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Economy Doesn't Buy Community Wellbeing: a Study of Factors Shaping Community Wellbeing in South Korea

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Abstract

Urban scholars have long viewed cities as competing to attract residents. Recently, this competition has expanded to the scope of livability and community quality of life indicators. Cities regularly advertise their high rankings on livability scores to attract new residents. Meanwhile, the 2007–2008 Global Financial Crisis has emphasized the importance of economics again. What makes a city more attractive to people? The traditional literature on cities as developmental states argue economic vitality is most important, while more contemporary literature on cities argue culture and entertainment amenities are important. We conducted a national survey of community wellbeing and its factors in South Korea in 2013. Regression models show natural resources, local administration, and social capital are the most important factors for the overall quality of life in cities. Residents' satisfaction with collective goods, rather than private goods, shape overall assessments of the community. Scholars and policymakers should pay more attention to these collective goods that enhance community wellbeing.

Keywords Community wellbeing · Local governments · Public services

Introduction

Wellbeing and quality of life studies have focused on the measurement of these concepts. Recently, scholars are calling for a more direct connection between wellbeing

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studies and public policy (e.g. Diener et al. 2009). This connection is most visible at the local level with various community wellbeing projects driven by local, national, and international actors. Some examples are the Community Indicators Victoria (Australia), Jacksonville Indicators (US), Sustainable Seattle (US), Calgary Indices of Community Well-being (Canada), and the World Bank's city indicators project (see Hoornweg et al. 2007). The importance of the local level in community wellbeing discourse may reflect broader trends of state rescaling that simultaneously push governance powers upward to international organizations and downward to local governments (Brenner 2004).

Recent trends at the local level reflect the unique position that local governments are in to enhance community wellbeing. In local planning, smart shrinking or smart decline agendas have been celebrated for rejecting the growth-centric paradigm, and instead focusing on the quality of life of current residents (Schilling and Logan 2008). The turn away from growth-centric paradigm reflects a broader critique of capitalism and the call for a new vocabulary on "degrowth" (D'Alisa et al. 2015). Sustainable growth agendas and new urbanism are emphasizing the importance of environmental sustainability for city quality of life and scholars have argued cities can and should promote equity through progressive municipalism (Clavel 2013) and the vision of a "just city" (Fainstein 2010, 2014). However, recently scholars have voiced concerns about the ability of cities to protect community quality of life as national governments have responded to fiscal stress in the public sector by pushing down fiscal stress and blame to the local level in the form of austerity programs (Peck 2014).

In this context of decentralization and austerity, what, if any, is the role of cities in enhancing community wellbeing? How should cities implement community wellbeing into local governance? This paper is an exploratory study of community wellbeing, its drivers, and the role of local governments. Based on survey data from 27 cities in South Korea, regression models show natural capital, local public administration, and social capital have the strongest influence on community wellbeing. The paper concludes with a discussion of our findings and implications for how local governments can be most effective in improving community wellbeing.

Literature Review

Quality of life and wellbeing has been understood as a multifaceted concept and can be traced back to the social indicators movement in the 1960s in the US. The Academy of Arts & Sciences report (Bauer 1966) on the impact of the space race on American society is considered the earliest use of social indicators and in the 1960s interest in social indicators grew to the extent of Duncan (1969) writing about a "social indicators movement." In the 1970s, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development started publishing national reports using social indicators and with Easterlin (1974)'s study of the relationship between happiness and income there was a strong focus on subjective indicators. In the 1980s, interest in social indicators weakened as several national economies suffered from the second oil shock in 1979. In addition, there was some disappointment with the extent to which social indicators had influenced public policy (Land et al. 2012). Nevertheless, there were continued efforts to include social indicators in policymaking processes, such as Amartya Sen (1989)'s capability approach in the 1980s that formed the basis of the United Nations (UN)

Human Development Index. In the 1990s, there was a renewed interest in social indicators with the popularity of the quality of life concept as Western industrial societies recognized the social costs of economic growth. An example of such social costs is the impact on the natural environment and the UN adopted Agenda 21 for sustainable development at the 1992 UN Earth Summit. Reflecting this trend of expanding the concept of wellbeing, there were several efforts to develop composite or summary indicators in the early 2000s.

Kee et al. (2015) take a multidimensional approach to community wellbeing and posited a capital-based model of community wellbeing. The model consists of six capitals: human, economic, natural, infrastructure, cultural, and social. They emphasize the role of local government in enhancing community wellbeing and its potential for local policymaking. The idea of local governments as spaces of democracy that are responsive to resident needs is not new (e.g. Nalbandian 1999). However, there are alternative views of what cities *do* and what they *should* do. Moreover, answers to these questions may change as levels of decentralization change.

Korea's government system is much more centralized in comparison to the US or UK. This is due to the short history of local autonomy that officially began in 1991. Although the latest financial crisis of 2007–2008 was less pronounced in Korea, local governments in Korea were also showing signs of fiscal stress in the aftermath (Kim et al. 2015). In fact, local governments in Korea may be under more stress as there is a relatively short history of decentralization and fiscal resources are still highly centralized. Despite the short history of local autonomy, there is strong evidence that local public officials played a crucial role in Korea's national development in the 1960s and 1970s through the Saemaul Undong (Lee and Kim 2017). Although this community development program was a national government agenda, the implementation of the program relied heavily on the capacity of local officials and community leaders.

Old theories of urban governance were focused on the economic capacity and growth potential of cities. Based on assumptions of regime theory that governments cannot govern the city alone (Stone 1989), Logan and Molotch (1987) identified a growth machine that forms between city government and land-based elites. In a growth machine, the interests of land-based elites who gain profit from increased land values and the interests of city governments that gain from the increased tax base align. Peterson (1981) takes this assumption further and applied it to city policies. He categorizes three types of policies – allocational, developmental, and redistributive – based on their goals. Allocational policies decide which groups receive the benefits of a policy, developmental policies increase economic status of a city, and redistributive policies distribute resources from the "haves" to "have-nots." He argued cities will (and should) focus on developmental policies because it grows the local economy. Based on theories of fiscal federalism, Peterson (1981) does not see this as problematic since redistribution at the local level is bound to be inefficient and ineffective. Assuming mobility of firms and people, expenditures on redistributive services will drive affluent residents out of the community as they receive less from local taxes paid. This view implies cities should focus on policies that will bring economic growth. This view of what cities should do contrasts with "progressive cities" (Clavel 2013) and the "just city" (Fainstein 2014) that emphasizes democracy, diversity, and equity should govern urban

policies. However, even the just-city perspective recognizes that economy constrains policy choices (Fainstein 2010).

Recently, economic development strategies have focused on attracting people (rather than just capital) more explicitly. Building on Florida (2002)'s creative class theory, practitioners are engaging in "place making," which generally means focusing on the physical qualities of a place (Kelly et al. 2016). There are two parts to the creative class theory. One is the presence of highly educated young professionals tend to attract more of the same population (leading to agglomeration and subsequently economic growth) and that this population is particularly attracted to amenities, such as restaurants, bars, recreational activities, and diversity.

Other city visions that emphasize livability and quality of life are new urbanism and sustainable cities. These ideas have had a more explicit emphasis on environmental conservation. While the focus on sustainability can be seen as pushback against the former growth-centric frameworks, whether the practice of measuring and ranking cities by sustainability indicators really breaks out of the former framework is questionable. Using the Eco-City Index and Sustainable Cities Index in a case study, McManus (2012) draws attention to the limitations of sustainability indexes for actually promoting sustainability policies. Rydin (2007) goes even further to say these indicators are legitimation tools for governments. Others have noted problems with sustainability itself as a goal. For example, while scholarly work has explored how sustainability and economic development can be complementary (Portney 2013) residents may still view the two as antithetical, especially in rural places (Cramer 2016).

Local governments are inherently multidimensional in that they provide a broad range of services and must balance multiple pressures from higher level governments and residents. However, local governments work with finite resources and the question of how to spend these resources is always present. In an age of continuing devolution and decreasing assistance from central governments, cities are pressured to attract both capital and residents. Given these pressures on cities, this paper explores what factors are most important for community wellbeing – a potential element that can attract and retain residents.

Data & Methodology

Data are from the national community wellbeing survey ("our survey") we conducted in February and March, 2015 in South Korea. We used a proportional stratified random sampling method by gender, age, and region based on the 2015 national census. The sample included 27 local governments (*si, gun, gu*; equivalent of cities) with approximately 100 respondents (minimum age 19) from each locality. The 27 localities range in population from 30, 271 (*Imsil gun*) to 576, 495 (*Gangnam gu*). The paper survey was administered as a face to face survey by a professional survey firm. After cleaning the data for non-responses, the final sample size was 2593 responses.

The survey is roughly divided into three parts. The first part contains questions about individual satisfaction with various aspects of the respondents' personal life and community. The second part asks about evaluations of the respondents' community, and the last part asks sociodemographic questions.

The purpose of this exploratory study was to see how various community characteristics are related to community wellbeing.[1] The dependent variable is based on the following question: "how satisfied are you with overall life in the community?" Answers were recorded on a 10-point Likert scale. Independent variables are also on a 10-point Likert scale and measure respondents' satisfaction and evaluation of the various capital items. We use these measures as indicators of the levels of various capital elements, such as medical services, public libraries, police services, etc. (see Table 1 for full list).

Results

As the purpose of this paper is to identify which capitals have the most influence on community wellbeing (defined as satisfaction with community life), our models are a set of ordinary least squares (OLS) models with the seven capitals and a full model with all variables. We present the single-capital models first and finally the full model. The single-capital models contain variables for each capital and control variables. That is, the first model includes human capital variables and control variables. The second model includes economic capital variables and control variables.

Comparing the models by R^2 values, the full model shows the highest R^2 value of 0.667, explaining approximately 67% of the variance in life satisfaction. In terms of single-capital models, models IV, VII, and VI have the highest R^2 value of 0.427, 0.421, and 0.404, respectively. Thus, natural capital, local public services, and social capital variables explain most of the variance in community wellbeing. Economic capital, which has been emphasized in urban governance literature, has a lower R^2 value and explains approximately 34% of community wellbeing variance.

We report the results of independent variables by category and by comparing it with the full model. The focus is on variables that show consistent relationships with the dependent variable in the singe-capital and full models. Model I shows higher satisfaction with health condition, medical services, elderly services, overall social services, public libraries, lifelong education, and educational environment are related to higher levels of community wellbeing (CWB). In the full model, only health services and public libraries are positively related to CWB.

Among the economic capital variables, higher satisfaction with unemployment services, level of jobs, budget size, and overall economic conditions are related to higher levels of CWB. The satisfaction with a budget size supporting adequate economic activities in the area as well as a safety net for the unemployed seem to relate to CWB. In the full model, only overall economic conditions are linked to higher levels of CWB. General economic conditions are important for CWB, but this is shaped by macroeconomic forces and largely out of local governments' control.

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[1] To be more precise, we are measuring subjective community wellbeing here as we use individual satisfaction with community life. However, we use the broader term community wellbeing throughout this paper as this paper is not about the various aspects of community wellbeing. For a discussion of aspects of community wellbeing in details see Lee and Kim (2017).

Table 1 Regression results of subjective satisfaction with overall living environment

	I	II	III	IV	V	VI	VII	VIII
Human Capital								
Health condition	0.055***							0.015
Medical services	0.033**							0.016*
Elderly services	0.048***							0.005
Disability services	0.000							−0.005
Childcare services	−0.000							0.003
General social services	0.020*							0.006
Public library	0.124***							0.020**
Lifelong education	0.103***							0.002
Educational environment	0.065***							0.000
Economic Capital								
Unemployment services		0.063***						0.003
Jobs		0.070***						0.008
Local budget		0.115***						0.014
Local taxes		0.005						0.002
Overall local economy		0.175***						0.059***
Cost of living		0.010						−0.002
Cultural Capital								
Leisure life			0.080***					0.066***
Community center programs			−0.075***					0.009
Local cultural spaces			0.067***					0.010
Local cultural artifacts			0.048***					0.008
Local festival			−0.106***					−0.038***

Table 1 (continued)

	I	II	III	IV	V	VI	VII	VIII
Local culture or history			0.309***					0.050***
Natural Capital								
Recycle & waste collection services				0.185***				0.038***
Air quality				0.212***				0.038***
Green space				0.135***				0.127***
Cleanliness of streets				0.041***				0.040***
Noise level				0.002				0.051***
Infrastructure								
Public transit					0.034***			0.081***
Condition of roads					0.056***			0.014
Public spaces for free internet					0.304***			0.043***
Preparedness for natural disasters					0.034***			−0.007
Public order					0.302***			0.072***
Police force					−0.286***			−0.100***
Social Capital								
Volunteer activity						0.012		0.034**
Local community activities						−0.002		0.011
Local community relations						0.329***		0.064***
Level of interactions in local community						0.011		0.027
Citizen participation in local agenda						0.009		0.006
Availability of political news						0.037***		0.008
Public hearings						0.029*		−0.021
Level of local cooperation for problem solving						0.107***		0.059***
Local public services								

Table 1 (continued)

	I	II	III	IV	V	VI	VII	VIII
Fairness of public employees							0.495***	0.262***
Attitude and level of public employees							-0.162***	-0.160***
Ease of accessing public services							0.125***	-0.003
General public services							0.079***	0.003
Control								
Female (dummy)	0.151*	0.088	0.143*	0.126	0.163*	0.217***	0.093	0.073
Age	0.024***	0.022***	0.023***	0.014***	0.014***	0.011***	0.009**	0.006*
Married (dummy)	-0.308**	-0.330**	-0.380***	-0.300**	-0.175	-0.292*	-0.184	-0.205**
Divorced, separated, widowed (dummy)	-0.612***	-0.535**	-0.639***	-0.432**	-0.398*	-0.512*	-0.385*	-0.261*
Middle school	-0.059	-0.210	-0.025	-0.136	-0.049	-0.036	-0.185	0.022
High school	-0.428***	-0.373**	-0.386**	-0.208	-0.279*	-0.190	-0.366**	-0.148
College or Community college	-0.460**	-0.363**	-0.324**	-0.217	-0.310*	-0.172	-0.375***	-0.230*
Graduate school or higher	-0.273	-0.403	-0.468	-0.044	-0.998***	-0.047	-0.405	-0.358
Income	0.001***	0.001***	0.001***	0.001***	0.001***	0.001***	.001***	0.001***
R^2	0.251	0.339	0.317	0.427	0.331	0.404	0.421	0.667

Source: Authors' analysis of 2015 Community Wellbeing Survey

$*p < .05$, $**p < .01$, $***p < .001$. Values reported are OLS coefficients. $N = 2593$ responses

Model III includes cultural capital variables. Higher satisfaction with levels of leisure activities, local cultural spaces, local cultural artifacts, and unique local culture or history were linked to higher levels of CWB. In contrast, satisfaction with community center programs (including senior center programs) and local festivals were linked to lower levels of CWB. In the full model, levels of leisure activities and unique local culture or history were positively related to CWB, while satisfaction with local festivals lowered CWB. Previous studies have found age is negatively correlated with subjective wellbeing (Diener and Suh 1998) and given that most users of senior center programs would be the elderly, this may be contributing to the negative relationship with CWB. The negative relationship between local festivals and CWB may reflect the costs of hosting popular local festivals or fairs. These festivals can draw in lots of people in a short period of time, leading to increased traffic jams or noise levels.

Model IV includes natural capital variables. Higher satisfaction with recycle and waste collection services, air quality, green space, cleanliness of streets is related to higher CWB. In the full model, all variables, including satisfaction with noise levels are positively linked to CWB.

Infrastructure variables, such as public transit, road conditions, free internet, preparedness for natural disasters, public safety, and police services, are included in Model V. All variables have a positive relationship with CWB, except for police services. Higher levels of satisfaction with police services are linked to lower levels of CWB. It is possible that even though someone is highly satisfied with police services in a community, the experience of using police services itself is an unpleasant experience, thus lowering CWB. In the full model, this negative relationship between police services and CWB persists. Meanwhile, only public transit, free internet, and public safety are positively related to CWB.

Model VI includes social capital variables. Local community relations, availability of political news, public hearings, and level of local cooperation for problem solving had a positive relationship with CWB. In the full model, local community relations and level of cooperation for problem solving were positively linked to CWB.

Lastly, Model VII includes local public service variables. In both model VII and the full model, fairness of local public employees (or equity in processing citizen requests) is linked to higher levels of CWB, while satisfaction with public employees' services is linked to lower levels of overall life satisfaction. Similar to the findings of satisfaction with police services, this may point to the nature of experiences with public employees. Most residents do not visit city hall unless they are making a complaint or have to obtain certain permits or licenses. They may be satisfied with the level of service provided to them but be unhappy about something in the community or be frustrated by the bureaucratic procedures required for obtaining these permits or licenses. This may lead to the overall experience being stressful, and ultimately lowering CWB.

Discussion

Cities have long been viewed as the developmental state. After the 2007–2008 Global Financial Crisis, the role of cities as economic engines is being re-emphasized.

However, our model results show higher levels of economic capital are not the strongest drivers of CWB. In fact, the results show natural capital, local public services, and social capital have the most explanatory power for CWB. Only overall economic conditions were linked to higher CWB in the full model. This result confirms the importance of economic vitality for communities; however, previous works show local economies are vulnerable to macroeconomic forces, such as market structure changes or recessions (Christopherson et al. 2010; Martin 2011). Thus, the role of enhancing economic growth may not be an appropriate task for local governments.

The importance of natural capital variables for CWB has implications for the potential conflict between economic growth and environmental sustainability that previous literature has emphasized. Some view this conflict as inherent and the emphasis on preserving natural resources in mostly affluent communities has raised doubts about whether poor communities can afford to be sustainable at the cost of economic growth. Our results imply natural environment is more important for CWB. Our national survey of 27 cities in South Korea collected data from affluent as well as poorer communities. Across all communities, the results show a strong relationship between natural capital and CWB. Increasing competition among cities implies there will be winners and losers in economic outcomes, which threatens the equity principle of a "just city" (Fainstein 2010), but our findings imply cities that are not economic powerhouses need not have lower CWB levels. A focus on natural capital can be an effective way to enhance CWB.

The results of local public services demonstrate the continuing importance of local public administration. Despite the relatively short history of local autonomy in Korea, local public officials played a key role in Korea's development in the 1960s and 1970s through the Saemaul Undong. Our results indicate local officials continue to play a key role in enhancing CWB, particularly through street-level bureaucrats who have face to face interactions with residents. Korea was also the 1st place winner of UN's e-gov survey in 2010 and 2012, and the high quality of Korean public administration has been highlighted by the UN in its Public Service Forums.

Lastly, the variables that are consistently positively related to CWB are collective goods, rather than private goods. These are services or goods that are collectively produced and consumed. With the exception of medical services (our survey did not differentiate whether the medical service was public or private) and level of leisure life, the items that matter most for CWB are public libraries, local culture and tradition, cleanliness of streets, public transit, local community relations, and level of cooperation to solve local problems. This reflects the need for local government roles to go beyond simple service provider. Even though these services may be provided by a local government, the actions of other residents affect the quality and quantity of these services. For example, local governments may provide street cleaning, but the prevalence of littering by residents will determine the level of street cleanliness. Moreover, items such as local community relations or level of cooperation for problem-solving requires input from community members as active citizens. This calls for a facilitator role from local governments (Nalbandian 1999; Sager 2013) with a broader goal that simply economic growth.

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