Perceptions of Inequality and Subjective Well-Being:

Connections with Political Orientation and Self-Actualization

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Abstract

Although there is evidence that subjective well-being (SWB) in the U.S. is affected by objective levels of inequality, little is known about whether individuals’ perceptions of inequality are also linked with SWB and its related correlates. This study addressed the associations between participants’ subjective well-being and perceptions of societal inequality, as well as the potential influence of political orientation (liberal vs. conservative) and self-actualizing tendencies on these connections. A total of 301 participants (72.4% between 18 and 40 years old, 151 female) completed self-report composite assessments of SWB and perceived inequality, and also measures of self-actualizing tendencies, political orientation, and income. Overall, participants who perceived higher levels of inequality had lower SWB, lower incomes, and were more politically liberal than their peers. Liberal participants also had lower incomes and lower SWB than their peers. Regression analyses revealed that higher incomes, perceiving lower inequality, and higher self-actualizing tendencies were all unique predictors of SWB, and that neither income nor political orientation moderated these findings. Finally, self-actualizing tendencies, unlike SWB, were not related to either participants’ political orientation or to their perceptions of inequality. Discussion addresses differences in the correlates of SWB and self-actualizing tendencies, and the importance of individuals’ subjective perceptions of inequality.

Perceptions of Inequality and Subjective Well-Being:

Connections with Political Orientation and Self-Actualization

Much has been learned about the correlates of feeling positively about one’s life circumstances since subjective well-being (SWB) researchers first combined Cantril’s (1965) “cognitive” life evaluation scale and Bradburn’s “affective balance” scale (1969). Higher levels of SWB, for example, are associated with greater longevity in both diseased and healthy participants, more positive health-related behaviors, lower levels of physical and mental stress, and a variety of other positive psychosocial outcomes (see, Diener & Chan, 2011, for a review). Yet, there are still important, unresolved questions about the specific factors that are likely to promote or hinder the development of SWB (Diener, Pressman, Hunter, & Delgadillo-Chase, 2017).

One remaining concern involves the connection between income and SWB (with “happiness” often used as a synonym for SWB). Across a number of countries, higher levels of income (Howell & Howell, 2008) are associated with modestly higher levels of SWB (although see Kahneman, Kreuger, Schwarz, & Stone, 2006). More recently, Oishi, Kesebir, and Diener (2011) have argued that income *inequality* is also likely to influence SWB. Drawing on national survey data from 1972 to 2008, the authors found that an objective measure of U.S. inequality (i.e., the Gini coefficient) was related to participants’ reported happiness. Specifically, participants were happier in years when U.S. inequality was lower, although this relation only emerged for participants in the bottom fifth of the income distribution.

One of the goals of the present study was to extend the research on inequality and happiness/SWB by examining individuals’ perceptions of inequality. This focus differs from Oishi et al.s’ (2011) research in two ways. First, we were interested in how individuals’ *perceptions* of inequality rather than objective economic measures (e.g., the Gini coefficient) related to SWB. This decision was guided, in part, by related research showing that higher levels of subjective socio-economic status (i.e., perceived SES) are related to more positive physical and mental health outcomes even after accounting for traditional objective measures of SES (Goodman, Huang, Schafer-Kalkhoff, & Adler, 2007). Similarly, it seems plausible that individuals’ perceptions of economic inequality would also play an important role in their SWB over and above their objective economic circumstances (see, e.g., Oshio & Urakawa, 2014, for related findings in a Japanese sample).

The present research also differed from the Oishi et al. study (2011) in that our measure of perceived inequality was based on more than income. Instead, we used a composite that combined judgments about: a) how overall societal resources are distributed (Evans & Kelley, 2017, see Figure 1); b) the fairness of that distribution; and, c) whether economic inequality is growing. Results from a recent review (Arsenio, 2018) suggest that the Evans and Kelley (2017) “five figure” measure is easier to understand than approaches where individuals must estimate wealth or income by generating their own estimates (e.g. “what percentage of all US wealth is owned by the richest 20% of Americans” [Norton & Ariely, 2011]). Moreover, studies have shown that “five figure” resource judgments are related to other measures of perceived inequality (e.g., Barreiro, Arsenio, & Wainryb, 2018; Flanagan & Kornbluh, 2017) and that, collectively, these different measures of inequality predicted preferences regarding various public policies.

Another goal of this research was to clarify the role of individuals’ political orientation on their SWB and on the connection between SWB and perception of economic inequality. A much-cited PEW opinion poll (Taylor, Funk, & Craighill, 2006) reported that 48% of conservative Republicans and 28% of liberal Democrats reported being “very happy,” with similar differences dating back to 1972. Subsequently, Napier and Jost (2008) found that political conservatives in the U.S. and 9 other mostly European countries reported having higher levels of SWB (see also Okulicz-Kozaryn, Holmes, & Avery, 2014). And in the U.S., higher levels of income inequality (Gini coefficients) over a 30-year period were associated with lower levels of SWB in liberals but not conservatives (Napier & Jost, 2008). To date, however, it is less clear whether political orientation also affects individuals’ subjective perceptions of inequality, and, more generally, the relations between perceived inequality and SWB.

Historically, interest in societal factors that influence SWB (e.g., Campbell, 1976) has been complemented by a longstanding focus on the underlying individual, psychological contributors to happiness and life satisfaction (e.g., Costa & McCrae, 1980). As summarized by Ryan, Curran, and Deci (2013), this psychological “conception of well-being or flourishing rests on the proposition that what is subjectively satisfying over the course of a life is activity that develops and expresses one’s most reflectively valued and well-integrated human potentialities” (Ryan, Curran, & Deci, 2013, p. 58). Ryff’s model of psychological well-being, (1989), Ryan and Deci’s (2000) self-determination theory (SDT), and Maslow’s focus on self-actualization (1962), among others, all share an interest in the psychological factors that promote human flourishing. According to this eudaimonic or flourishing perspective, the exclusively hedonic focus of SWB research on happiness and satisfaction can help to illuminate progress towards a life well lived, but not the internal means of approaching or attaining such a life.

Although there is a growing literature on the links between hedonic and eudaimonic well-being (e.g., Barrett-Cheetham, Williams, & Bednall, 2016), far fewer studies have examined potential economic and political influences on these connections. One notable exception is a study by Tay and Diener (2011) that used Maslow’s theory to understand the connections between hedonic SWB and the fulfilment of different physical and psychological needs. Using Gallup World Poll data from 123 countries worldwide, the authors found that individuals’ SWB depended not only on whether their own basic needs (food, shelter, etc.) were met, but also on whether their nation fulfilled the collective needs of all of its citizens. In addition, and consistent with self-determination theory, personal autonomy and mastery (along with social relationships [Ryan & Deci, 2000]) were related to individuals’ SWB. Questions about the influence of political orientation and perceptions of inequality, however, were not addressed.

In summary, the present study was designed to examine how individuals’ perceptions of inequality, their political orientations, and a type of eudaimonic well-being (i.e., self-actualizing tendencies) were related to one another and, especially, to subjective well-being. Although relations among many of these constructs have been examined in some detail, to our knowledge, the present exploratory study is among the first to assess this combined group of economic, political, and eudaimonic influences in relation to participants’ SWB. Several central hypotheses were addressed.

First, it was expected that higher levels of perceived inequality would be related to lower levels of SWB, although this effect might be limited to lower income participants. Second, it was expected that, compared to their more liberal peers, conservatives would report higher levels of SWB and lower levels of perceived economic inequality (see, e.g., Arsenio, 2018). Analyses also addressed whether political orientation would moderate the connection between perceived inequality and SWB, with the expectation the connection between perceived inequality and SWB might be stronger for liberals than for conservatives. Given a lack of relevant previous research, the expectations for self-actualizing tendencies were less clear. Although it was expected that higher levels of SWB would be related to greater self-actualizing tendencies, there were no specific expectations about whether perceptions of inequality or participants’ political orientation would affect the SWB – self-actualizing tendency connection or how self-actualizing tendencies would be related to either perceived inequality or political orientation.

*Method*

*Participants*

Three hundred and one participants (150 male, 151 female) were recruited from Amazon’s Mechanical Turk (MTurk) website. Results from several reviews indicates that samples from the MTurk are often more demographically diverse than standard (non-nationally representative) samples and are also more diverse than samples involving American college students (Buhrmester, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011). In addition, however, MTurk samples are also more educated and earn somewhat less than nationally representative U.S. samples (Hitlin, 2016).

A majority of our study participants (72.4%) were between 18 and 40 years old (44.5% between 18-30 and 27.9% between 31-40), with 12.3% between 41-50, 11.0% between 51-60, and 4.3% over 60 years. Participants reported their race/ethnicity as follows: 5.3% African American, 7.3% Latino, 79.4% Caucasian, 6.0% Asian, and 2% multi-racial. In terms of education, 47% reported having at least a 4-year college degree, and another 40% completed some college or had an associate degree. Finally, 20% of participants reported a household income of less $20,000, 18% between $20,001 and $35,000, 23% between $35,001 and $50,000, 18% between $50,001 and $75,000, and 19% had incomes above $75,000. These five income groups are described below as “income quintiles” both because each group includes about 20% of all study participants and because the present income quintile groups roughly approximate national U.S. income quintiles (<https://www.statista.com/statistics/203183/percentage-distribution-of-household-income-in-the-us>).

*Procedure*

Participants were individually administered an Internet questionnaire/survey through

Amazon’s Mechanical Turk site. The first webpage provided a brief study description, followed by sections informing potential participants of the voluntary nature of their participation and their ability to withdraw from the study at any time by closing the study webpage. After reading the consent page, individuals who decided to participate completed two measures often utilized to assess overall subjective well-being (i.e., life satisfaction, and recent positive and negative emotional experiences; see below), followed by assessments of their perceptions of how societal resources are and ought to be distributed as well as the fairness of those distributions. Then participants completed a measure of self-actualizing tendencies well as a final section that included demographic questions assessing participants’ sex, age, race/ethnicity, educational and income levels, and overall political orientation. The order of questions was fixed across participants. The project was approved by a university Institutional Review Board.

*Measures*

*Subjective Well-Being (SWB)*

*Life Satisfaction.* Cantril’s Self-Anchoring Striving Scale (Cantril, 1965) was used to assess individuals’ overall satisfaction with their lives. Specifically, participants were presented with a depiction of a ladder and asked to use an eleven-point scale ranging from 0 (“worst possible life”) to 10 (“best possible life”) to provide a global rating of the quality of their lives. This measure has been used in international studies involving more than 100 countries (see, e.g., Tay & Diener, 2011).

*Positive and Negative Experiences (adapted from Tay & Diener, 2011).* Participants were asked to recall where they were, what they were doing, and how they felt within the last week. Participants then rated their recent experiences (the past week) of two positive (happiness and enjoyment) and three negative emotions (anger, sadness, and worry) using a 5-point scale (1 = never, 3 = occasionally, and 5 = very frequently). Scores were calculated separately for positive and negative emotions by averaging the scores in each category.

*Overall Subjective Well-Being.* Individuals’ scores for the three measures (life satisfaction, and positive and negative emotional experiences) were converted to Z scores to adjust for the different metrics used. The mean of the three Z scores was then used as a composite measure of SWB. (See results below for information on the psychometric features of the overall SWB measure.)

*Societal Measures*

*Increasing Disparity Scale.* Participants judged whether the disparity between rich and poor individuals in the U.S. has grown over the last 10 years using a 5-point rating scale (1 = “definitely not” to 5 = “definitely yes.”).

*Judgments Regarding Current and Ideal U.S. Societal Structures.* A revised version of the measure originally developed by Evans, Kelley, and Kolosi (1992) was used to assess participants’ perceptions of the structure of the society they currently live in as well as the structure of the society they would ideally prefer to live in (Figure 1; Evans & Kelley, 2017). This measure has been used in international studies in more than forty countries (Smith, 2015) and in recent studies involving adolescents in both the U.S. (Flanagan & Kornbluh, 2019) and Argentina (Barreiro, Arsenio, & Wainryb, 2019; and see Arsenio, 2018, for a review). Participants were presented with a scale that depicted five different distributions of societal resources (Figure 1), and they were first asked which distribution most closely approximated the current distribution of resources in the U.S. Following this, participants rated the fairness of that distribution on a five-point scale (1 = very unfair to 5 = very fair), and, in a final judgment, selected which of the 5 potential distributions was seen as closest to being ideal (“earlier you judged how society in the U.S. *actually* looks today. Now we would like to know *ideally* how you would like society in the U.S. to look”).

*Short Index of Self-Actualization.* Jones and Crandall’s Short Index of Self-Actualization (1986) was used as a measure of self-actualizing tendencies and, more generally, as a representative assessment of eudaimonic well-being. This 15-item self-report measure ( for the current study = .75) was originally developed to provide a short but valid and reliable assessment of individuals’ levels of self-actualization in relation to Maslow’s (1962) hierarchy-of-needs based theory. The original scale was highly correlated with longer measures of self-actualization (e.g., the Personal Orientation Inventory, Knapp & Knapp, 1978), and subsequent research provided good support for its construct validity (see Crandall & Jones, 1991, for a review).

Respondents used a 5-point Likert scale (1 = “completely disagree” to 5 = “completely agree”) to rate the degree to which various statements applied to them (e.g., “I am loved because I give love,” and “I have no mission in life to which I feel especially dedicated” [reverse coded]). Higher scores indicted that a person “has basic needs satisfied, is free of illness and is using capacities to the fullest extent. In general, the self-actualizing person is in the process of maximizing his or her full potential” (Jones & Crandall, 1986, p. 63).

*Demographic information*. After completing all other measures, participants indicated their gender (male, female, and other), age group (18 to 30 years, 31 to 40, 41 to 50, 51 to 60, and more than 60 years), self-identified race/ethnicity (African American, Latino, Caucasian, Asian, and multi-racial), level of education (less than a high school degree, high school or equivalent degree, some college but no degree, associate degree [AA], completed 4-year college, and graduate degree), and overall household income (less than $20,000, $20,001 to $35,000, $35,001 to $50,000, $50,001 to $75,000, $75,001-$100,000, $100,001 to $150,000, and more than $150,000). Finally, participants rated their overall political orientation on a 5-point scale, ranging from strongly liberal (1) to strongly conservative (5).

*Results*

*Data Analytic Plan*

Preliminary analyses revealed that participants’ gender and education level were not related to any of the main study variables, and, consequently, gender and education level are not discussed any further. The first section below summarizes information on the formation of two composite variables: one for subjective well-being and one for conceptions of inequality. This is followed by sections regarding the correlational connections among study variables and results of regression analyses predicting overall subjective well-being.

*Subjective Well-Being Composite.* The three components of SWB (life satisfaction, and positive and negative emotions) were all significantly related to each other. Participants with greater levels of life satisfaction had more positive (*r* = .50, *p* < .001) and fewer negative emotions (*r* = -.40, *p* < .001), and higher levels of positive emotion were associated with fewer negative emotions (*r* = .67, *p* < .001). As expected, a factor analysis of these three measures (with negative emotions reversed) revealed a single component with an eigen value greater than 1 (2.05): this factor accounted for 68% of the variance with all three items loading at .55 or higher. Internal consistency for the composite measure of SWB was .77 (Cronbach’s .

*Conceptions of Inequality Composite*. The three inequality-related measures (perceptions of growing inequality, existing resource distribution, and unfairness of resource distribution) were all significantly related: perceptions of growing inequality and existing resource distribution, *r* = .36, *p* < .001; perceptions of growing inequality and unfairness of resource distribution, *r* = .55, *p* < .001, and existing resource distribution and unfairness of resource distribution, *r* = .45, *p* < .001). A factor analysis of these three measures resulted in single component with an eigen value greater than 1 (1.92): this factor accounted for 64% of the variance with all three items loading at .56 or higher. Internal consistency for the composite

conceptions of inequality measure was .71 (Cronbach’s 

*Correlational Analyses*

*Correlations involving income.* Consistent with previous research, higher income was significantly related to higher levels of SWB (see Table 1). In addition, participants with higher incomes described their political orientation as more conservative and perceived lower levels of societal inequality. Finally, higher income participants had higher self-actualizing tendencies.

*Correlations involving political orientation.* Participants with more conservative political orientations perceived lower levels of societal inequality than their more liberal peers. In addition, more conservative participants reported higher levels of SWB and (as noted above) had higher incomes.

*Correlations involving SWB.* Higher levels of SWB were related to greater self-

actualization, and to lower perceived societal inequality. And, as described above, higher SWB was associated with higher incomes and a more conservative political orientation.

*Other significant correlations*. Preference for a more egalitarian ideal distribution of resources was related to higher self-actualizing tendencies. In addition, summarizing from above, participants who perceived higher levels of societal inequality had lower incomes, were more liberal than conservative, and had lower levels of SWB.

*Regression Predicting SWB*

A central goal of the present project was to examine and contrast the relative influence of the different correlates of SWB that have emerged in previous studies, including income, political orientation, and conceptions of inequality (e.g., Napier & Jost, 2009; Oishi, Kesebir, & Diener, 2011). A hierarchical regression was conducted (see Table 2) with income quintile entered on the first step followed by political orientation at the second step. At the third and fourth steps, the societal inequality composite and then the self-actualizing variable, respectively, were entered. This order was guided by prior research indicating that income and political orientation predict individuals’ well-being, and by our goal to examine whether conceptions of inequality and self-actualization would influence subjective well-being over and above the influence of previously assessed contributors to that well-being. (Judgments of ideal resource distribution were not included because they were only weakly related to one other variable.)

Finally, at the fifth step, six interaction terms were entered to examine the possible moderators of the associations between some of the predictors and SWB. Two interactions were included because of previous evidence that: a) different levels of income interacted with inequality in predicting SWB (e.g., Oishi et al., 2011); and, b) political orientation interacted with inequality in predicting SWB (e.g., Napier & Jost, 2008). Three other interaction terms addressed whether the significant association between self-actualization and SWB might be moderated by interactions involving self-actualization and income, conceptions of inequality, or political orientations. (A regression analysis conducted without these last three interaction terms did not alter any of the significant findings reported below except for those involving the additional three moderators).

As seen in Table 2, income was a significant predictor of SWB when entered on the first step (R2 =.116, *p* < .001), and political orientation was a marginally significant predictor of SWB at step 2 (R2 =.011, *p* < .06). In contrast, conceptions of inequality (step 3, R2 =.001, *NS*) did not significantly predict additional variance in participants’ SWB. Self-actualization at step 4, however, was a significant predictor of SWB (R2 =.26, *p* < .001). Finally, (step 5, R2 =.017, *NS*) there was no evidence that, collectively, the six moderators as a group predicted any additional variance in participants’ SWB beyond what emerged in the first four regression steps. Overall, higher income, conservative political orientation (a trend), and self-actualization all added to the prediction of greater SWB.

An examination of the standardized coefficients at each step, however, provides a somewhat different picture. Although political orientation was a unique significant predictor of SWB at step 2 (a trend), once conceptions of inequality were entered at step 3, political orientation did not predict SWB at that step or at step 4 or 5. In contrast, income quintile and self-actualization were significant predictors of SWB when first entered in the regression, and both remained unique significant predictors on the final step of the regression. In addition, although conceptions of inequality were not significantly related to SWB when entered at step 3 or at step 4, these conceptions were uniquely related to SWB (*p* = .056) at step 5 when all other variables were entered. Overall, higher levels of SWB were uniquely related (step 5) to having higher incomes, lower conceptions of inequality (a trend), and higher self-actualization.

In addition, a moderated effect emerged for income and self-actualization on SWB (*p* = .058). Although this last moderated effect was only marginally significant, a decision was made to explore it further given its potential effect on the most influential predictor of SWB, that is, self-actualization. Overall, higher income individuals had higher levels of SWB than lower income individuals at all three levels of self-actualization. Tests of simple slopes, however, revealed that at all three levels of income self-actualization was a significant predictor of SWB (i.e., all 3 *t*s differed significantly from zero and ranged from 5.06 to 13.89). In summary, there was no clear evidence that income moderated the connection between SWB and self-actualization.

Discussion

What makes people feel happy and satisfied with their lives? We sought to extend the existing literature on this topic by examining how individuals’ perception of inequality, political orientations, and self-actualizing tendencies, individually and in combination, are related to their subjective well-being. One key finding was that participants who perceived greater levels of inequality had lower levels of SWB. To our knowledge, the only similar finding is from a Japanese study (Oshio & Urakawa, 2014) in which participants who judged that the gap between rich and poor had grown more in the past five years rated themselves as being less happy. Interestingly, in both studies the connections between perceived inequality and SWB did not differ as function of participants’ reported income level: the link between perceived inequality and SWB was not moderated by income level in this study, and the link between perceived inequality and happiness in Japan remained significant after controlling for income.

The present findings are consistent with Oishi et al.s’ (2011) observed connection between higher levels of U.S. inequality and lower levels of SWB, while also differing in two important ways. One obvious difference is that Oishi et al. assessed *objective* levels of historical inequality (Gini coefficients from 1972-2008) whereas this study explicitly focused on participants’ *subjective perceptions* of relatively current levels of inequality. Although we did not contrast subjective and objective measures of inequality, our findings add to a growing literature highlighting the unique utility of assessing subjective perceptions of economic phenomena. For example, using international data from 26 countries, a recent World Bank study (2019) concluded that “perceptionsof inequality are more closely associated with preferences for redistribution than are objective indicators of inequality” (Bussolo, Ferrer-i-Carbonell, Giolbas, & Torre, p. 38)

A second difference from the Oishi et al. (2011) study is that we found no evidence that income moderated the connection between inequality and SWB. Instead higher incomes were uniquely related to higher levels of SWB even after accounting for the influence of all other study variables. This influence of income is common to “both cross-sectional and longitudinal studies [that] have consistently shown small-to-moderate associations between income and subjective well-being” (Soto & Luhmann, 2013, p. 46). In part, the association between income and SWB may be a consequence of how higher incomes help to address both basic material as well as psychological needs (Diener, Tay, & Oishi, 2013). It is still unclear, however, whether there is a lower (e.g., Oishi et al., 2011) or upper threshold (e.g., Kahneman et al., 2006), or no threshold at all on the influence of income on SWB.

Results from the present study also revealed that political orientation has an important influence on SWB and on several contributors to that SWB. The finding that a more conservative political ideology is associated with higher SWB is consistent with Taylor et al.s’ (2006) observation that, over a several-decade period, Republican conservatives reported being happier than liberal Democrats. Moreover, recent research suggests that it is the conservative vs. liberal dimension rather than party affiliation, per se, that really matters. For example, Napier and Jost (2008) found that in both the U.S. and nine other mostly European countries that conservatives had consistently higher levels of SWB than liberals owing, in part, to conservatives’ greater tendency to rationalize inequality in meritocratic terms (“hard work gets rewarded”).

Although the mean levels of several key study variables differed significantly as a function of political ideology, there was no evidence that political orientation moderated any of the connections among the variables. In other words, more conservative participants reported higher SWB, higher incomes, and perceived less inequality than their liberal peers. However, political orientation did not influence the observed associations *among* variables: greater perceived inequality was associated with lower SWB, and higher incomes were associated with greater SWB across political orientations. This lack of moderated affects involving political orientation are somewhat surprising given other related findings. Napier and Jost (2008), for example, found that although objective increases in inequality over a 30-year period were associated with lower levels of SWB for everyone, liberals were more affected than their conservative peers.

The lack of expected moderated effects in this study (i.e., neither political orientation nor income level moderated the association between perceived inequality and SWB) has several potential explanations. As noted above, Oishi et al. (2011) and Napier and Jost (2008) as well assessed inequality using the objective Gini index whereas our explicit focus was on participants’ subjective perceptions of inequality. Given the limited and still incompletely understood connections between objective and subjective measures of inequality (Norton & Ariely, 2011, and see Arsenio 2018 for a review), it is not surprising that these two types of measures might have different connections with SWB. In addition, both Oshi et al. (2011) and Napier and Jost (2008) assessed historical patterns of inequality over several decades, whereas we examined conceptions of inequality at one point in time. Although much more research will be needed to address these complexities, it is still worth noting that *both* lower levels of subjective and objective measures of inequality are related to greater SWB.

Finally, the results of this study underscore the important connections between hedonic

and more eudaimonic measures of well-being (i.e., self-actualization in this study). Specifically, participants with higher levels of self-actualization had higher levels of SWB, and a regression analysis revealed that self-actualization was the major, unique predictor of SWB after accounting for the influence of all other study variables. Despite the overlap between SWB and self-actualization, however, the other correlates of these two measures were fairly distinct: SWB was related to income, political orientation, and perceptions of inequality, whereas self-actualization was related to income and perceptions of ideal resource distribution. In other words, political orientation and conceptions of inequality were related to SWB but not self-actualization, and an additional analysis revealed that income was more strongly related to SWB than to self-actualization (*z* = 4.65, *p* < .001). And, although self-actualization and income interacted marginally in predicting SWB, self-actualization was related to SWB in all three income groups (high, medium, and low).

Why were there so many distinct influences (income, political orientation, and conceptions of inequality) on hedonic but not on eudaimonic well-being? One possible explanation begins with the eudaimonic emphasis on activities that promote “intellectual, social, and productive potentials in good and admirable ways, even though *pleasure* is not the aim of such activities” (emphasis added, Ryan, Curren, & Deci, 2013, p. 58; see also Waterman, 2013). According to this view, pleasure (i.e., hedonic well-being) is neither necessary nor sufficient for eudaimonic well-being. Instead, eudaimonic accounts suggest, we often do our best to exercise certain core potentials, but life circumstances then can either hinder or facilitate that pursuit and, in the process, generate more or less positive feelings about progress towards our goals. In other words, eudaimonic well-being involves the more central, universal aspects of human flourishing, whereas hedonic well-being reflects more of the vicissitudes of life (e.g., income and political orientation) that affect how we feel about our progress in pursuit of that flourishing. It is important to acknowledge, however, that the present study was not explicitly designed to contrast the different correlates of hedonic and eudaimonic well-being. Additional research is needed to untangle the specific economic, political, and social cognitive contributors unique to these two forms of well-being.

Future studies on these issues will need to address an important limitation of the present investigation: our use of an MTurk sample. Although MTurk samples are more diverse than typical college samples, MTurk participants are also more educated and have lower incomes than participants in nationally representative samples (Hitlin, 2016). It is unclear how this higher education/lower income profile might have affected some of the findings for the two forms of well-being in this study. For example, the weaker link between income and eudaimonic well-being than between income and SWB could stem from MTurk workers’ greater concern with workplace autonomy than with economic rewards (although see Greenhouse, 2019). Such a pattern might not apply to more nationally representative, less educated participants who have fewer educational credentials to increase their odds of future success in times of economic uncertainty.

Despite this limitation, the results of the present study underscore the negative effects of

increasing inequality, whether measured objectively or subjectively, on U.S. adults’ SWB. More generally, this research supports the utility of simultaneously examining both perceived societal (political and economic) and individual, psychological contributors to SWB. Although these two types of contributors are widely studied as part of the SWB literature (Oishi, 2012), we are only beginning to understand how the “personal” and the “political” interact to affect different forms of well-being.

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*Table 1*

*Descriptive statistics and correlations among study variables*

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M SD 1 2 3 4 5 6

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1. Income quintile 3.16 1.62 - .11\* -.10\* .04 .10\* .35\*\*\*

2. Political orientation 2.42 1.09 - -.46\*\*\* -.06 .01 .13\*

3. Perceptions of inequality 0.00 .73 - .03 .06 -.11\*

4. Ideal resource dist. 4.20 .70 - .11\* .03

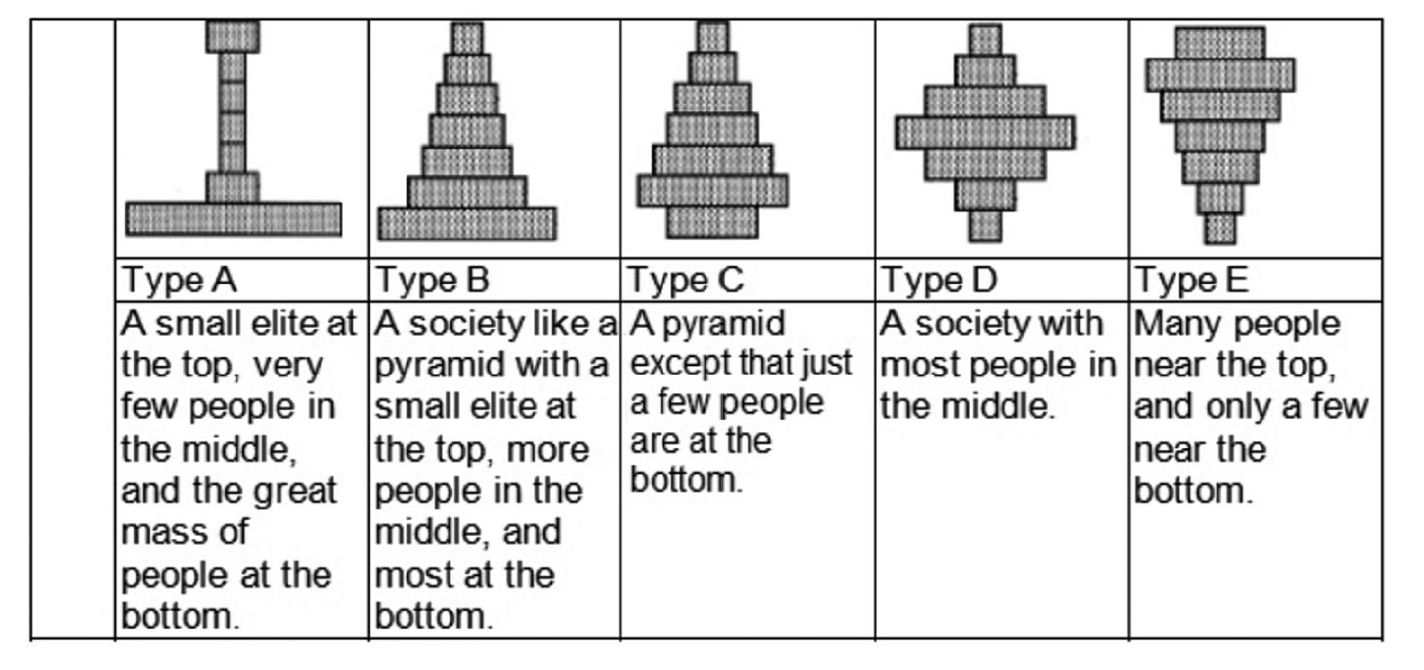
5. Self-actualization 53.04 7.66 - .53\*\*\*

6. SWB -.01 .83 -\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

\*\*\* *p* < .001, \*\* *p* < .01, \* *p* < .05

Note - political orientation was scored on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (very liberal) to 5 (very conservative). Perceptions of inequality and SWB were Z scored composite measures.

*Figure 1*



Measure for assessing participants’ perceptions of the distribution of societal resources.

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