

Essay

Social Quality and Residents' Subjective Well-Being in China—An Empirical Analysis Based on CSS2021 Data

Xiaojuan Ouyang ^{1,2,*}  and Zequan Pan ¹

¹ School of Public Administration, Central South University, Changsha 410083, China

² School of Social Development and Management, Hunan Women's University, Changsha 410081, China

* Correspondence: 190201011@csu.edu.cn

Abstract: Happiness is the eternal pursuit of human beings, and subjective well-being is an essential indicator for evaluating happiness. Research on subjective well-being mainly focuses on material, economic, and psychological factors, and there is insufficient research on the impact of social factors on subjective well-being. Focusing on the influence of social factors on subjective well-being can help us better understand the “Easterlin Paradox”. Based on the theoretical model of social quality, this paper analyzes the influence of the current Chinese social quality on Chinese people's subjective well-being using the data from the China Social Survey 2021 (CSS2021). It is found that the higher the social quality, the stronger the people's subjective well-being, and this conclusion is stable for different groups. By dimension, socio-economic security, social cohesion, and social inclusion significantly affect people's subjective well-being, but social empowerment does not significantly affect subjective well-being. This paper provides new evidence to explore the impact of social quality on people's well-being.

Keywords: social quality; socio-economic security; social cohesion; social inclusion; social empowerment; subjective well-being



Citation: Ouyang, X.; Pan, Z. Social Quality and Residents' Subjective Well-Being in China—An Empirical Analysis Based on CSS2021 Data. *Sustainability* **2023**, *15*, 13219. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su151713219>

Academic Editors: Giuseppe Battaglia

Received: 12 July 2023

Revised: 19 August 2023

Accepted: 23 August 2023

Published: 3 September 2023



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1. Introduction

Happiness is an ancient but everlasting topic; people's pursuit of happiness is eternal, but different societies have different understandings of happiness at different times, so the influencing factors of happiness are always changing [1–4]. Over the past 40 years of reform and opening up, China's economy has developed rapidly, people's living standards have steadily improved, socialism with Chinese characteristics has entered a new era, and China's social contradiction has been transformed into the contradiction between people's growing needs for a better life and unbalanced and insufficient development [5], so that the focus of the state and the society has gradually shifted from economic construction to the enhancement of people's livelihoods and well-being. According to the Global Happiness Index Report 2022, China's happiness index is ranked 72, and there is still much room for improvement. The report of the 19th CPC National Congress points out that it is necessary to “continuously satisfy the people's growing needs for a better life, continuously promote social justice, form effective social governance and good social order, and make the people's sense of gain, happiness, and security more fulfilling, more secure and more sustainable”. The essence of promoting social justice and forming effective social governance and good social order are to pay attention to the “social factors” that affect residents' sense of well-being, and the impact of social factors on subjective well-being is manifested in social justice, social order, social stability, social cohesion, and social participation. Focusing on the influence of social factors on subjective well-being can help us better understand the “Easterlin Paradox”, i.e., why people's well-being has not increased, or even decreased, despite the continuous economic development. Social quality theory provides a good perspective and analytical tool for the study of this issue. Social quality theory is socially

oriented, focusing on the social nature of human beings as well as the subjective feelings of human beings in the process of interacting with the society and the structural opportunities for personal development in the society. So how, exactly, does social quality affect the well-being of the Chinese people? This paper analyzes the impact of current Chinese social quality on the subjective well-being of the Chinese people using data from the Chinese Social Survey (CSS2021).

2. Literature Review and Research Hypotheses

2.1. Subjective Well-Being and Its Influencing Factors

Subjective well-being is the evaluator's overall assessment of his or her own life satisfaction based on internal criteria, which is subjective, relatively stable, and holistic [1]. Subjectivity means that the evaluation of happiness is mainly based on the actor's own internal cognitive experience as a standard; stability means that, although subjective well-being is affected by the situation and emotional state, overall happiness is a relatively stable value; holistic means that subjective well-being is a comprehensive evaluation; structurally, this evaluation includes three dimensions, namely, the positive emotional experience, the negative emotional experience, and life satisfaction. Academic research on the influencing factors of subjective well-being is summarized in three aspects. Firstly, there are individual factors. Some studies found that personality factors have a significant effect on well-being [6]. Costa believes that extraversion and neuroticism have a higher sensitivity to positive and negative emotions in subjective well-being and can predict the level of subjective well-being [7]. One study found, through meta-analysis, that personality predicted life satisfaction, happiness, and positive affect, but was much less predictive of negative affect [8]. It has also been suggested that age can be used as a predictor of happiness. There is also extensive discussion about the impact of marriage on happiness. In addition, scholars have discussed the impact of gender factors on happiness. Secondly, there are economic factors. Economics has a large number of studies on the impact of economic income on subjective well-being, and there are three aspects of the impact of income on well-being, including absolute income [9], relative income [10], and income inequality [11]. Layard believes that there is a significant positive correlation between absolute income and happiness, but the marginal happiness brought by income decreases against higher income. Layard also points out that relative income has an important impact on happiness, and higher income compared with colleagues, friends, and neighbors also means higher happiness. The relationship between income and happiness also presents a more complex picture. Easterling pointed out that personal income growth can significantly enhance happiness, but national economic growth does not necessarily improve the subjective happiness of the nation. He found, through a number of surveys and studies, that the level of economic growth of the country and the subjective happiness of the nation is a U-shaped relationship. Thirdly, there are social factors. Social psychology explains the influencing factors of happiness from the perspectives of social comparison theory, expectancy theory, goal theory, and adaptation theory. One study examined the impact of religious involvement on subjective well-being, concluding that individuals with strong religious beliefs reported greater life satisfaction [12]. Some scholars analyzed the effects of major life events and life event adaptations on well-being and concluded that divorce, widowhood, career, and disability significantly affect one's subjective well-being. The impact of state systems, especially welfare systems, on subjective well-being has received increasing attention, with studies proving that the social democratic welfare state system provides high levels of subjective well-being and that the social democratic welfare state also best compensates for status differences in levels of subjective well-being compared to other state systems [13]. Welfare system social inequality compensates for the disadvantages of social inequality by supporting disadvantaged groups, thus increasing the subjective related living standards and well-being of citizens, whereas citizens of countries that do a weaker job of reducing inequality will have lower subjective well-being.

2.2. Social Quality and Subjective Well-Being

With the gradual deepening of the study of happiness, researchers have gradually shifted their focus on the factors influencing subjective happiness from objective factors to subjective factors, and from personal factors to social factors. Initially, economic factors were thought to significantly improve the standard of living of society [14], but economic factors ignored all the factors of social development, system, and environment, which are “besides the value of life” [15]. Social quality, on the other hand, focuses more on the interaction between people as social beings and their social environment. Social quality is a measure of good or bad social development, and the concept of social quality is a set of indicators developed by European scholars and used to evaluate the state of social development in each country of the European Union. The European Union Society for the Study of Social Quality defines social quality as “the extent to which people are able to participate in social or economic life in a way that enhances their well-being and realizes their individual potential” [16]. Social quality is a multidimensional concept that encompasses multiple dimensions that influence subjective well-being, such as social capital [17], economic resources [18], and social inclusion [19], which are often studied independently within the framework of social determinants of health [20]. As a comprehensive concept of social quality, many scholars have established and developed a comprehensive system of indicators for evaluating social quality [21]. This concept is measured in four main dimensions, namely the socio-economic security dimension, the social cohesion dimension, the social inclusion dimension, and the social empowerment dimension. Some scholars have identified them as four quadrants, which are the product of the globalization process and historical changes on the one hand, and the result of the relationship between systems, institutions, and communities on the other.

These four dimensions can be further subdivided into a number of indicators, with socio-economic security considering 24 indicators in the areas of economic resources, housing and environment, health and care, employment, and education. The social cohesion dimension is the mechanism that holds society together and builds mutual trust, embodies social solidarity, and provides for social stability and continuity. A number of indicators such as trust, integrative and normative values such as social justice, social networks, and social relations are mainly considered. Appropriate social cohesion is what enables citizens to “exist as real human subjects, as a society” [14]. Social inclusion refers to the extent to which people are integrated into institutions, organizations, and social systems, both in terms of close relationships with relatives and friends and membership in loose networks, and it is necessary for modern societies to be pluralistically inclusive [22], with a focus on measuring whether members of a society are guaranteed or excluded from political power, social rights, and citizenship. Social empowerment is concerned with the dignity and value of the human self, i.e., the ability of the individual to utilize opportunities, and also includes the feeling of subjective initiative. Indicators of measurement are the institutional system, the economic system, and the openness of the public sphere to citizens [23]. With the spread of social quality from Europe to Asia, Chinese scholars have also become interested in social quality theory. On the one hand, many scholars have devoted themselves to developing the concept of social quality theory in line with the local context in China [24] and to constructing a system of social quality measurement indexes with Chinese characteristics [25–27]. On the other hand, the social quality theory is used to analyze and explore its impact on social evaluation [28–30], on social fairness and justice [31], on residents’ sense of acquisition [32,33], on residents’ social status identity [34], on well-being [35,36], and so on.

Social quality is a theoretical model derived from sociology, where society is recognized as the result of the integration of communities and systems and provides context for living, as a complex methodological and analytical framework that helps to explain the “Easterlin Paradox”. It has been demonstrated that a theoretical model of social quality can explain differences in subjective well-being [37]. Using data from 27 EU countries, it has been shown that, despite differences in subjective well-being among residents of different countries, the results derived from the quality of society model are stable and that all countries need

economic security, social cohesion, social inclusion, and control over their lives in order to have a high level of subjective well-being [38]. Most of the existing studies on social quality and well-being use regional data in China, and the research gap is the lack of examination of the overall sample of China, especially in the last ten years. This study attempts to utilize the national sample of China to provide new evidence for exploring the impact of social quality on the well-being of the population. This study proposes the following hypotheses based on the theory of social quality and its possible impact on residents' well-being:

Hypothesis 1. *Social quality has a significant effect on residents' well-being; the higher the social quality, the stronger the residents' subjective well-being.*

Hypothesis 1a. *The higher the level of socio-economic security, the stronger the residents' subjective well-being.*

Hypothesis 1b. *The higher the degree of social cohesion, the stronger the residents' subjective well-being.*

Hypothesis 1c. *The higher the degree of social inclusion, the stronger the residents' subjective well-being.*

Hypothesis 1d. *The higher the degree of social empowerment, the stronger the residents' subjective well-being.*

3. Research Design

3.1. Data

The data used in this study come from the "China Social Situation Survey" (CSS2021), which is a national probability sampling household survey initiated by the Institute of Sociology of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) in 2005. It is conducted once every two years, and the data from the survey have been widely used in empirical research in many disciplines. CSS2021 is the eighth survey conducted by CSS, and its research theme is "Social Quality and Modernization", covering the modules of family, economic status, living conditions, social security, social values and social evaluation, social and political participation, volunteer service, etc. The survey covers 30 provinces/cities in China. The survey covered 592 villages in 30 provinces/municipalities/autonomous regions and collected 10,136 qualified questionnaires. By qualifying and excluding samples with a high number of missing values for the core variables, the final sample included in the analysis in this study was 3075.

3.2. Variable Setting and Operationalization

3.2.1. Dependent Variable

The dependent variable in this study is subjective well-being. As an emotional and cognitive evaluation of one's own quality of life, subjective well-being is highly "subjective", and, currently, there are both single-dimensional and multidimensional measures of subjective well-being. Although a single dimension is more concise and easier to operate, there is a risk of losing information, so this study uses a multidimensional measure. The corresponding question in the CSS2021 questionnaire is "Please use a scale of 1–10 to express your level of satisfaction with the following items, with 1 indicating very dissatisfied and 10 indicating very satisfied." The question provides six options, which are your family relationships, your family's financial situation, your level of education, your leisure/entertainment/cultural activities, your social life, and, overall, how satisfied you are with your life. The first five options are measures of different dimensions of well-being, while the sixth option is an overall assessment. In this paper, the values of options 1–5 are summed to create a new variable called "Multidimensional Happiness", with higher scores indicating greater happiness.

3.2.2. Independent Variables

The independent variable of this study is social quality, which is measured in four dimensions, namely socio-economic security, social cohesion, social inclusion, and social empowerment, according to the previous description of social quality. Combined with the questionnaire, the specific indicators of the four dimensions are chosen as follows:

Socio-economic security is mainly concerned with whether society can provide basic material security for the survival and development of individuals, specifically examining the income level and social security situation of the study participants. Therefore, in this study, household economic income and evaluation of social security status are selected as the main measurement indicators. Household economic income corresponds to the question in the questionnaire: “Please tell me the total income of your family last year (2020)” (the total income of the family will be logarithmic and put into the model for the sake of analysis). The questionnaire has two indicators of income; one is the total personal income in 2020, and the other is the total household income in 2020. Considering the strong bonding nature of Chinese families, using the total household income as the indicator is more in line with the Chinese cultural context. The evaluation of the social security situation corresponds to the question: “How would you rate the following social security provided by the government to the general public, with 1 indicating very dissatisfied and 10 indicating very satisfied?” The options include the five aspects of old age security, medical security, employment security, minimum living standard security, and housing security. In order to simplify the analysis, the five items of social security were downscaled by factor analysis. The principal component method was used, which produced two factors explaining a total of 83.365% of the variance, and the KMO and Bartlett’s sphere test values for the factor analysis were 0.865. Factor 1 included employment security, minimum living security, and housing security, and was named basic economic security, and Factor 2 included old-age security and medical security, and was named basic social security.

The social cohesion dimension examines social solidarity and integration, and three measures were selected for this dimension: firstly, an overall evaluation of social fairness, second, an overall evaluation of interpersonal trust, and third, an overall evaluation of the level of morality in society. The corresponding questions in the questionnaire are: “Your evaluation of the overall fairness and justice of society”, “Your evaluation of the current level of interpersonal trust”, and “Your evaluation of the general moral level of people in society nowadays”. The scores range from 1 to 10, with higher scores representing higher evaluations of social fairness and justice, interpersonal trust, and the moral level of people in society.

The social inclusion dimension concerns the equal rights and values of individuals, and it examines the extent to which individuals can be supported rather than excluded. Evaluation of the degree of social tolerance and evaluation of unfair treatment were selected as secondary indicators. The corresponding questions in the questionnaire are: “Your evaluation of the degree of tolerance in the current society”, which was assigned a value of 1–10 points; the higher scores indicate that the degree of tolerance in modern society is higher, and “Do you think there is a serious situation of unfair treatment in the following aspects of society nowadays”, which examines the respondents’ evaluations of the unfair treatment in eight aspects: age, gender, race/ethnicity, registered permanent residence, religion, education level, occupation, family background, and social relations. Assigning a value of 1–4, the score from low to high indicates that the unfair treatment is “serious, more serious, less serious, no such problem”, and “not easy to say” is set as a missing value. The scores of the eight items are summed up, with the higher scores indicating that “the less unfair the treatment”. The higher the score, the “less unfair treatment”.

Social empowerment emphasizes the ability of an individual to exert his or her strengths and abilities in society and points to human dignity. Two indicators were selected for this dimension: participation in public affairs and public participation effectiveness. The questionnaire corresponding to the participation in public affairs action is “In the last two years, have you participated in the following things (multiple choice)”, including

discussing problems with others or netizens, reflecting social problems to the media, responding to government departments, participating in public affairs hearings, petitioning to government departments, etc., with 12 choices and assigned values of 0 and 1, where 1 indicates having participated and 0 indicates not having participated. In this study, all the options were summed up to generate the variable of “participation in public affairs actions”, and the higher the score, the higher the degree of participation. The question corresponding to public participation efficacy was “Do you agree with the following statements?”, with values ranging from 1 to 4, with “don’t know” as the missing value. The question presents nine attitudes, three of which are concerned about village/neighborhood council elections, “I can get help from the village/neighborhood council when I need it”, and “I have the ability and knowledge to comment on politics”, as opposed to the other six attitudes, which are reversed, and the scores of all the choices are summed up, with higher scores indicating weaker feelings of efficacy in public participation.

3.2.3. Control Variables

The control variables in this study include gender (1 = male, 0 = female), age (2021 – year of birth), years of education (converting the corresponding level of education to the year of receiving education), nature of the household, political profile (1 = party member, 0 = non-party member), and marital status (0 = unmarried).

3.3. Model Setting and Analyzing Method

In order to test the impact of social quality on residents’ happiness, this paper uses the OLS multiple linear regression model, which is set as follows:

$$Y = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_1 + \beta_2 X_2 + \beta_3 X_3 + \cdots + \beta_k X_k + \varepsilon$$

where Y is the dependent variable subjective well-being, and $X_1, X_2, X_3 \cdots X_k$, are the core independent variables and control variables of the article, corresponding to the logarithm of household income, basic social security, basic economic security, general social fairness, inter-personal trust, general morality, general tolerance of the society, the degree of unjust treatment, the degree of participation in public affairs, and public participation efficacy, as well as gender, age, years of education, political profile, registered permanent residence, and marital status. $\beta_1, \beta_2, \beta_3 \cdots \beta_k$ are the regression coefficients of each independent variable, respectively, with β_0 as the constant term and ε as the error term.

In this study, subjective well-being is taken as a continuous variable and an OLS multiple linear regression model is used to explore the effect of social quality on well-being. The baseline model containing only control variables was built separately, then the single-dimension models of socioeconomic security, social cohesion, social inclusion, and social empowerment were built dimensionally, and, finally, the full model of social quality was built. In order to test the reliability of the research conclusions, the robustness test is carried out by replacing the dependent variable, i.e., the research results are tested by using a single-dimensional measure of subjective well-being (Table 1).

Table 1. Descriptive analysis of variables.

Variable	Percentage/Mean (Standard Deviation)	Variable Type
Dependent variable		
Subjective well-being	33.11 (9.16)	continuous variable
Independent variable		
Socio-economic security dimension		
Household income (log)	10.92 (1.10)	continuous variable

Table 1. *Cont.*

Variable	Percentage/Mean (Standard Deviation)	Variable Type
Basic social security	0 (1)	continuous variable
Basic economic security	0 (1)	continuous variable
The social cohesion dimension		
General social equity	6.99 (2.06)	continuous variable
Interpersonal trust	6.68 (2.17)	continuous variable
General level of morality	7.28 (1.91)	continuous variable
Social inclusion dimension		
Level of social tolerance	7.19 (1.10)	continuous variable
Level of social injustice	24.58 (5.03)	continuous variable
Social empowerment dimension		
Public participation initiatives	0.53 (0.99)	continuous variable
Public participation effectiveness	22.84 (3.89)	continuous variable
Control variable		
Gender (female)	0.56	categorical variable
Age	46.61 (14.49)	continuous variable
Years of education	9.54 (4.40)	continuous variable
Political profile (party member)	0.10	categorical variable
Nature of household (rural household)	0.65	categorical variable
Marital status (unmarried)	0.14	categorical variable

4. Research Findings

4.1. The Effect of Social Quality on Residents' Happiness

Model 1 is a baseline model containing only control variables. Through the data, we found that gender has no significant effect on subjective well-being, age and years of education have a certain positive effect on subjective well-being, party members have higher subjective well-being than non-members, and, from the point of view of marital status, compared with unmarried people, married, divorced, and widowed all have a negative effect on well-being.

Model 2 examines the impact of socio-economic security dimensions on subjective well-being. After controlling for demographic factors such as gender, age, years of education, nature of household registration, political profile, and marital status, it is found that household income, basic economic security, and basic social security all have a positive impact on residents' well-being, and the regression equation of Model 2 has an increase in explanatory power of 16.1% compared to Model 1. It can be seen that the higher the family income, the better the basic economic security, and the better the basic social security, the higher the residents' happiness, in which basic social security has the greatest impact on the residents' happiness, which shows that the basic social security plays a positive role in protecting the basic life of the residents and improving the residents' sense of security. Hypothesis 1a is verified.

Model 3 examines the impact of social cohesion dimensions on residents' happiness, and the explanatory power of the regression equation of the social cohesion model is 18.2% higher than that of model 1. The degree of social fairness, the level of interpersonal trust, and the level of general morality all have a positive impact on residents' happiness. Hypothesis 1b is verified.

Model 4 examines the impact of the social inclusion dimension on residents' happiness; the explanatory power of the regression equation of the social inclusion model is 9.6% higher than that of model 1, and the degree of social tolerance and the situation of social injustice both significantly affect residents' happiness. The higher the degree of social tolerance and the less the phenomenon of unjust treatment in society, the higher the residents' happiness. Hypothesis 1c is verified.

Model 5 examines the impact of social empowerment dimensions on residents' happiness, and the explanatory power of the regression equation of Model 5 increases by only

0.7% compared with Model 1. The situation of people's participation in public affairs does not have a significant impact on residents' happiness, but the sense of efficacy of participation in public affairs has a positive impact on residents' happiness. Hypothesis 1d is only partially verified.

Model 6 is a complete model of social quality, which contains four dimensions of social quality and examines the impact of overall social quality on residents' happiness. The explanatory power of the regression equation in Model 6 increased by 24.1% compared to Model 1, explaining a total of 33.7% of the variance in residents' happiness. In the full model, the socio-economic security dimension, social cohesion dimension, social inclusion dimension, and social empowerment dimension all have a positive effect on residents' happiness. However, in the full model, the effect of public affairs participation in the social empowerment dimension becomes significant, while the sense of participation efficacy is not significant. Hypothesis 1 is tested (Table 2).

Table 2. OLS regression analysis of the effect of social quality on subjective well-being.

Variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
Control variable						
Gender (Male = 0)						
Female	0.299	0.362	0.220	0.510	0.478	0.137
Age	0.081 ***	0.126 ***	0.067 ***	0.062 ***	0.093 ***	0.091 ***
Years of education	0.407 ***	0.259 ***	0.423 ***	0.447 ***	0.354 ***	0.340 ***
Nature of household						
(0 = rural household)						
Non-rural household	2.288 ***	1.022 **	2.180 ***	2.092 ***	2.180 ***	1.142 *
Residence household	1.350 ***	0.417	1.371 ***	1.215 **	1.260 **	0.636
Political profile						
(Non-party members = 0)						
Party member	3.222 ***	1.695 ***	1.735 ***	2.490 ***	2.713 ***	1.044 *
Marital status (unmarried = 0)						
Married	−3.303 ***	−2.594 ***	−2.866 ***	−3.290 ***	−2.891 ***	−2.530 ***
Divorced	−6.202 ***	−4.738 ***	−4.268 ***	−6.005 ***	−5.508 ***	−4.005 ***
Widowed	−4.335 ***	−3.167 ***	−3.734 ***	−3.701 ***	−4.053 ***	−3.403 ***
Independent variable						
Socio-economic security dimension						
Household income (log)		1.168 ***				1.071 ***
Basic social security		2.035 ***				1.507 ***
Basic economic security		2.930 ***				1.769 ***
Social cohesion dimension						
General social equity			0.963 ***			0.551 ***
Interpersonal trust			0.813 ***			0.506 ***
General level of morality			0.575 ***			0.470 ***
Social inclusion dimension						
Level of social tolerance				1.240 ***		0.174 *
Level of social injustice				0.215 ***		0.104 ***
Social empowerment dimension						
Public participation initiatives					0.224	0.302 *
Public participation effectiveness					0.240 ***	−0.026
Constant term	27.315 ***	13.734 ***	11.552 ***	13.981 ***	21.680 ***	1.744
F	59.979 ***	125.628 ***	161.574 ***	82.183 ***	43.957 ***	83.319
R ²	0.097	0.258	0.279	0.195	0.106	0.341
Adjusted R ²	0.096	0.256	0.278	0.192	0.103	0.337

Note: *** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$.

4.2. Heterogeneity Analysis and Robustness Tests

4.2.1. Heterogeneity Analysis

The previous section examined the effect of social quality on residents' subjective well-being and verified the positive effect of social quality on residents' subjective well-being.

However, only the average effect of the whole sample was obtained, and it was not possible to distinguish the heterogeneity of the impact of social quality on the subjective well-being of different groups. Therefore, this study further examines the effect of social quality on residents' subjective well-being in different groups by sub-sample regression, such as urban and rural areas, gender, and age groups, and the regression results are shown in Table 3. The regression results are shown in Model 7 to Model 12.

Table 3. Heterogeneity analysis and robustness tests.

Variable	Model 7	Model 8	Model 9	Model 10	Model 11	Model 12	Model 13
	Urban Household	Rural Household	Male	Female	Age ≤ 40	Age > 40	Single-Dimension Measure
Control Variable	Controlled	Controlled	Controlled	Controlled	Controlled	Controlled	Controlled
Independent variable							
Socio-economic security dimension							
Household income (log)	1.452 ***	0.848 ***	1.147 ***	0.874 ***	1.257 ***	0.834 ***	0.260 ***
Basic social security	1.129 **	1.587 ***	1.378 ***	1.624 ***	1.442 ***	1.487 ***	0.289 ***
Basic economic security	2.111 ***	1.768 ***	1.533 ***	2.012 ***	1.845 ***	1.763 ***	0.396 ***
Social cohesion dimension							
General social equity	0.145	0.571 ***	0.783 ***	0.274 *	0.467 **	0.584 ***	0.131 ***
Interpersonal trust	0.801 ***	0.401 ***	0.421 ***	0.612 ***	0.573 ***	0.457 ***	0.064 ***
General level of morality	0.718 **	0.436 ***	0.311 *	0.648 ***	0.549 ***	0.405 **	0.063 *
Social inclusion dimension							
Level of social tolerance	0.193	0.161	0.183	0.191	0.294 *	0.142	0.113 ***
Level of social injustice	0.164 *	0.103 **	0.113 **	0.112 **	0.124 **	0.100 **	0.021 ***
Social empowerment dimension							
Public participation initiatives	−0.068	0.643 ***	0.281	0.353	−0.110	0.619 **	0.026
Public participation effectiveness.	0.085	−0.063	−0.058	0.005	−0.048	−0.094	0.014
Constant term	−8.689	6.379 *	2.121	1.804	1.095	9.623 **	0.832
F	22.848 ***	45.555 ***	47.056 ***	43.409 ***	45.089 ***	44.211 ***	63.539 ***
R ²	0.402	0.288	0.362	0.336	0.383	0.315	0.251
Adjusted R ²	0.385	0.281	0.354	0.328	0.374	0.308	0.247

Note: *** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$.

By household registration, the impact of social quality on the subjective well-being of urban residents is greater than that of rural residents, and the explanatory degree of the regression equation for the subjective well-being of urban residents is 10.4% higher than that of rural residents. Overall socio-economic security and social cohesion have a significant effect on both urban and rural residents. The social tolerance dimension of social inclusion has no significant effect on the subjective well-being of either urban or rural residents. The social empowerment dimension of participation in public affairs has a significant positive effect on the subjective well-being of rural residents but has no significant effect on the subjective well-being of urban residents. The possible explanation is that the villagers' self-governance model in rural areas of China determines the direct impact of public affairs participation on villagers' lives.

By gender, the effect of social quality on subjective well-being is slightly higher for men than for women, and the explanatory degree of the regression equation is 2.6% higher for men than for women. By dimension, there is no gender difference in the impact of socio-economic security, social cohesion and social inclusion, and social empowerment on subjective well-being. Slightly different is that family income status and level of social equity have a greater impact on subjective well-being for males, while basic economic security, basic social security, level of interpersonal trust, and level of social morality have a greater impact on well-being for females.

In terms of age groups, this study considers those whose age is less than or equal to 40 years old as the youth group and those whose age is greater than 40 years old as the middle-aged and elderly group. We compared the effect of social quality on subjective well-being in different age groups. The effect of social quality on the happiness of youth is slightly higher than that of middle-aged and old-aged people, and the model of the regression equation has a higher degree of explanation of 6.6%. Specifically, social tolerance has a significant effect on the subjective well-being of youth but not on the subjective well-being of middle-aged and old-aged people, while participation in public affairs has a significant effect on the subjective well-being of middle-aged and old-aged people but not on the subjective well-being of youth.

4.2.2. Robustness Test

In order to ensure the reliability of the conclusions drawn from the OLS regression model, this study adopts a way of changing the measurement of the dependent variable to test the robustness of the findings. In CSS2021, in addition to measuring subjective well-being in multiple dimensions, there is also a single-dimension measure, in which the questionnaire asks, “Overall, how satisfied are you with your life” to evaluate the overall subjective well-being of the respondents. On the same ten-point scale, with 1 indicating very dissatisfied and 10 indicating very satisfied, the regression results are shown in Model 7. It can be seen from Model 7 that the use of a single dimension to measure the subjective well-being of social and economic security, social cohesion, and social inclusion still significantly and positively affects the residents’ subjective well-being. However, the social empowerment dimensions do not significantly impact the residents’ subjective well-being. The overall explanatory power of the model is 24.7%, which is slightly lower than that of the multidimensional subjective well-being measure, which shows that the model results are stable.

5. Discussion and Implications

5.1. Discussion

The theory of social quality provides a new theoretical perspective and analytical tool for studying the impact of social factors on subjective well-being. This study analyzes the impact of current Chinese social quality on residents’ supervisory well-being based on the 2021 China Social Survey (CSS2021) data and analyzes heterogeneity based on gender, age, and urban–rural subgroups, and the study finds that:

Firstly, social quality is one of the essential factors affecting residents’ subjective well-being. The higher the social quality is, the stronger the residents’ subjective well-being is. It supports the conclusions of existing studies [33,36,39], and this effect is reflected in each of the four dimensions of social quality. The degree of social and economic security, social cohesion, and social inclusion all have a significant positive effect on residents’ subjective well-being, and the indicator of public participation in the dimension of social empowerment significantly affects subjective well-being. However, the indicator of public participation effectiveness has no significant effect, which differs from the results of some studies [40]. It was found to be robust by replacing the dependent variable measurement.

Secondly, to compare the differences in the impact of social quality on subjective well-being among different groups, a heterogeneity analysis of urban and rural areas, gender, and age subgroups reveals that social quality significantly positively affects subjective well-being in different groups. The specific differences are that social quality has a higher impact on urban residents than on rural residents, and the results confirm the existing conclusions [34,41] have a slightly higher impact on men than on women, and a slightly higher impact on youth than on middle-aged and elderly groups. By dimension, the socioeconomic security dimension significantly affects the subjective well-being of all groups. In the social cohesion dimension, the degree of social equity does not significantly affect the subjective well-being of urban registered permanent residence residents. It may be related to the fact that urban residents have enjoyed more fruits of social development in

China. In the dimension of social inclusion, the degree of social tolerance only significantly affects the subjective well-being of residents less than or equal to 40 years old. In the dimension of social empowerment, participation in public affairs has a significant effect on the subjective well-being of rural household residents and residents aged 40 or older only.

This study examined the impact of overall social quality on residents' subjective well-being, but there are still shortcomings. The impact of social quality on subjective well-being is complex, but the methodology used in this study is rather basic and fails to dig deeper into the differences between the different dimensions of social quality on the well-being of different groups, which needs to be deepened in future studies.

5.2. Implications

From social quality theory, this study argues that social quality can be improved in the following ways to increase the subjective well-being of Chinese residents.

The first way is by improving people's well-being and improving social and economic security. Over the past 40 years of reform and opening up, China's economy has developed rapidly, the people's economic income has risen dramatically, and their living standards have greatly improved. Socio-economic security is still an essential factor affecting the subjective well-being of the population, but this has an impact that is not mainly reflected in the improvement of absolute income but is more focused on the reform of income distribution. On the one hand, it is necessary to insist that the concept of increasing the income of low-income groups, expanding the proportion of middle-income groups, and reasonably regulating excessive income be implemented more thoroughly in order to reduce the weakening effect of income inequality on subjective well-being. On the other hand, it is necessary to continue improving the social security system, mainly to weave a good "safety net" of basic social security such as old-age pensions, medical care, and housing.

The second way is to continue to promote socialist core values and create a fair and just social environment of solidarity and love; a society with solid cohesion and centripetal force is one in which members of the community with the characteristics of the community share the same values, mutual trust, and reciprocity. It requires the CPC to strengthen its ideological leadership, further modernize the country's governance capacity and system, improve the government's credibility, and create a clean and upright social environment, promoting social harmony and stability.

The third way is to resolve conflicts promptly and promote open and inclusive social development. It is necessary to respect the plurality of society and build an inclusive society with gender equality, all-age friendliness, and ethnic unity. It is important to break down regional and urban–rural barriers so that residents in different regions and between urban and rural areas can enjoy the same political and social rights, promote equalizing public services, and designate more inclusive social policies.

The fourth way is to empower members of society and increases their willingness, ability, and sense of effectiveness to participate in public affairs. Although the social empowerment dimension currently has less impact on subjective well-being than the three dimensions of socio-economic security, social cohesion, and social inclusion, as society develops and progresses, people's demand for social participation will become higher and higher. Therefore, it is necessary to actively create a platform for diversified social participation, foster social organizations, strengthen the construction of public spaces, and build a social governance community of common governance and sharing in order to enhance residents' subjective sense of well-being through empowerment.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, X.O. and Z.P.; methodology, X.O.; software, X.O.; validation, X.O. and Z.P.; formal analysis, X.O.; investigation, X.O.; resources, Z.P.; data curation, X.O.; writing—original draft preparation, X.O.; writing—review and editing, X.O.; visualization, X.O.; supervision, Z.P.; project administration, Z.P.; funding acquisition, Z.P. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research was funded by the National Social Science Fund of China (grant number 20&ZD149).

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: All participants signed an informed consent form and agreed to participate in the survey.

Data Availability Statement: The data were released to researchers without access to any personal data. Data access link: http://css.cssn.cn/css_sy/, accessed on 22 August 2023.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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