “one of the most unequal countries in the world,” the top 10% have 31 times the wealth of the middle 50% of the population (Chancel et al., 2022, p. 209). In Romania, the social situation shows certain inequalities: the earnings of the highest 10% of earners were 4.3 times higher than those of the lowest 10%, while the median disposable household income stood at 59% of the OECD average (OECD, 2024). The Philippines has one of the highest rates of income inequality in East Asia, with the top 1% of earners capturing 17% of the national income, while the bottom 50% share only 14%; however recently inequality has begun to fall (World Bank, 2025).

At the national level, growing economic inequality may lead to societal malaise, worsening health outcomes (including lower life expectancy), lower economic growth, higher crime, lower trust in government and public institutions, and lower levels of happiness and life satisfaction (IMF, 2025; Jetten et al., 2021). National income inequality may also affect social mobility, as illustrated by the so-called “*Gatsby Curve*” wherein the higher the degree of economic inequality, the lower the chance of moving up socially (Durlauf et al., 2022).

At the individual level, we wanted to explore not inequality, but instead mobility; that is, individual and family improvements in one’s relative standing in society, both economically and socially. We believe that *perceived mobility* plays a fundamental role in explaining why and to what extent people are happy. Previous research has not fully explored the relationship between upward mobility and wellbeing, although some scholars have identified a positive relationship. For example, Li et al. (2023) found a relationship between social

mobility perceptions and expectations of subjective wellbeing. Marzi (2016) argued that aspirations for upward social mobility (including ambition) are central to the process of actual mobility and the development of wellbeing outcomes, especially for young people. Huang et al. (2017) found that Chinese rural-to-urban migrants gained in subjective well-being not only because of direct financial achievement but also because of their perceptions and beliefs about their relative social status.

Of course, individual differences among people in similar circumstances matter. As Davis (1957: 134) pointed out: *“Failure attends the efforts of the majority of those individuals who wish to rise to a higher status and actually attempt to do so.”* As Davis noted, it may very well be that individual differences explain why individuals in similar circumstances arrive at very different life outcomes. We posit that two individual characteristics, optimism and feelings of responsibility for outcomes, will enhance the relationships between mobility and happiness, as we explain below.

2. Literature Review and Hypothesis Development

We next review the literature on wellbeing, status and perceived upward mobility, optimism, and responsibility, and present our testable hypotheses.

Wellbeing

The discussion of wellbeing has lasted for centuries and is deeply rooted in the debate about what constitutes happiness and living a good life. Ancient Greek philosophers Aristippus of Cyrene and Epicurus are well-known for their views of hedonism (Ryan & Deci, 2001). They believed that the fundamental reason for a life to exist is to pursue pleasure: living a good life; wellbeing is therefore about maximizing pleasure and minimizing pain. In the letter to Menoeceus, Epicurus wrote, *“Pleasure is our first and kindred good. It is the starting point of every choice and of every aversion, and to it we come back, insomuch as we make feeling the rule by which to judge every good thing”* (Berryman, 2016).

Hedonic philosophers like Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill applied utilitarian views of pleasure to quantify pleasure / wellbeing: pleasure comes from different means with different quality levels (West, 2004). One should maximize the total pleasure coming from selective high-quality means rather than one single mean. High quality means include pursuits of intellectual, emotional and aesthetic pleasures rather than sensual and physical pleasures. According to Mill, *“It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied”* (West, 2004).

Eudaimonia commonly refers to flourishing, doing well or living well. Aristotle is generally considered to be the father of eudaimonia. He believed that virtue and fulfillment are key components of wellbeing / happiness: *“Again, our*

definition accords with the description of the happy man as one who ‘lives well’ or ‘does well’ [...] happiness [is ...] a form of good life or doing well” (Van de Weijer, et al., 2018). In the eudemonic view, wellbeing is about accumulating and practicing knowledge over time, fulfilling human capabilities, and actualizing human potential (Ryan & Deci, 2001). This view has inspired psychology, sociology and management research in the fields of social exchange, motivation, entrepreneurship, etc. For example, in his hierarchy of needs, Maslow proposed that the highest level of needs one could achieve is self-actualization, wherein one reaches the fullest potential in life (Maslow, 1943).

Driven by the former philosophical themes of happiness or living a good life, researchers have explored two main types of wellbeing in the social sciences: subjective wellbeing and psychological wellbeing.

Subjective Wellbeing

Coming from hedonism, subjective wellbeing focuses on maximizing pleasure and optimizing self-interest (Ryan & Deci, 2001). In studies of subjective wellbeing, Diener’s three propositions have had a profound influence on research and teaching: (1) Subjective wellbeing is subjective (not objective). It resides within one’s own individual experience, criteria and judgements. Objective factors, such as wealth and health, may influence one’s subjective evaluation of wellbeing, however these objective factors are not inherent, essential or necessary for one’s subjective wellbeing; (2) subjective wellbeing must be assessed using positive measures, which cannot be replaced by negative measures, since pleasure is a key component of hedonism; and (3) subjective wellbeing measures should be inclusive of all important life aspects and should be considered as a global or overall measure set (Diener, 1984).

Researchers generally include life satisfaction, positive affect, and negative affect when studying subjective wellbeing (Diener et al., 1985). For decades, researchers have investigated subjective wellbeing and its outcomes such as social relations, health, and societal benefits (Diener & Ryan, 2009). For example, Rego et al. (2010) found that affective wellbeing (positive affect) leads to citizenship behavior. Lambert (2010) and Meynhardt et al. (2020) got similar results that life satisfaction (one component of subjective wellbeing) is positively associated with citizenship behavior. Zhang et al. (2024) found that individual wellbeing is associated with social entrepreneurial intent. McGuire (2023) found that increased subjective wellbeing is associated with lower levels of deviant behavior in university or at work. Subjective wellbeing, in addition to being of value for its own sake, has multiple positive consequences.

Psychological Wellbeing

Rooted in Aristotle’s eudaimonia, psychological wellbeing focuses on human flourishing and full functioning (Ryan & Deci, 2001). According to Ryff (1989, 1995, 2014), psychological wellbeing is about pursuing growth and