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No urban malaise for Millennials

Adam Okulicz-Kozaryn^a and Rubia R. Valente^b

ABSTRACT

Urban malaise or unhappiness with city life is common in developed countries. City dwellers, particularly those in the largest metropolitan areas, are reported to be the least satisfied with their lives. Using the US General Social Survey (1972–2016), this paper explores the latest happiness trends. The results confirm earlier findings of urban malaise: Americans in general are happiest in smaller cities and rural areas. However, the advantage of rural living is declining – rural Americans are becoming less happy relative to urbanites. Most interestingly, the results show that the latest generation, termed ‘Millennials’ (1982–2004), as opposed to earlier generations, are the happiest in large cities (an estimated magnitude larger than earning an additional US\$100,000 in family income annually). The possible reasons for this trend are explored and directions for future research are discussed.

KEYWORDS

subjective well-being (SWB); happiness; life satisfaction; cities; urbanicity; Millennials; Gen Y; Generation Y; General Social Survey (GSS)

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INTRODUCTION

Empirical evidence demonstrates that unhappiness with city life is common in developed countries (Ala-Mantila, Heinonen, Junnila, & Saarsalmi, 2017; Morrison & Weckroth, 2017; Okulicz-Kozaryn, 2015; Sørensen, 2014). Residents of some of the largest metropolitan cities in the world report the lowest levels of happiness. For instance, St. Louis, New York City, Detroit and Philadelphia are the least happy places in the United States (Okulicz-Kozaryn & Mazelis, 2016; Senior, 2006) – New York City being the largest city, and Philadelphia one of the largest. Similarly, London is the largest and least happy place in the UK (Chatterji, 2013; Office for National Statistics (ONS), 2011). Toronto, the largest metropolitan area in Canada, is the second least happy (only Vancouver, the third metropolitan area, is less happy) (Lu, Schellenberg, Hou, & Helliwell, 2015). Helsinki is the largest and the least happy place in Finland (Morrison, 2015). Bucharest is the largest and least happy place in Romania (Lenzi & Perucca, 2016). Likewise, the largest metropolitan area in New Zealand, Auckland, is the least happy (Morrison, 2011). Australia’s largest city, Sydney, is also the least happy; and so is Dublin in Ireland (cited in Morrison, 2011), and so forth. Incidentally, research shows that urban unhappiness is not only a product of urban problems, such as crime and poverty, but also of cities themselves –

their core defining characteristics, such as size and density, are related to unhappiness (Okulicz-Kozaryn & Mazelis, 2016).¹ While there is a multitude of studies on urban–rural happiness gradient as recently reviewed by Okulicz-Kozaryn (2015), strikingly, no study has focused on this gradient over time. Research on generations does not seem to pay attention to the urban–rural happiness gradient at all (e.g., Howe & Strauss, 1992; Marsden, 2012; Moos, Pfeiffer, & Vinodrai, 2017; Myers, 2016; Twenge, 2017; Twenge, Campbell, & Freeman, 2012), and urban subjective well-being (SWB) research simply has not paid attention to time. Two studies come closest to the present study. Berry and Okulicz-Kozaryn (2011) show trends over time until 2008. By then, the closing urban–rural happiness gap was not apparent, and the study does not focus nor mention generations or cohorts. Okulicz-Kozaryn (2015) uses data until 2010, when the closing gap is apparent, but without much discussion – generations and Millennials are only briefly mentioned in the endnotes. The relevant findings are scattered without coherent synthesis regarding development of the gap over time. For instance, we already knew in the 1970s that Americans prefer smaller areas (Fuguitt & Brown, 1990; Fuguitt & Zuiches, 1975) and were happier there (Campbell, Converse, & Rodgers, 1976; Fischer, 1973). And we know that Americans overall still prefer smaller areas, though there is some indication of urban affinity among Millennials (e.g., YouGov US, 2012).

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However, there has been no prior research showing how SWB has varied by generations and over time. In this study, we investigate SWB by complementing the earlier spatial focus on urbanicity with a focus on time. We investigate the American urban–rural happiness gradient over the past four decades. We use consistent measurement of SWB over time including the most recent years (1972–2016). White and White (1977) provide a detailed summary of attitudes towards cities since the founding of the United States – Americans, or at least American intellectuals, have always been hostile or ambivalent towards cities. Is this attitude still alive today?

The investigation of the urban–rural happiness gradient over time will proceed as follows. First, we will define generations or cohorts that will become time units. Second, we will define SWB or happiness. We will then proceed to the empirical part of the study: an overview of data, variables and analysis.

MILLENNIALS

Cohorts or generations are typically defined according to Howe and Strauss (1992), as summarized below. The length of a generation approximates the span of a life phase and is defined by many commonalities: age, location, beliefs, behaviour and perceptions. A succession of generation cohorts has dominated American life since the earliest days of its settlement. A cohort consists of everyone born in a particular 20–25-year span, sharing a common age bracket as they move through their life cycles, experiencing the same economic and social conditions, and sharing a common sequence of life phases. Cohorts typically develop adherence to certain fundamental notions, a generational web of beliefs and attitudes about fundamental questions.

Millennials, also known as Gen Y or Generation Y, are those born between 1982 and 2004. Some of their shared characteristics include being civically and politically disengaged, but engaged online and being pressed for time (Twenge, 2017; Twenge et al., 2012). Yet, Millennials share a desire for more equality, cohesiveness, empathy and social capital (Twenge et al., 2012). Some scholars argue that Millennials are the generation that prefers cities over smaller places (e.g., Flint, 2014; Kalaidis, 2014; Maney, 2015; Nielsen News, 2014; Walker, 2016; YouGov US, 2012); others argue that they are not very different from earlier generations and still prefer the suburbs, just a little less (e.g., Delgado, 2016; Hudson, 2015; Kinder Rice Institute for Urban Research, 2016), or, according to others, a little more (Kolko, 2015). In short, there is much discussion and disagreement – it is somewhat clear that Millennials have greater affinity for cities than earlier generations, but it is not clear how different Millennials really are from other generations, and whether the differences are substantial at all, and how long they will last.

In terms of differences in residential status and preferences between Millennials and earlier generations, one point is worth emphasizing: it is not city versus suburb, which is surprisingly about the same, but metropolitan

areas (city + suburb) versus smaller places – almost twice as many Boomers lived in non-metropolitan areas as compared with Millennials (Jaffe, 2014).

This difference in residential status and preference echoes Hanson (2015): the biggest divide is urban–rural (and most suburban areas are arguably more urban than rural). This is one problem with contemporary urban scholarship and media attention: metropolitan areas are given almost all the attention (Fuller, 2017). And it seems as if the only choice is suburb versus city: the suburbs used to be preferred, now cities are fashionable, and soon it is likely that the suburbs will be favoured again. Smaller areas are forgotten altogether, and surely it must surprise urbanists and ‘sub-urbanists’ that people in general are neither happy in cities nor in suburbs, but in smaller places (Morrison & Weckroth, 2017; Okulicz-Kozaryn, 2015; Sørensen, 2014).

HAPPINESS

Happiness, or subjective well-being (SWB), is widely studied in psychology. Other fields are increasingly using it to study factors of interest within their domains. This versatility – being widely studied across social science – is also its limitation. Different fractions, especially across fields, tend to understand SWB differently, and sometimes fiercely defend their convictions, despite the fact that the majority of studies are using the same measurement of SWB based on identical or very similar survey questions. The most widely used surveys contain virtually the same survey questions: the US General Social Survey (GSS; used here), the World Values Survey (WVS), Eurobarometers (EB) and the Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS). These and other data sets are summarized by Powdthavee (2015). The literature about the link between urbanicity and happiness is summarized by Ballas (2013).

We use the terms ‘subjective well-being’ and ‘happiness’ interchangeably, while malaise refers to the opposite – lack of SWB. The survey measure used here, as defined below, mostly captures the cognitive dimension of SWB. It is mostly an evaluation of life as a whole, and not just a momentary affect. Previous research has shown that well-being is a multidimensional concept, with well-known limitations and dimensions (for recent reviews, see Diener, 2009; and Diener, Inglehart, & Tay, 2013). Here, the measurement is mostly a cognitive dimension of SWB. Having just one survey item to measure SWB results in the impossible task of measuring it precisely and independently from other dimensions. Yet, even one subjective and self-reported item has at least adequate validity and reliability (Diener et al., 2013; Myers, 2000). Specifically, we study here general/overall happiness and not a domain-specific happiness such as neighbourhood or community satisfaction.

DATA AND MODEL

We use the US GSS cumulative data set (1972–2016) obtained from gssdataexplorer.norc.org. The GSS is

collected face to face and is nationally representative. Since 1994, it has been collected every other year (in earlier years it was mostly annually). The GSS surveys persons who are 18 years or older. The sample has about 60,000 observations, and 2844 Millennials.² Note that the sample size used in the present models vary as a result of missing data. In more elaborate specifications, there are more missing data, and hence in those elaborate models the representativeness of the sample may be limited.

Variables are defined in Table 1. The SWB question reads: ‘Taken all together, how would you say things are these days – would you say that you are very happy, pretty happy, or not too happy?’ and answers are coded as 1 = ‘not too happy’, 2 = ‘pretty happy’ and 3 = ‘very happy’.³

This study is about Millennials and urbanicity, hence the key variable of interest is the interaction of a dummy variable identifying Millennials with a measurement of urbanicity, and urbanicity is measured using a sets of dummies for three variables:

- *Size deciles* are deciles of population size of a place of residence.
- *SRC beltcode* distinguishes between medium and large suburbs, and other areas.
- *Expanded NORC size code*, which is an even finer classification according to places’ density and size.

For the exact definitions for all size variables and cross-tabulations of all size variables, see Tables A1–A3 in the supplemental data online. The exact definitions for all size variables are shown at beginning of the Appendix. Table 1 lists the typical controls used in the SWB literature and the definitions for each variable (Berry & Okulicz-Kozaryn, 2011; Okulicz-Kozaryn, 2016). For the distributions of all variables, see Figure A1 in the supplemental data online.

In addition to these variables, we also included in the models three sets of dummy variables: occupation, regions and years. Occupation dummies are based on the International Standard Classification of Occupations (ISCO)

Table 1. Definitions of the variables.

Variable	Description
SWB (subjective well-being)	General happiness: ‘Taken all together, how would you say things are these days – would you say that you are very happy, pretty happy, or not too happy?’
size deciles	Deciles of the <i>SIZE</i> variable: ‘Size of place in thousands – a four-digit number which provides actual size of place of interview’ (see the supplemental data online for details)
SRC beltcode	SRC beltcode (see the supplemental data online for details)
expanded NORC size code	Expanded NORC size code (see the supplemental data online for details)
cohort	Year of birth
year	General Social Survey (GSS) year for the respondent
family income in 1986 US dollars, millions	Income variables (<i>INCOME72</i> , <i>INCOME</i> , <i>INCOME77</i> , <i>INCOME82</i> , <i>INCOME86</i> , <i>INCOME91</i> , <i>INCOME98</i> , <i>INCOME06</i>) are re-coded in six-digit numbers and converted to 1986 US dollars. The collapsed numbers above are for convenience of display only. Since this variable is based on categorical data, income is not continuous but based on categorical mid-points and imputations.
unemployed	‘Last week were you working full time, part time, going to school, keeping house, or what?’ ‘Unemployed, laid off, looking for work’
female	Respondent’s sex
age	Age of the respondent
highest year of school completed	Highest year of school completed: (A) ‘What is the highest grade in elementary school or high school that (you/your father/your mother/your [husband/wife]) finished and got credit for?’ Code exact grade; (B) If finished 9th–12th grade or Don’t know (DK*): ‘Did (you/he/she) ever get a high school diploma or a GED certificate?’; (C) ‘Did (you/he/she) complete one or more years of college for credit – not including schooling such as business college, technical or vocational school?’ If yes: ‘How many years did (you/he/she) complete?’
white	Race: ‘What race do you consider yourself?’
married	Marital status: ‘Are you currently – married, widowed, divorced, separated, or have you never been married?’ Note: variable recoded to 1 if married; 0 otherwise
number of children	‘How many children have you ever had? Please count all that were born alive at any time (including any you had from a previous marriage)’
health	Condition of health: ‘Would you say your own health, in general, is excellent, good, fair, or poor?’

Note: SRC = Survey Research Center (SRC), University of Michigan beltcode.

classification of one-digit occupations: professional, administrative/managerial, agriculture, production, clerical, sales, services, transport, craft and technical. It is important to control for occupation because there is arguably much overlap between happiness and certain jobs, and specificity of work differs widely across occupations and places. Also, since there are regional or cultural differences in just about anything, we included dummies for census regions: New England, Middle Atlantic, E. Nor. Central, W. Nor. Central, South Atlantic, E. Sou. Central, W. Sou. Central, Mountain, and Pacific.

We use ordinary least squares (OLS) to analyze the data. Although OLS assumes cardinality of the outcome variable, and happiness is clearly an ordinal variable, it is an appropriate estimation method to use in this case. Ferrer-i-Carbonell and Frijters (2004) showed that results are substantially the same as those from discrete models, and OLS has become the default method in happiness research (Blanchflower & Oswald, 2011). Theoretically, while there is still debate about the cardinality of SWB, there are strong arguments to treat it as a cardinal variable (Ng, 1996, 1997, 2011). Nonetheless, as a robustness check we also ran multinomial logit regressions. For the results, which are substantially the same, see the supplemental data online.

RESULTS

We start by looking at SWB over time in Figure 1. The first panel shows that urbanites are less happy, albeit becoming happier, and that people living in smaller areas have been becoming less happy since the 1970s, and especially in recent years. The second panel plots SWB against five cohorts or generations. A similar pattern emerges: the SWB urban–rural gap is closing. There is a considerable gap in SWB between urban and rural areas for all generations, but not for Millennials. These are, of course, simplified patterns, but they hold for multiple

definitions and cut-offs for cities and generations, as shown in the supplemental data online.

Next, we turn to the regression estimates that account for other predictors of SWB, as discussed above. The results indicate that Millennials do not experience urban malaise relative to smaller areas as do other generations, and appear to be happier in cities than elsewhere. The key estimates of the interactions between the Millennial dummy with the urbanicity measurements are easier to interpret using graphed predicted probabilities, as shown in Figure 2.⁴ The solid line shows the predicted SWB for Millennials; the dashed line pertains to older generations. Confidence intervals are much wider for Millennials due to their smaller sample size. We have adjusted for heteroskedasticity and used robust standard errors. Multicollinearity is not a problem: correlations among variables are not very strong. For cross-correlations, see Table A4 in the supplemental data online. Again, for robustness, we used three measures of urbanicity, which are quite different.

In the first panel of Figure 2, we used *size deciles*. Continuous population size is broken into categories to explore non-linearities between SWB and urbanicity. Among older generations, the larger the place, the lower the SWB. For Millennials, on the other hand, we observe the opposite: they are least happy in small areas (of 4000–8000 people) and their happiness reach a maximum in large towns (of about 60,000 people), and is only slightly lower in other larger areas.

The second panel of Figure 2 using *expanded NORC size code* differentiates between types of areas, which are not necessarily ordered from smallest to largest. Interestingly, Millennials are quite unhappy in large unincorporated areas.⁵ They are happiest in cities with a population greater than 50,000 people.

The third panel using *SRC beltcode*, which has fewer categories and narrower standard errors than the first two panels, shows a similar pattern. Millennials are least happy in small rural areas, much happier in small urban areas, a little less happy in the suburbs and the most

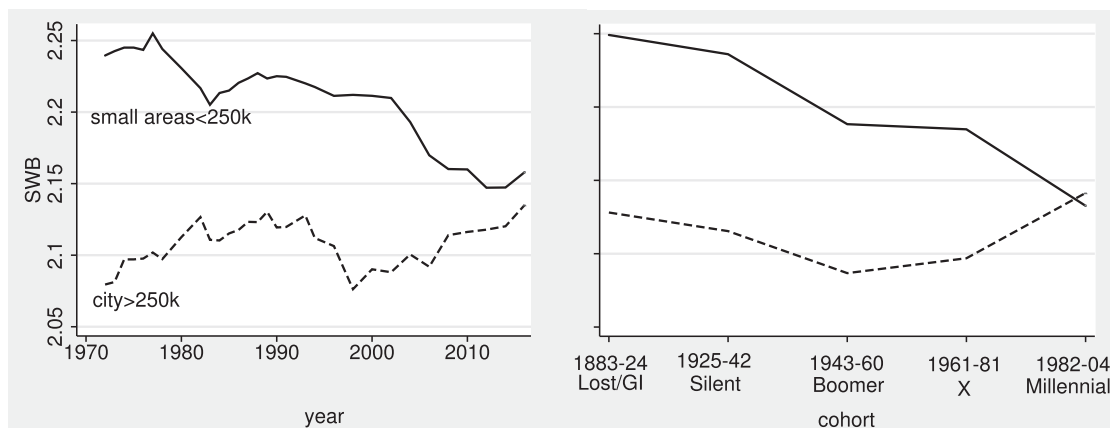


Figure 1. Average subjective well-being (SWB) (*y*-axis) for cities more than 250,000 people (dashed line) and smaller areas fewer than 250,000 people (solid line) against year in the first panel and against five cohorts in the second panel. The series in the first panel are uniformly weighted with a moving average using four lagged, four forward terms, and the current observation in the filter. A similar pattern indicating a closing SWB gap between urban and rural emerges when using different urbanicity cut-offs (see Figure A3 in the supplemental data online).

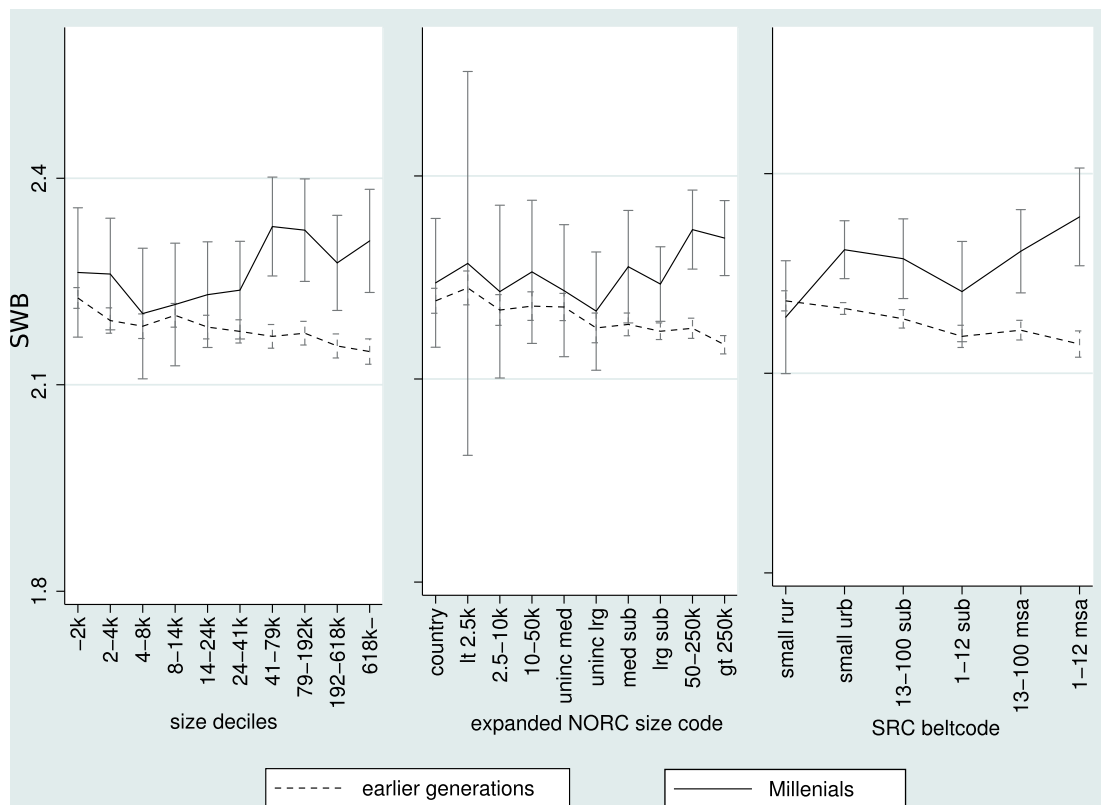


Figure 2. Predicted subjective well-being (SWB) (y-axis) against measures of urbanicity in three panels. The solid line is for Millennials; the dashed line is for earlier generations. 95% confidence intervals (CI) are shown. For the underlying regressions, see Tables A5–A7 (model 4) in the supplemental data online.

happy in the largest metropolitan areas. The *SRC beltcode* measure is arguably the best fitting to illustrate the urban–rural divide: the divide is between metropolitan areas versus smaller areas (Hanson, 2015), and *SRC beltcode* identifies the metropolitan statistical areas (MSAs).

These results are in line with recent research showing rising happiness in urban areas over the past several years (Okulicz-Kozaryn, 2015) as cities experienced a large increase in the number of Millennials. Concurrently, the results provide support for those who argue that Millennials prefer urban areas (e.g., Flint, 2014; Kalaidis, 2014; Maney, 2015; Nielsen News, 2014; Walker, 2016; YouGov US, 2012), and counter those who claim that there is a suburban preference (e.g., Delgadillo, 2016; Hudson, 2015; Kinder Rice Institute for Urban Research, 2016; Kolko, 2015) (if we assume that SWB is an indication of preferences).

The interactions of the Millennial dummy with urbanicity measures are statistically significant at about 50,000 population and above for the first two panels, and in almost all cases in the third panel (the base case is always the smallest area). The effect sizes are large: for the largest places, the difference between Millennials and others is about 0.15 on a 1–3 happiness scale (as seen in Figure 2). The effect is larger than that of gender and race and as high as three-quarters of the one-step increase on the four-step health variable.

Perhaps the large effect size is easiest to understand when compared with what it would be equivalent in

income.⁶ Since the happiness gap between Millennials and others in the largest places is about 0.15 – to obtain a comparable change from income, its coefficient, which is about 2.2, would have to be multiplied by about 0.07,⁷ and since income is measured in millions, it would yield at least US\$70,000 in 1986 dollars, which is considerably over US\$100,000 (about US\$150,000 in today’s dollars).⁸ This would indicate a great equivalent difference in income.

An important caveat is age – we have controlled for age and age², but the oldest Millennial in sample is 34 years. Arguably, youngsters enjoy cities more⁹ and young people tend to be happy,¹⁰ and hence, the results may be biased. Millennials could appear happier in cities simply because they are young and not because they are Millennials. Thus, we ran additional regressions including only respondents younger than 35 years. The results were similar (see Tables A8–A10 in the supplemental data online).

DISCUSSION

Why are Millennials happy in the city if all other generations are not?

The results show that Millennials are happier living in cities. The obvious question is: why? Why are Millennials happy in cities while earlier generations are happier outside cities?

Perhaps it has something to do with urban amenities that appeal better to Millennials. Per central place theory,

the number and kind of amenities are proxied by size – the larger the place, the more amenities and the more specialized they are (O’Sullivan, 2009). However, there are certain amenities that may appeal more to Millennials than others. For instance, Millennials (and post-Millennials) are very much an internet/smartphone generation (Poushter, 2016; Twenge, 2017; Valcke, Bonte, De Wever, & Rots, 2010), and they drive less than other generations (Badger, 2013; Nielsen News, 2014). There is no better place to drive less, and to be more online in, than in a city, where high-speed internet is more easily accessible and one can use it easily on public transportation.

In cities we find more comparisons and greater relative deprivation (Okulicz-Kozaryn, 2015; Ravallion & Lokshin, 2010; Simmel, 1903; Veblen, 2005; Wirth, 1938), and arguably urbanites have higher expectations (Okulicz-Kozaryn & Valente, 2017). Inequality (e.g., Luttmer, 2005; Okulicz-Kozaryn, Holmes, & Avery, 2014), relative deprivation (D’Ambrosio & Frick, 2007; Smith, Pettigrew, Pippin, & Bialosiewicz, 2012) and higher expectations can decrease happiness since:

$$\text{happiness} = \text{achievement or experience} \\ - \text{aspirations or expectations} \quad (1)$$

Millennials relative to younger cohorts, at least in some ways, may have lower expectations (Sanghani, 2014), and appear to be less materialistic (Kadlec, 2015; Malcolm, 2016) and more interested in buying experiences than things (Economy, 2016), which can increase happiness (Okulicz-Kozaryn, 2014; Okulicz-Kozaryn & Tursi, 2015). It may also help that Millennials are confident, connected and open to change (Pew, 2010).

On the other hand, Millennials are also found to be disengaged civically and politically, and less concerned about helping the larger community (Twenge et al., 2012). They have been called generation ‘Me’. Although they want more equality, cohesiveness, empathy and social capital, they are also very much focused on themselves. Millennials are more extrinsic (e.g., money) than intrinsic (e.g., meaning, purpose) motivated, they are less concerned with suffering and disadvantage, and are more narcissistic than earlier generations (Twenge et al., 2012). Some of these traits may actually increase urban happiness. For instance, they will not be upset or bothered by homelessness, poverty and other urban problems. In general, cities may have more appeal to extrinsically motivated people.

Another possible reason for the unexpected urban happiness of Millennials could be the fact that they are more diverse (Jaffe, 2014) and less prejudiced toward others based on social identities and differences such as race, gender and sexual orientation (Twenge et al., 2012), and, hence, they may be happier living in cities – heterogeneity is a key defining feature of cities (Wirth, 1938).

In addition, Millennials are probably already the most educated generation,¹¹ and are set to become the most educated generation ever to exist in the near future (Pew Research Center, 2017). Education may also be the key to urban happiness. Richard Florida argues persuasively

in favour of education when considering urban SWB (e.g., Florida, Mellander, & Rentfrow, 2013). Arguably, there are greater returns from education in cities than elsewhere, and education helps one enjoy more urban amenities such as theatres, concert halls, opera houses, museums and so forth. Still, the urban happiness of Millennials is in addition to the effect of education since the present models control for education.

Importantly, the happiness of Millennials in the largest cities is not necessarily a sign of city greatness or even of city improvement. Rather, Americans are increasingly forced into metropolitan areas because rural jobs are progressively disappearing (Okulicz-Kozaryn, 2015). Within metropolitan areas, earlier generations, notably Boomers, chose to live in the suburbs and were happier there than in cities. Yet, the suburbs have increasingly become problematic – ‘dull, fake, and boring’ (Duany, Plater-Zyberk, & Speck, 2001; Kay, 1997; Kunstler, 2012, 2004). Hence, cities, may be a better (and happier) place for younger generations. Sørensen (2014) and Morrison and Weckroth (2017) provide a detailed discussion on possible causes for the urban–rural happiness gradient.

Fundamentally, however, these are all speculations, and it remains for future research to test what distinctive features of Millennials allow them to be happier in cities.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

One interpretation of the results is that the spatial happiness gap follows the temporal Easterlin paradox – increases in income do not translate into increases in SWB (Easterlin, McVey, Switek, Sawangfa, & Zweig, 2010). Most income is generated in urban areas, yet these areas are not happy. They are actually less happy, arguably mainly due to the consequences of income-generating activities, pollution, congestion etc. The economics point of view upholds the traditional economic axiom ‘the more income, the better’ (e.g., Autor, 2010). Accordingly, it opposes the Easterlin paradox (Stevenson & Wolfers, 2013) and the urban–rural happiness gradient (Glaeser, 2014, 2011b, 2011a; Glaeser, Gottlieb, & Ziv, 2016, 2014). The utilitarian explanation for the closing gap in rural–urban happiness can be challenged by the fact that it is arguably the negative effects of cities, particularly their dominance over rural areas, that is causing this gap to close. As lack of opportunities and investments in rural areas accentuate, the narrowing gap in happiness increases. This is perhaps best explained by someone living in a rural area, such as this Californian who stated (Fuller, 2017, p. 2):

We run this state like it’s one size fits all. You can’t do that. In the rural parts of the state we drive more miles, we drive older cars, our economy is an agriculture- and resource-based economy that relies on tractors. You can’t move an 80,000-pound load in an electric truck.

They’ve devastated the jobs, timber jobs, mining jobs with their environmental regulations, so, yes, we have a

harder time sustaining the economy, and therefore there's more people that are in a poorer situation.

Millennials still prefer low-density living, similar to earlier generations. However, there is debate about the strength and durability of this preference. By some accounts the preference is very strong: 75% want to buy a single-family detached home, 66% would prefer to live in the suburbs, 24% would opt for rural areas and only 10% would choose to live in the central city (Quint, 2015). Given this scenario, it is even more striking to find out that Millennials are the happiest in cities, which is opposite to other generations.

There is no indication that cities have become great in any fundamental way, regardless of all the hype about smart growth, walkability and bikeability (Aspen Institute, 2014). Rather, it seems that Millennials are the ones who are different and more pro-urban. Surely there are notable generational differences as discussed previously, but then again, Millennials do not seem to be completely different from earlier generations. This happiness with city life may be simply a phase or fashion such as others in the past. It remains to be seen, when more data become available in future years, whether Millennials are really happier in cities.

The main contribution of this paper is to provide the first investigation focused on the urban–rural happiness gradient over time. The results indicate that Millennials are different from all other generations living in the United States over the past 40 years – they are the first generation to be more satisfied with urban than with rural life. It will be important to continue analyzing this phenomenon as more data become available to determine whether the trend is sustained, and whether it is also visible in other countries.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This study emphasized generality over specificity. It should be stressed that the relationship between urbanicity and SWB is more nuanced and complex than presented here. While urban unhappiness is common at least in the Western world, as elaborated in the introduction, cities vary greatly in all aspects. Yet, the GSS data do not identify specific cities and, hence, we cannot control for their characteristics. Such analysis has been done by Okulicz-Kozaryn (2016) – when controlling for city-level attributes, the largest cities were the least happy. However, the data used in Okulicz-Kozaryn (2016) would not allow for long-term analyses – the GSS is best suited for this purpose.

Future research could focus on cross-sectional and short-term changes. In addition, data sets that would allow researchers to control for city amenities can be important in determining whether amenities are significant to Millennials' happiness. One amenity that is very important for SWB in general is nature (Barton & Pretty, 2010; Bertram & Rehdanz, 2014; Brown, Oueslati, & Silva, 2015; Krekel, Kolbe, & Wüstemann, 2016; Larson, Jennings, Cloutier, & Lepczyk, 2016; Pretty, 2012, 2013; Wheeler, White, Stahl-Timmins, & Depledge, 2012;

White, Alcock, Wheeler, & Depledge, 2013a, 2013b). Arguably, some amenities and some cities would appeal more to Millennials than others, and accordingly, Millennials would be happier there. Future research can also use other variables available in the GSS to try to infer amenities that are present, e.g., using variables that measure what activities Millennials are engaged in, and the effect, if any, of social life.

The goal of this study was to document the relationship between the urban–rural happiness gradient and time. We leave the differentiation among city amenities for future research. In addition, different age groups (and other groups, too) are happy or unhappy with different things. Therefore, future research should take into account the environment, or ecology, and explore the person's or group-level interactions with the environment. For instance, the age composition of the environment is likely to impact a person's own SWB. Such an analysis could be carried out in a multilevel modelling framework.

It is possible that the closing urban–rural happiness gap is due not only to generational changes but also to changing cities – it is possible that cities somehow became more friendly to youth (older people are still more happy outside of cities). However, because Millennials are the youth of today, it is impossible to separate the influence, if any, that age and differences in cities might have in our models. It is important to distinguish between mega-cities, large cities and smaller cities – cities differ greatly in size. Although the present study provided some degree of differentiation, notably in terms of size and density, more differentiation is needed in future research. As more years of data become available, and other data sets identifying different types of cities are used, we could make these distinctions. Likewise, we should emphasize that there are multiple complexities of understanding happiness in cities. Ideally, one would need to consider a number of geographical and contextual variables such as various inequalities, lack of social cohesion, poverty, homelessness and so forth, which are all likely to affect SWB. Thus, whenever possible, local area problems should be controlled for, as done by Okulicz-Kozaryn and Mazelis (2016). Also, we emphasize that these problems are not only urban problems but also that they affect rural areas. Many problems are increasingly rural, such as the opioid epidemics among rural Whites (Case & Deaton, 2015). Therefore, a city or a rural area could be socially cohesive or unequal, and social and spatial contexts are very important to consider (e.g., some rural areas have high levels of social cohesion and/or are very affluent, but also there are poor/very deprived areas with limited access to amenities that would be standard in cities). Naturally, no single study can address all these issues, but they must be acknowledged. The goal in the present study was to provide a general statement – it is the first study to link urban–rural happiness gradient to cohorts or generations. Future research should explore the idiosyncrasies of different cities.

Another direction for future research is to use panel or longitudinal data. Such an approach would better investigate the effect of age (and moving) on SWB by urbanicity

controlling for invariant person-level characteristics. A respondent could be analyzed over his or her lifetime as they move across places of different sizes. It is likely that they could be more satisfied with cities in their adolescence, in their 20s and even in their 30s: cities provide visual stimulation, exposure to various stimuli and may satisfy the many curiosities of young age. But once a person has children, and grows older, smaller places may be more appealing – larger, quieter and more affordable. As explained above, Millennials have certain unique traits as compared with other generations, and it could be useful to analyze variables proxying those characteristics to examine whether ‘Millennial attributes’ are related to urban happiness in other cohorts as well.

As with data sets that identify locations such as the BRFSS, panel data sets are shorter than the GSS. For the United States, there is the AddHealth, with only a few waves and inconsistent SWB measurement, and the Panel Study of Income Dynamics with consistent measurement, but also only has a few waves. The British Household Panel Survey (BHPS) and the German Socio-Economic Panel (GSOEP) are longer, but still considerably shorter, than the GSS. We have advocated the use of panel data. Yet, no amount of statistics or econometrics including panel data techniques can lead to confident causal statements. Experiment or quasi-experiment is required. This is an observational or correlational study, and we cannot claim causality – testing the underlying causal mechanism is impossible with this type of study. Correlational studies are not without value, however. Very often causality is first discovered in correlational studies – for instance, smoking was first found to cause cancer in a correlational study (Blanchflower & Oswald, 2011; Oswald, 2014). More importantly, a true experimental design is usually impossible to accomplish, and experimental designs virtually always suffer from low or non-existent external validity, and hence, an experiment is not an absolute improvement over correlational studies (e.g., Pawson & Tilley, 1997). Fundamentally, testing the effect of a variety of settlements over long periods of time with experimental data is virtually impossible. Surely, there must have been random assignments of people to a place, but we do not know of any large-scale assignments to a variety of places that could provide enough data to generalize to a wider population. In addition, people would actually have to live in a place for a considerable amount of time to be able to estimate the effect of the place on their SWB – just being in a place as a visitor or short-term resident would not be enough. Given our research focus on Millennials, it would be impossible to have an experimental data set covering multiple decades and generations, since one limitation of experimental studies is their very limited geographical and temporal coverage (Pawson & Tilley, 1997).

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

NOTES

1. Research suggest that this might not be the case in some developing countries (Valente & Berry, 2016a).
2. The GSS staff replied to our enquiry about the representativeness of the survey stating: ‘the GSS is almost certainly representative of the universe of Millennials, with some degree of error around any particular question’.
3. This question has been used in many SWB studies (e.g., Blanchflower & Oswald, 2003; Oishi, Kesebir, & Diener, 2011; Okulicz-Kozaryn, 2016; Berry & Okulicz-Kozaryn, 2011; Valente & Berry, 2016b). For more details about the GSS measurement of SWB, see the supplemental data online.
4. For the underlying regressions, see Tables A5–A7 (model 4) in the supplemental data online.
5. For detailed definitions of areas, see the supplemental data online.
6. For instance, Sørensen (2014) made a similar calculation to illustrate urban rural differences.
7. That is, if we solve for X , we would obtain: $2.2 * X = 0.15$, which would result in $X = 0.15 / 2.2 = 0.07$.
8. See <https://data.bls.gov/cgi-bin/cpicalc.pl?cost1=7000&year1=198601&year2=201709/>.
9. An argument can certainly be made that young people are attracted to cities: cities are exciting, promising and vibrant (Okulicz-Kozaryn & Valente, 2017; Okulicz-Kozaryn, 2015).
10. Most find a ‘U’-shaped relationship between age and SWB (López Ulloa, Møller, & Sousa-Poza, 2013).
11. Also in this sample, Millennials are already slightly more educated than other generations when considering the 25–34-years age bracket. The average years of education for all generations are: the Silent Generation, 12.4 years; the Boomer Generation, 13.2 years; Generation X, 13.7 years; and Millennials, 13.9 years. There are no Millennials older than 35 years in this sample, and many are still attending school. In future, there will be arguably an even greater proportion of Millennials with more education (Pew Research Center, 2017; see also Landrum, 2017).

SUPPLEMENTAL DATA

Supplemental data for this article can be accessed at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00343404.2018.1453130>.

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