



ARTICLE IN THE SPECIAL SECTION

## Subjective Well-Being and Participation in Volunteering in Russia

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### ABSTRACT

An extensive body of research suggests a positive connection between subjective well-being (SWB) and volunteering. However, their relationship is often described in terms of health-related and personal psychological effects, thus raising an issue of elaborating proxies that would focus on the social effects and determinants of such relationship. This study aims to demonstrate a number of direct and indirect links of volunteering and the SWB on the example of Russian citizens. We believe that exploring the connection between SWB and volunteering can expand knowledge about the social component of SWB and its correlates. The hypotheses suggested were tested using binary logistic regression on data from the All-Russian population survey ( $N = 2,015$ , urban and rural residents aged 18 and over were interviewed by telephone). The obtained results do not allow us to conclude that volunteering itself significantly increases the level of subjective well-being. Nevertheless, some kind of “external effect” was revealed: respondents are more likely to feel happy if they observe social solidarity, which in turn may be fostered by raising awareness of the beneficial outcomes of volunteerism. This observation directly leads to practical considerations to be taken into account in planning and organizing volunteer engagement. It would require a shift in the promotion of volunteerism, from its direct impact on the lives of individuals to a broader effect of volunteering on the quality of life in the community at large, fostering the feeling of social connectedness, common goals and solidarity. To achieve this, concerted efforts of NGO leaders and social media in this direction will be important.

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**Introduction**

The concept of subjective well-being became entrenched in social sciences only in the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Until then, its closest equivalent, the somewhat fuzzy and not very clearly defined concept of happiness, had been in the limelight of debates involving philosophers and psychologists. Different conceptualizations of happiness emphasize either its more hedonic aspects focused on pleasant feelings and positive emotions or its more eudaimonic side centered on fulfillment and personal meaning (Leontiev, 2020). Owing to a global nature of happiness, which embraces both a mental judgement and subjective reaction with regard to an individual's life situation, we prefer, following Leontiev, to use a more specific and measurable concept of "subjective well-being" (SWB) as an operationalization of happiness.

However, the concept of subjective well-being is also extensively debated. What is important about SWB is that "an essential ingredient of the good life is that the person herself likes her life" (Diener et al., 2009, p. 63). A broad concept of SWB includes both cognitive and affective evaluation of individual's life. For instance, the impact of volunteering on the SWB of volunteers in the UK was assessed with such key SWB dimensions as life satisfaction, quality of life, sense of purpose, sense of control, anxiety, and depression (Stuart et al., 2020).

One of the earliest overviews devoted to SWB theories and measurement identifies three hallmarks that distinguish SWB: its subjective nature, the abundance of positive measures although a balance between positive and negative indices should not be overlooked, and an emphasis on the global assessment, an integrated judgement of all aspects of a person's life (Diener, 1984, p. 545). According to Leontiev (2020, p. 20), Diener's paper had outlined basic psychological contours of SWB whereas later studies mostly refined and elaborated Diener's major conclusions. A case in point is a study (Borgonovi, 2008), which underscores the subjectivity of the subjective well-being concept and puts forth self-reported health and self-reported happiness as SWB core indicators.

As reflected by the emergence of "positive psychology" (Seligman, 2002), the concept of positive subjective well-being has been increasingly capturing the attention of researchers in recent years. The interest in people's subjective well-being, in contrast to the traditional focus on their ill-being, has expanded the idea of what it means to live well, thereby drawing attention to the potential significance of inquiring into people's subjective views of their subjective well-being (Mellor et al., 2009).

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Even a brief overview of SBW literature clearly indicates that psychological, often medical, and sometimes philosophical and economic perspectives predominate in conceptualizing, measuring, and explaining SBW. Also, a relationship between SBW and prosocial behavior is mostly viewed through the lenses of psychology as a way of helping people to realize their existential needs for purpose and fulfillment in life needed to experience optimal psychological health (Konrath, 2014). Indeed, it has been rightly emphasized that a study of SWB has great implications for psychology, as it provides insight into how people feel and think about their lives (Diener et al., 2003). A significant body of research corroborates the evidence that giving of both time and money to others is associated with a number of physical health benefits for givers, including stronger immune systems, a reduced risk of serious illnesses, better cardiovascular health, and a lower mortality risk (Konrath & Brown, 2013).

However, the prevailing empirical and theoretical focus on psychological and medical aspects of SBW leads to a certain underestimation of SBW social aspects. As Diener concludes, the type and quality of social contact differ from study to study. Moreover, they have not been systematically analyzed. Social contact is often related to SWB, but the parameters that affect this relationship are not well understood (1984, p. 564).

To address the gap in studying social aspects of SWB, Mellor et al. (2008) suggest what seems a very productive approach. Within the general SWB construct, Mellor and colleagues identify a neighborhood (or community) well-being component (NWB), that is people's subjective experiences of living in a given community, along with the widely recognized personal subjective well-being (PWB) defined as people's own views of their subjective well-being. The concept of NWB comes closest to what may be referred to as a social component of SWB. It concentrates on social constituents of subjective well-being including trust, participation, common goals, and reciprocity as well as material elements of local security, the natural environment, and availability of resources. Mellor et al. (2008) argue that "despite its conceptual relevance to overall subjective well-being, research that has investigated the social aspect of subjective well-being, particularly NWB, is extremely scarce" (p. 152). A study of volunteering, which is a form of social engagement, and its relationship with SWB gives a relevant ground for examining this relatively unexplored area.

While a positive nature of the above relationship has been well documented, most of the research concentrate on personal and psychological benefits of volunteering for volunteers as individuals, such as gaining new knowledge and skills, changes in career path, enhanced confidence and self-esteem. The social aspects of subjective well-being expose a complex and multilayer structure of SWB but this strand of research received relatively less attention. However, there is no strict dividing line between the social and psychological (or personal) components of SWB, which often overlap.

This paper aims to explore the relationship between volunteering and SWB with a focus on the impact of volunteering on various aspects of SWB. In particular, we seek to demonstrate a number of direct and several indirect links between volunteering and SWB using the example of Russian citizens. In our view, exploring the nexus between SBW and volunteering is likely to enhance the knowledge of SWB social component and its correlates.

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As regards volunteering, we follow its operational definition suggested by L. Salamon in the framework of the John Hopkins Comparative Nonprofit Sector Project and subsequently adopted in the *Manual on the Measurement of Volunteering Work* of the International Labour Organization (2011). Volunteering is defined as unpaid non-compulsory work, namely time that individuals give without pay to activities performed either through an organization or directly for others outside of their family or household. These operational criteria could be applied independently of any specific socio-cultural context, which made them particularly useful for a cross-national study of volunteering (Salamon et al., 2011).

With a growing contribution of volunteering to the social and economic development globally, the research into volunteering impacts on subjective well-being will continue to be even more relevant for both theory development and policy recommendations. According to United Nations Volunteers (2021, p. 37), the monthly number of volunteers aged 15 years and over amounts to 862.4 million worldwide. Despite the growing recognition of volunteering contribution to global social and economic development, significant gaps remain in measuring the scope of volunteering due to the scarcity of data, especially in the Global South, and inconsistency of measuring tools and approaches. In Russia, a share of adults engaging in volunteering amounts to some 27% of the population<sup>1</sup>. In terms of policy recommendations, the findings of exploring the nexus between volunteering and SWB will further elucidate how to recruit volunteers more effectively (Mateiu-Vescan et al., 2021). Establishing potential benefits of volunteering may help retain volunteers in the organizations (Studer & von Schnurbein, 2013).

### Literature Review: Correlates and Measurements of the Relationship Between Volunteering and SWB

Researchers have generated an extensive body of literature discussing the association between volunteering and subjective well-being: Appau & Awaworyi Churchill, 2019; Binder & Freytag, 2013; Brown et al., 2012; Gimenez-Nadal & Molina, 2015; Kim & Morgül, 2017; Konrath, 2014; Magnani & Zhu, 2018; Mellor et al., 2009; Post, 2011; Tanskanen & Danielsbacka, 2016; Thoits & Hewitt, 2001.

Diener's classical notion of SWB is firmly rooted in the idea that it relies on the standards of the respondent to determine what is the good life (Diener, 1984, p. 544). In agreement with the focus on the actor's subjective judgement, a robust body of extant literature measures SWB through a correlate such as life satisfaction. Binder and Freytag (2013) found that volunteering at least once a week significantly increased life satisfaction when personality traits, trust, and social networks were considered. This positive impact was demonstrated among those with lower rather than higher levels of subjective well-being, thus suggesting that the effects of volunteering were "driven by reducing the unhappiness of the less happy" (2013, p. 97).

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<sup>1</sup> According to All-Russian Population Survey conducted in 2022 by the Centre for Studies of Civil Society and the Nonprofit Sector of HSE University, Moscow, Russia (Mersianova, 2022).

A similar link between volunteering and life satisfaction was found by Lawton et al. (2021) in their analysis of ten waves of longitudinal data from the British Household Panel Survey and Understanding Society. After controlling for a wide range of factors, including socio-demographic, health, employment status, and religion, the study reported a statistically significant relationship between volunteering and life satisfaction. A longitudinal panel study of adults in Germany (Meier & Stutzer, 2008) also found a direct relationship between volunteering and subjective well-being measured by life satisfaction. The authors reported that an individual who volunteered regularly on a weekly basis had higher SWB than someone who never volunteered.

At that, as follows from the literature review in this section, the relationship between SWB and volunteering is mostly described with psychological and health-related indicators rather than indicators pertinent to the social sphere.

A recent comprehensive umbrella overview of literature identified 28 eligible reviews on older adults in the USA that included a range of volunteer forms. It found a multitude of benefits for volunteering influencing their mental and physical well-being, particularly, reduced mortality, and increased functioning, quality of life, empowerment, motivation, social support, and sense of community. Still, personal psychological and health effects predominated (Nichol et al., 2024).

In terms of personal psychological effects of volunteering, another widely used measure of subjective well-being concentrates on changes in an individual's sense of purpose in life and a fulfilled life. Based on data from the English Longitudinal Study of Ageing, Steptoe and Fancourt (2020) found that regular volunteering, at least once a month, predicted higher levels of feeling that life is worthwhile. Several qualitative studies of recent years established an association between volunteering and a stronger sense of purpose in life (Armour & Barton, 2019; Cousineau & Misener, 2019; Smith et al., 2020).

However, another psychological conceptualization of SWB–volunteering relationship stresses pleasant emotions, a preponderance of positive effect over negative one; hence, the related measure would be a depression- and anxiety-lessening effect of volunteering. A number of studies examined the impacts of volunteering on depression. They predominately focused on changes in depressive symptoms amongst volunteers in later years of their life. Hong et al. (2009) analyzed engagement of people aged 70 and older in volunteering across three waves of a US longitudinal survey. The study found that volunteering had a protective effect against depression for those in later years of life. Hong and Morrow-Howell (2010) polled a group of volunteers involved in the US volunteer program bringing older adults into public elementary schools to improve academic achievement of students. The authors compared changes over time between the school program volunteers participating on average 12 hours per week, with a control group. The research found that after two years of participating in the program and controlling for such factors as marital status, education, employment status, and family income, the volunteering group experienced fewer depressive symptoms whereas the control group reported an increase. While the depression-reducing effects of volunteering and its positive impact on the mental health and subjective well-being of older volunteers are well-

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established, a similar effect of volunteering on youth is only starting to gravitate toward the focus of SWB research. Based on the national survey data (from 2019 to 2020) from across the United States, volunteering was found to be associated with higher odds of excellent or very good health in children aged six to 11 years and adolescents aged 12 to 17 years (Lanza et al., 2023).

Various links between volunteering and economic aspects of SWB have also been firmly established in the literature. It gives reasons to researchers to speak about “happiness economics,” which examines the impact of material and social resources on SWB (Sarracino, 2013, p. 36).

Among economic resources, income is confirmed as an important correlate of SWB, but at the same time, it emerges as not being the only one. Studies have found that the likelihood of volunteering increases with higher income levels (Musick & Wilson, 2008).

Evidence of a positive association between higher income and volunteering was challenged by Diener (1984) whose findings were further supported by Borgonovi (2008). As Diener puts it, people may only know how satisfied they should be by comparing their situation with that of others (1984, p. 559). Almost a quarter of a century later, Borgonovi’s study confirms this view by providing evidence that volunteering reinforces satisfaction for what one has rather than dissatisfaction for what she lacks. Thus, people shift the salient group they use to judge their circumstances from those above them in the income distribution to those below them, which in turn may lead to greater happiness. “By doing so it might mitigate people’s tendency to care excessively about relative income and how badly they are doing compared to those above them in the income distribution and in turn lead to greater happiness” (Borgonovi, 2008, p. 2348).

A reverse positive impact of charity donation and volunteering on SWB has also been consistently registered (Bekkers & Wiepking, 2011; Choi & Kim, 2011; Wilson, 2000). Some economic theories provide insight into the nature of this relationship. For instance, theories of altruism suggest that a person’s subjective well-being could be influenced by the benefits derived from others. Accordingly, the warm glow theory suggests that people derive internal satisfaction from altruistic behavior, such as donation and helping others. Consistent with this, the “warm glow” theory suggests that people derive internal satisfaction from giving (Andreoni, 1990).

As regards social resources associated with SWB, the relationship between social capital and subjective well-being is particularly relevant because social capital and social networks, as its core idea, are natural concomitants of volunteering. The relationship between social capital and SBW has been widely investigated. Despite this, however, no definitive conclusion has been reached owing to both conceptual and methodological difficulties. Partly, these difficulties complicate the study of this relationship due to the generality and vagueness of the social capital concept reflected by a variety of measurements leading to mixed evidence concerning the impact of social capital on SWB.

Most research on social capital stems from Coleman’s seminal work (1988) which identified three basic components of social capital: trust, information channels,

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norms and sanctions. Later studies elaborated on Coleman's ideas. Trust was further subdivided into categories, which are generalized trust and special trust, e.g., trust in known people or institutions (Paldam, 2000). Information channels were broken into social relationships through contacts with family and friends (Powdthavee, 2008) and civic engagement (Bjørnskov, 2006). As for the third component of social capital, norms and sanctions that can promote actions beneficial for common good and constrain undesirable actions, it appears to be the most abstract and the least agreed upon part of Coleman's social capital triad.

Putnam (2000) particularly focused on the role and benefits of formal and informal social networks, although in a later work, Helliwell and Putnam (2004) admitted that "social trust—that is, the belief that others around you can be trusted—is itself a strong empirical index of social capital at the aggregate level" (p. 1439).

Another important constraint in the study of the social capital–SWB relationship is the so-called reverse causation, which means that correlations between social circumstance and subjective well-being might reflect the effects, not the causes of subjective well-being (Helliwell & Putnam, 2004, p. 1441). Fundamentally, this problem remains unresolved affecting almost all aspects of volunteering–SWB relationship. Thus, while volunteering may lead to higher subjective well-being, the reverse is also possible: people who feel well may be more likely to engage in volunteer labor and select themselves in the volunteering group (self-selection). For example, in a study of religious volunteering, Borgonovi (2008) finds that the positive association between volunteering and health is not causal but rather due to reverse causality or self-selection. Several studies report that any association between volunteering and subjective well-being can be better explained by the participation of happier or healthier people in volunteering than by volunteering itself (Appau & Awawory Churchill, 2019; de Wit et al., 2015; Stuart et al., 2020). In a comparative study of individuals aged 50 and above from 12 European countries, Hansen et al. (2018) identified a relationship between volunteering and life satisfaction, which is though "driven by selection of high-satisfaction individuals into volunteering rather than by volunteering having a clear impact on life satisfaction" (p. 12). Similarly, a 21-year longitudinal analysis of individuals from young adulthood to midlife found that the direction of association was from happiness to higher civic engagement measured by participation in organizations, groups, and associations, rather than the other way around (Fang et al., 2018).

Overall, Meier and Stutzer (2008) posit that the mechanisms for the positive relationship between volunteering and subjective well-being can be roughly divided into two groups: intrinsic indicating that people's subjective well-being increases because of volunteering and extrinsic suggesting that people's utility increases because they receive an extrinsic reward from helping others.

The unresolved issue of reverse causation leads researchers to the conclusion of a bi-directional relationship between SWB and social capital (Lucchini et al., 2015). Similarly, a bi-directional relationship seems to exist between various aspects of subjective well-being and volunteering: "We expect personal well-being to select individuals into volunteer work, and we also expect volunteer service to

enhance well-being, net of pre-existing levels of personal well-being and volunteer efforts” (Thoits & Hewitt, 2001, p. 123). Until now, it remains debatable if there is solid evidence to demonstrate casual links between volunteering and SWB and the conclusion made by Helliwell and Putnam (2004) about 20 years ago still holds true: “the use of causal language in talking about the social context of subjective well-being ... is premature, because of the possibility of selection effects, reverse causation” (p. 1456).

## Methodology

The proposed hypotheses stem from the main findings of the literature review summarized below:

- SWB is a multilayer construct, with volunteering relating in different ways to a variety of SWB aspects.
- Positive association has been established between SWB and volunteering, although the casual nature of this association has been extensively debated.
- The relationship between volunteering as a prosocial activity and SWB is largely described in terms of personal psychological and health-related effects.
- Specific links between volunteering and social aspects of SWB have been less systemically explored and the focus has been on the reverse causation between social capital and SWB.

Drawing on the theoretical review, we proposed three hypotheses, each highlighting the relationship between volunteering and various aspects of SWB:

**Hypothesis 1 (H1):** SWB is positively associated with an individual’s overall physical and financial well-being.

**Hypothesis 2 (H2):** Correlates of social capital concomitant with engagement in volunteering, such as trust, willingness to unite with others, and a perception of social cohesion in the society are positively associated with a feeling of happiness.

**Hypothesis 3 (H3):** Participation in volunteering is positively associated with SWB.

This study is based on data from an All-Russian survey conducted by the Centre for Studies of Civil Society and the Nonprofit Sector (HSE University, Moscow, Russia) in 2022. The sample size consisted of 2,015 respondents, including urban and rural citizens aged 18 and older who were surveyed via telephone interviews from September 9 to 19, 2022.

The method of analysis used was binary logistic regression, which estimates the probability of a target event occurring as a function of the explanatory variables using a logit transformation of the dependent variable.

In accordance with the emphasis on the subjective judgment of the actor, to measure the SBW, respondents were asked the following question: “Speaking generally, are you definitely happy, rather happy, rather not happy, or definitely not happy?” The dependent variable takes two values: “one” if the respondents replied that they consider themselves definitely happy or rather happy, and “zero” if the respondents considers themselves definitely not happy or rather not happy.



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The equation includes the following independent variables:

1. Variables describing overall subjective well-being:

- *Income*. This variable takes two possible values depending on whether the current total monthly income of the respondent's family easily allows them to meet basic needs or not;

- *Health*. This variable has three possible values depending on whether the respondent considers their health to be good/very good, average, or poor/very poor;

- *Marital status*. This variable takes three values: the respondent has never been married; the respondent is married or in an unregistered marriage; the respondent is divorced or widowed.

2. Variables characterizing an individual's attitudes toward trust and willingness to unite with others:

- *Generalized trust*. This variable takes two possible values depending on whether the respondent believes that most people can be trusted or that one should be cautious in their relationships with people;

- *Interpersonal trust*. This variable takes two possible values depending on whether the respondent believes that most people in their immediate social circle can be trusted or that one should be cautious in their relationships with them;

- *Perception of social cohesion in the country*. This variable takes two possible values depending on whether the respondent believes that there is more agreement and unity or disagreement and disunity in the country;

- *Perception of cohesion in the immediate social circle*. This variable takes two possible values depending on whether the respondent believes that there is more agreement and unity or disagreement and disunity among the people in their immediate social circle.

The variable "willingness to unite with others" was not included in the final equation as insignificant; besides, it negatively affected the quality of classification.

3. Participation in volunteering in the past year defined as any socially useful work without coercion or payment, although not to help family members or close relatives.

4. Control variables:

- *Gender*;
- *Age*.

The variable "education" was insignificant and was not included in the final model because it negatively affected the quality of classification.

## Results and Conclusions

The results of the logistic regression are presented in Table 1, where  $\text{Exp}(B)$  is the exponent of the regression coefficient, reflecting the change in the chances of feeling happy associated with a change in the predictor compared to the baseline category.

**Table 1**  
*Factors Associated With Happiness*

Factor	<i>p</i>	Exp( <i>B</i> )
Gender (male as a baseline)	.002	1.901
Age	.119	0.989
Generalized trust	.449	1.267
Interpersonal trust	.016	1.678
Perception of social cohesion in the country	.000	2.815
Perception of cohesion in the immediate social circle	.017	1.726
Volunteering participation	.337	1.242
Marital status (not married as a baseline)	.000	
Marital status (married/unregistereg marriage)	.000	2.943
Marital status (divorced/widowed)	.023	2.063
Income	.000	3.505
Health (poor as a baseline)	.000	
Health (average)	.000	3.087
Health (good)	.000	4.923
Constant	.020	0.359

The results of the analysis show that feeling happy is slightly more common for women, but is not significantly associated with age. The variables associated with an individual’s overall well-being have the most noticeable impact on feeling happy. Having an income that easily allows the respondent’s family to meet their basic needs increases the respondent’s chances of being happy by 3.5 times, while good health increases the respondent’s chances of being happy by 4.9 times compared to respondents who rate their health as poor. Marriage increases the respondent’s chances of feeling happy by 2.9 times. Notably, respondents who were previously married but divorced or widowed also have higher chances of feeling happy compared to those who have never been married. Thus, **H1** was fully supported by the data, which corroborates multiple evidence of the relationship between health status and income, on one hand, and SWB, on the other.

According to our data, generalized trust does not have a significant impact on feeling happy, but interpersonal trust increases the respondent’s chances of feeling happy by 1.7 times. Moreover, for respondents who believe that there is more agreement and unity among the people in their immediate social circle, the chances of feeling happy increase by 1.7 times. The impact of the perception of social cohesion in the country is even greater: it increases the chances of feeling happy by 2.8 times. Contrary to our initial expectations, willingness to unite with other people and generalized trust do not have a significant impact on happiness. Overall, it can be concluded that **H2** found partial support.

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As for **H3**, no significant association was found between participation in volunteering and self-reported happiness. This is in conformity with the mixed evidence on the impacts of volunteering on SWB. While most evidence points to a positive association between the two, a small number of studies found that participation in volunteering and civic participation does not have an impact on subjective well-being (Dolan et al., 2004; Stuart et al., 2020, p. 24).

Thus, the analysis carried out indicates that the greatest influence on SWB is predictably exerted by factors such as the absence of financial problems, good health, and having a permanent relationship partner. In addition, the situation in the immediate social environment is also associated with the feeling of happiness: if a respondent does not trust the people around or considers that there is disagreement and disunity around them, they are more likely to feel unhappy. The perception of social cohesion in the country is also significantly positively associated with SWB. We believe that further exploration of social impacts resulting from SWB and volunteering would lead to a better understanding of the relationship between both of these.

At the same time, the results obtained do not allow us to conclude that volunteering in itself significantly increases the level of subjective well-being. Rather, we can talk about a certain “external effect” of helping behavior and volunteering: respondents are more likely to feel happy if they observe social solidarity, which, in turn, may be fostered by raising awareness of the beneficial outcomes of volunteerism. This observation directly leads to practical considerations that need to be taken into account in planning, organizing, and coordinating volunteer engagement. Therefore, a consistent focus on effects of volunteerism for the community at large, such as strengthening the feeling of cohesion, social solidarity, and social support among citizens of different generations and walks of life, could predictably lead to enhancing the links between volunteering and subjective well-being. This, in turn, would require an additional shift in the promotion of volunteerism, from the direct impact of volunteering on the lives of individuals to its broader impact on the quality of life in the community by fostering the feeling of social connectedness, common goals, and solidarity. To achieve this, concerted efforts of NGO leaders and social media in this direction will be important.

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