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# Social Support, Freedom, and Inequalities in Subjective Well-Being Across Nations

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## Abstract

Subjective well-being has increasingly become an important area of social inquiry because it reflects how people experience and evaluate life within broader social and institutional contexts. This study examines cross-national inequalities in subjective well-being with particular attention to the roles of social support and freedom. Using a quantitative, cross-sectional, comparative design, the study analyzes country-level data from 143 nations. Descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, and grouped comparisons were used to explore patterns of variation in well-being across countries and across ordered well-being groups. The findings reveal substantial cross-national disparities in subjective well-being. Social support showed a strong positive association with subjective well-being, while freedom also demonstrated a positive, though comparatively weaker, relationship. Countries in the higher well-being groups consistently reported stronger social support and greater freedom than those in the lower well-being groups. In addition, higher-well-being countries tended to display more favorable economic conditions, better health, and stronger corruption-related confidence. These patterns indicate that subjective well-being is closely linked to broader relational, structural, and institutional conditions rather than being solely an individual-level outcome. The study concludes that inequalities in subjective well-being across nations are associated with unequal social environments. It highlights the importance of addressing supportive social conditions, freedom, health, and broader structural factors in efforts to improve human well-being and reduce cross-national disparities.

**Keywords**: subjective well-being; social support; freedom; cross-national inequality; comparative social research; quality of life

## 1. Introduction

Subjective well-being has emerged as a key issue in the modern social research field due to its importance in terms of how people assess their lives in relation to a larger social, economic and institutional framework. No longer it is seen as an individual psychological condition, but as a socially patterned condition that is supported, unequal, and influenced by health, participation and opportunity. This larger concept has resulted in subjective well-being becoming a valuable tool in the analysis of how societies allocate the circumstances under which individuals can lead meaningful and fulfilling lives. Considerable amount of literature recognizes social support as one of the most effective predictor of subjective well-being in various populations. In individuals with physical disability, social support has been identified to enhance subjective well-being with psychosocial processes like self-esteem, indicating that life satisfaction is tightly connected with relational affirmation and social recognition (Ji et al., 2019). The same evidence in adolescents suggests that perceived social support is closely related to psychological well-being, which states the significance of favorable environments in the life of adolescents (Poudel et al., 2020). Support also has crucial importance in the digital realm, as social support online was found to affect subjective well-being based on the experience and patterns of interaction among users (Hsu et al., 2020). Collectively these researches indicate that social support is not just interpersonal support, but a broader social resource that influences the experience and assessment of life.

Recent research also indicates that the power of social support is not limited to emotional reassurance to extend to wider conditions of health, resilience and adaptation. In older adults, social support correlates with subjective well-being and perceived overall health, which means that there is a strong connection between the relational and physical aspects of welfare (Farriol-Baroni et al., 2021). Other studies have shown similar results with older adults who have chronic disease, indicating that social support mediates the correlation between depression and subjective well-being, and thus, its protective effect in vulnerable conditions (Li et al., 2025). Social support has also been identified to enhance well-being in older adults in the case of migrant older adults, which has been a factor of psychological resilience, which means that supportive relationships are still important in the context of mobility and transition (Liu et al., 2025). In cases of public health emergencies, social support has also been observed to mediate the influence of information involvement on subjective well-being, also highlighting its significance in circumstances of uncertainty (Zhang et al., 2025).

Nonetheless, social support is not the way one can comprehend subjective well-being. There are also socioeconomic and structural determinants of the distribution of well-being among populations. Studies indicate that socioeconomic status can affect subjective well-being by class identity and social activities, which means that social position and engagement will be at the middle of well-being development (Wang et al., 2023). Support has been found to be relevant in depression and academic stress in educational contexts, demonstrating the role of social buffering in the context of challenging institutions (Kotyśko and Frankowiak, 2025). The same argument has been put forward in the occupational context where social support is defined as a key to dealing with stress in the workplace and maintaining well-being when under organizational stress (Oliveira et al., 2025). More recent literature frames subjective well-being in broader questions of social sustainability and the policies of the state. Studies of socially sustainable local environments have revealed that supportive and inclusive community conditions are positively related to subjective well-being, indicating that territorial inequalities and local social arrangements are important to quality of life (Capecchi et al., 2025). Similarly, the developing contexts evidence suggests that the subjective well-being on the societal level can be tailored by sustainable public policies and institutional arrangements (Pacheco-Jaramillo and Zaldumbide, 2025).

It is against this backdrop that the current paper looks into the relationship between social support, freedom, and inequalities in subjective well-being across countries. However, despite the fact that the role of social support has been clearly demonstrated in certain groups and contexts, the relationship between supportive conditions and freedom and cross-national differences in subjective well-being has not been comparatively investigated in the past. The study will target:

1. To examine cross-national differences in subjective well-being across countries.
2. To assess the association of subjective well-being with social support and freedom.
3. To compare social support and freedom across lower- and higher-well-being country groups.
4. To interpret cross-national inequalities in subjective well-being in relation to broader contextual conditions such as economic status, health, and institutional environment.

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1 Research Design

This research was based on a quantitative, cross-sectional, comparative research design to check the variation of subjective well-being among different countries and the relationship between the variation and social support and freedom. The country level was the level of analysis and each country was regarded as the unit of observation. The design was considered suitable since the research aimed to determine and explain cross-national differences in well-being in a larger social environment, but not to determine the cause and effect relationship at the individual level.

### 2.2 Data Source

The study used a secondary country level data that contains 143 countries in observation (Singh, 2024). The dataset included national indicators of subjective well-being as well as a list of social, institutional, and economic indicators that were used to conduct comparative social inquiry. The fact that it is cross-national in coverage meant that it could be used to study both the differences in well-being between countries and to study how the differences relate to the larger contextual factors.

### 2.3 Variables

Subjective well-being was the dependent variable in the study. Social support and freedom were the two main explanatory dimensions because they were directly related to the conceptual focus of the study. Moreover, the consideration of certain contextual indicators based on economic conditions, health, generosity and perceived corruption was also applied to interpret the cross-national disparities. These variables were employed in order to have a wider picture of the social and institutional setting in which national disparities in well-being are placed.

### 2.4 Data Processing and Preparation

Data was reviewed to ensure completeness and consistency before the analysis. There were no duplicate entries of similar countries. Some contextual indicators had missing values in a few observations; hence complete-case analysis was utilized in the processes that needed such values. Meanwhile, the entire range of possible observations in the country was not discarded with the descriptive evaluation of subjective well-being. The data were then tabulated to be compared in a better way by classifying countries in rank and making them categorize into well-being-based groups to make it easier to analyze the patterns of disparity between lower- and higher-well-being settings.

### 2.5 Data Analysis

The analysis was done in three steps. First, the distribution of subjective well-being among the countries was summarized with respect to central tendency and variation using the descriptive statistics as a way of determining the general trend of cross-national differences. Second, the correlation analysis was used to determine the direction and the strength of the relationship between the subjective well-being, social support, and freedom. Third, nations were categorized into five well-being groups to compare the degree of variations in social support and freedom among relatively low and high well-being national environments. Other contextual indicators were explored descriptively to further interpret the observed disparities. These results were explained by cross-national correlations and disparities in social circumstances, and not causal impacts.

## 3. Results

### 3.1 Cross-National Distribution of Subjective Well-Being

The comparison showed that the subjective well-being in the 143 countries that took part in the study was significantly different across nations. As shown in Table 1 and Figure 1, the mean well-being score was 5.53 (SD = 1.17), with a median of 5.79. The scores were between 1.72 and 7.74, which show that the levels of national well-being were widely dispersed. This trend shows that subjective well-being did not seem to be evenly distributed among the countries.Table 1 indicates that the highest well-being scores were observed in Finland (7.74), Denmark (7.58), Iceland (7.53), Sweden (7.34), and Israel (7.34) and the lowest scores in Afghanistan (1.72), Lebanon (2.71), Lesotho (3.19), Sierra Leone (3.25), and Congo (Kinhasa) (3.30). Figure 1 also reflects the broad spread of country scores across the well-being distribution.

**Table 1. Descriptive profile of subjective well-being across countries**

| Panel | Indicator / Country | Value |
|---|---|---|
| **A. Descriptive statistics** | Number of countries | 143 |
| | Mean | 5.53 |
| | Standard deviation | 1.17 |
| | Median | 5.79 |
| | Minimum | 1.72 |
| | Maximum | 7.74 |
| | Range | 6.02 |
| **B. Highest well-being countries** | Finland | 7.74 |
| | Denmark | 7.58 |
| | Iceland | 7.53 |
| | Sweden | 7.34 |
| | Israel | 7.34 |
| **C. Lowest well-being countries** | Afghanistan | 1.72 |
| | Lebanon | 2.71 |
| | Lesotho | 3.19 |
| | Sierra Leone | 3.25 |
| | Congo (Kinshasa) | 3.30 |

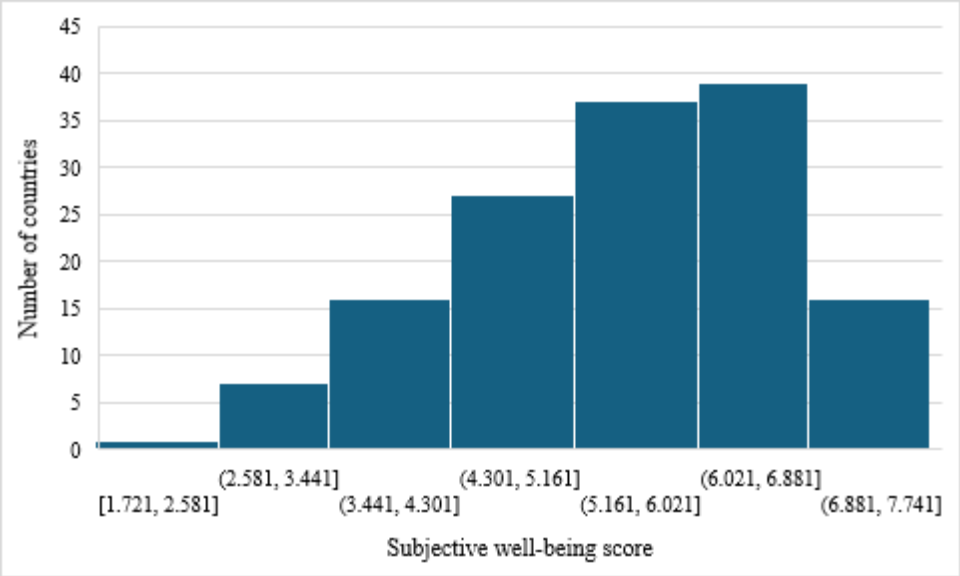



**Figure 1.** Distribution of subjective well-being across countries

### 3.2 Association of Subjective Well-Being with Social Support and Freedom

Both social support and freedom were positively related to subjective well-being in all countries as reported in Table 2 and shown in Figures 2 and 3. There was a strong positive correlation between social support and subjective well-being with Pearson correlation of r =.814, p <.001 and a Spearman correlation of rho =.820, p <.001. This shows that the stronger the social support of countries were, the more they were likely to indicate high levels of subjective well-being. Freedom also showed a positive relationship with subjective well being which was moderately strong. As shown in Table 2, the Pearson correlation was r = .644, p < .001, and the Spearman correlation was rho = .635, p < .001. Despite the fact that the two associations were both significant, social support had always a stronger relationship than freedom. The upward trends depicted in Figure 2 and Figure 3 help to support this pattern visually.

**Table 2. Correlation of subjective well-being with social support and freedom**

| Variable | Pearson's r | p-value | Spearman's rho | p-value |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Social support | 0.814 | < .001 | 0.820 | < .001 |
| Freedom | 0.644 | < .001 | 0.635 | < .001 |

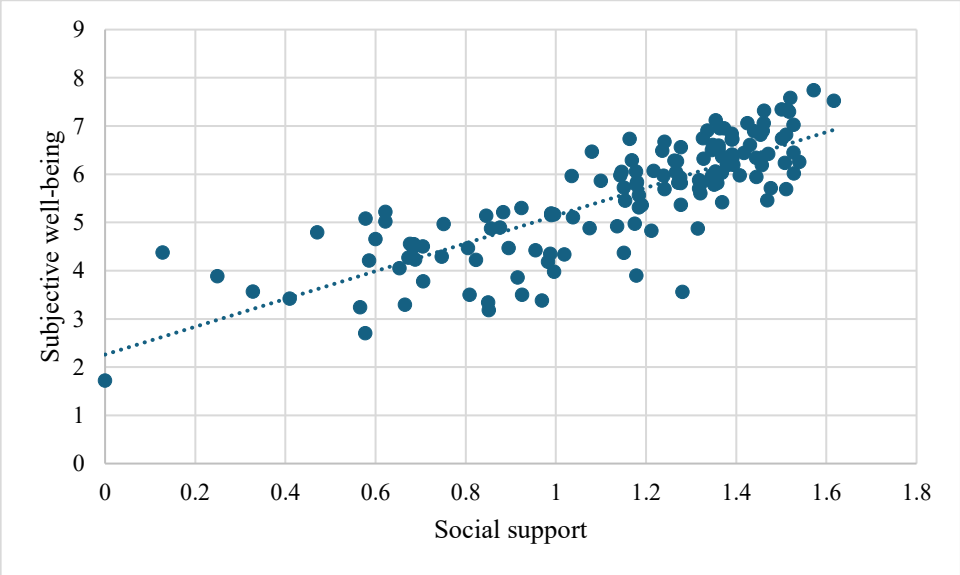



**Figure 2.** Relationship between social support and subjective well-being

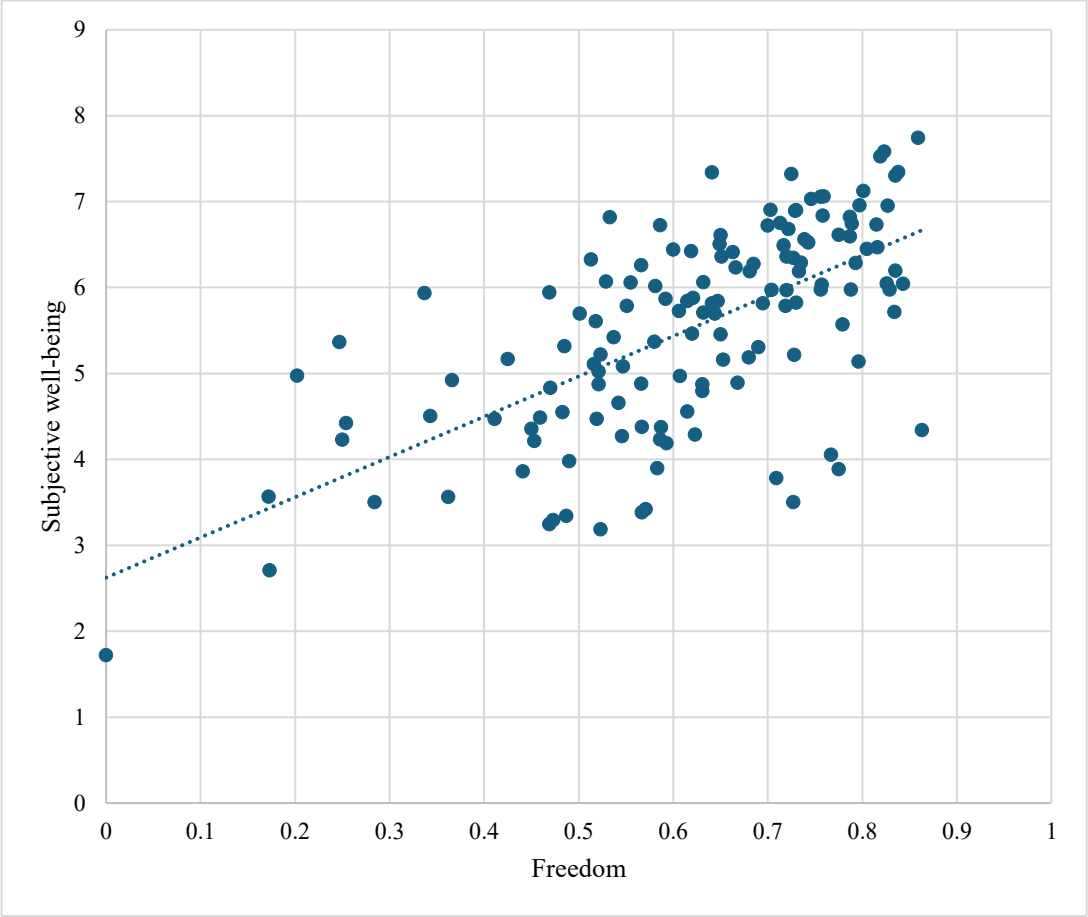



**Figure 3.** Relationship between freedom and subjective well-being

**3.3 Inequalities Across Well-Being Groups**

Countries were classified into five well-being categories to examine inequalities closely. There was an evident gradient between these groups, as Table 3 and Figure 4 revealed. The average score for countries in the lowest well-being category was 3.74, and the average score was 6.99 in the highest category giving a difference of 3.25 points.

The systematic disparities in social support and freedom went along with this inequality in subjective well-being. Table 3 indicated that mean social support went up in the lowest group of 0.74 to the highest group of 1.43 and mean freedom went up in 0.50 to 0.75. The same trend was observed in the intermediate groups: the lower-middle group had mean values of 4.89, 0.88 and 0.53 on subjective well being, social support, and freedom respectively, the middle group had 5.75, 1.28 and 0.63, and the upper-middle group had 6.28, 1.35 and 0.70. Figure 4 also vividly reveals this gradual trend, showing that more well-being countries were more socially supported and had more freedom.

**Table 3. Subjective well-being, social support, and freedom across well-being groups**

| Well-being group | n | Mean subjective well-being | Mean social support | Mean freedom |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Lowest | 28 | 3.74 | 0.74 | 0.50 |
| Lower-middle | 28 | 4.89 | 0.88 | 0.53 |
| Middle | 28 | 5.75 | 1.28 | 0.63 |
| Upper-middle | 28 | 6.28 | 1.35 | 0.70 |
| Highest | 28 | 6.99 | 1.43 | 0.75 |

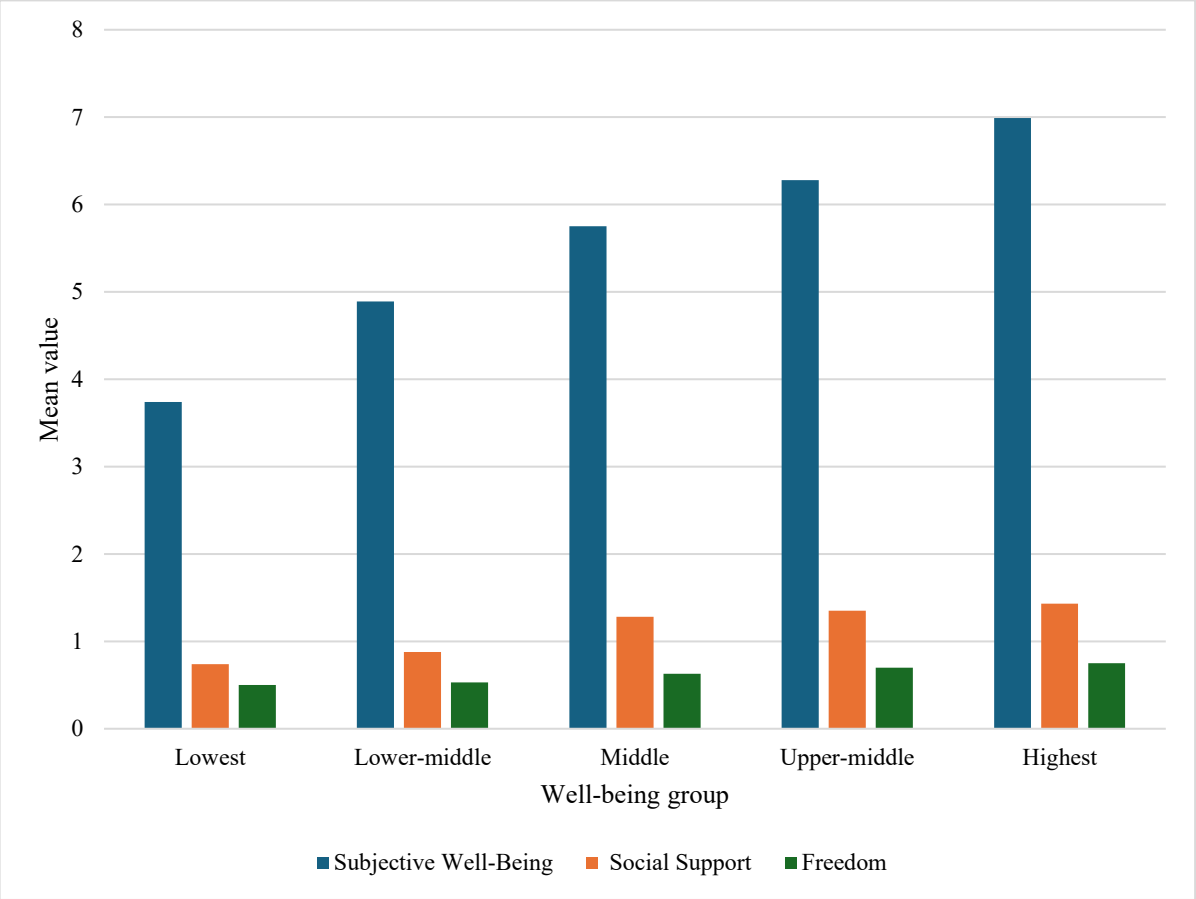



**Figure 4.** Gradient in subjective well-being, social support, and freedom across well-being groups

### 3.4 Contextual Pattern of National Disparities

There were also systematic differences in the broader contextual indicators across well-being groups. As Table 4 and Figure 5 indicate, more countries in the upper group of well-being indicated better average economic situation, healthier life expectancy, and higher corruption related confidence than countries in the lowest well-being group. This trend indicates that cross-national disparities in subjective well-being were incorporated in broader social and institutional setups.

The steepness was particularly high in the case of economic conditions and health. The mean GDP of the lowest group was 0.93 and the highest group was 1.85 and the mean health indicator was 0.35 and 0.67 respectively as shown in Table 4. The lower-middle, middle, and upper-middle groups also had a more or less rising trend, with GDP of 1.12, 1.39, and 1.61 as well as health of 0.41, 0.56, and 0.63 respectively. Corruption indicator also exhibited a greater range across groups with lowest and lower-middle groups experiencing 0.12, 0.08 in the middle group, and upper-middle and highest groups experiencing 0.31 and 0.15 respectively. Generosity differentiated slightly within the distribution, with the lowest and highest groups of 0.14 and 0.18 with an intermediate of 0.15, 0.14, and 0.12. Figure 5 also shows these patterns with GDP and health having the steepest upward gradients among the ordered well-being groups.

**Table 4. Selected contextual indicators across well-being groups**

| Well-being group | Mean GDP indicator | Mean health indicator | Mean corruption indicator | Mean generosity indicator |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Lowest | 0.93 | 0.35 | 0.12 | 0.14 |
| Lower-middle | 1.12 | 0.41 | 0.12 | 0.15 |
| Middle | 1.39 | 0.56 | 0.08 | 0.14 |
| Upper-middle | 1.61 | 0.63 | 0.15 | 0.12 |
| Highest | 1.85 | 0.67 | 0.31 | 0.18 |

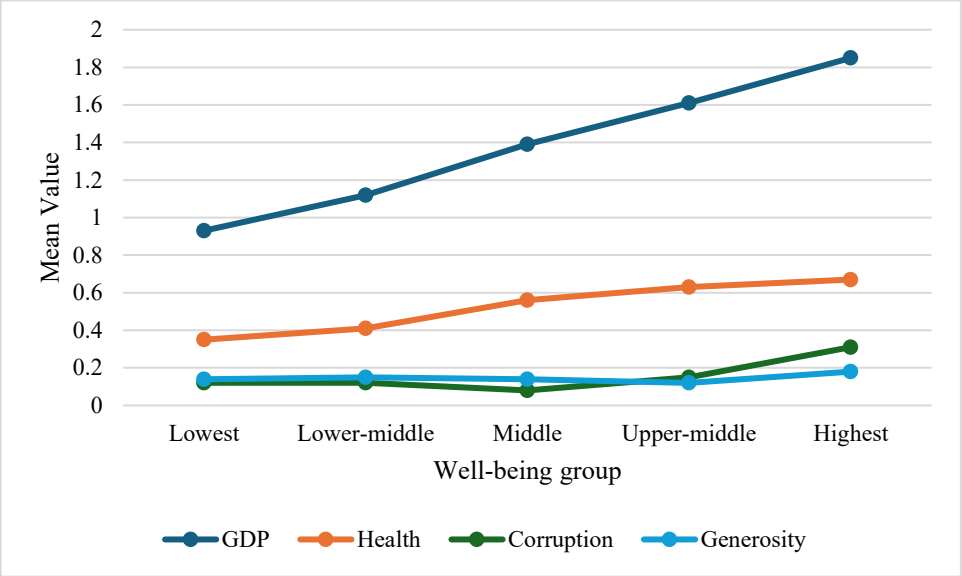



**Figure 5.** Contextual indicators across well-being groups

## 4. Discussion

The present study examined cross-national disparities in subjective well-being and explored the relationship between the differences and social support, freedom, and contextual circumstances of choice. The results indicate that there are three significant trends. First, subjective well-being is significantly different between countries. Second, social support and freedom are positively related to subjective well-being, with the stronger relationship seen between social support and well-being. Third, the level of subjective well-being also implies that higher-level countries are more likely to report better economic situations, healthier life expectancy, and higher corruption-related confidence. Collectively, these results imply that subjective well-being is not merely a personal psychological state, but a socialized outcome that is influenced by the relational, institutional and structural contexts.

The high cross-national difference in subjective well-being highlights the significance of considering well-being in its social contexts as opposed to considering it as an individual issue. This is in line with the larger literature, which is increasingly theorizing subjective well-being as a multidimensional construct that is influenced by life evaluation, emotional experience, and social conditions acting together (Diener et al., 2018). The great disparity between the lowest and the highest ranked countries in the current study suggests that the national setting is at the core of defining the experience and assessment of life. This difference is of particular importance to the progressive social inquiry, as it guides the focus towards the uneven social set-ups where well-being is shared among the populations.

One of the key conclusions of the study is the fact that social support and subjective well-being have a strong positive correlation. Greater subjective well-being in countries with a stronger social support was reported and this pattern was observable even among the ordered well-being groups. This implies that positive social association is an elemental aspect of national well-being. On the macro-social level, social support can be perceived not only in terms of interpersonal support, but as a reflection of social cohesion, relational security and the ability of a society to maintain meaningful human contact. This interpretation can be connected to the evidence that social support has a close relation to affective well-being and is an influential factor of positive life experience under varying conditions (Xu et al., 2021). It is also consistent with the results indicating that the effectiveness of social support works in conjunction with health status in relation to subjective well-being, as supportive environments might increase resilience, complementing the advantages of other positive factors (Zhang and Sun, 2024). The current results thus reinforce the thesis that the differences in well-being among countries can be partly due to the inequality in access to supportive and socially integrated environments.

Freedom too proved to be a major correlate of the subjective well-being, but the relationship was not as strong as the one between social support and freedom. This finding indicates that freedom is still a significant aspect of national well-being, although its impact might be mediated by the overall social and institutional structures under which individuals exercise choice. When looked at in comparison, the concept of freedom can be understood as the expression of agency, autonomy, and perceived ability to influence the life one leads in a particular social order. The topicality of this dimension is justified by the international studies that underline the importance of freedom in the development of humans, equality, and the overall welfare (Perkins et al., 2021). The current research builds on that viewpoint by demonstrating that nations that have a greater subjective well-being are also likely to have greater freedom related states. In such a way, the results suggest that supportive social relations and perceived agency cannot be considered as conflicting explanations of well-being but as interdependent characteristics of social contexts that allow individuals to lead more fulfilling lives.

The cluster analysis also enhances the understanding of inequality in the research. The higher well-being groups always reported higher levels of social support and more freedom compared to countries in the lower well-being groups. This graded trend is relevant as it means that the relationship that is observed is not limited to extreme instances only. Instead, the results indicate a systematic social gradient whereby increasingly positive supportive and enabling conditions are linked with an increasingly positive subjective well-being. This tendency indicates that national disparities in well-being might indicate stratified modes of social benefit and drawback, as opposed to single variations in ranking. This meaning aligns with studies that have identified participation, inclusion, and social connectedness to be a form of strengthening core psychological resources that promote well-being in community life (Chen & Zhang, 2021). In this regard, the current findings reveal that the differences in well-being among countries are highly coupled with the differences in the social environment that promotes human prosperity.

The contextual indicators assigned to the analysis give a deeper understanding of the larger framework of cross-national well-being. The higher well-being groups also reported more favorable economic conditions, and healthier life expectancy, with the corruption-related confidence differing significantly across the distribution. These results imply that disparities in subjective well-being are rooted in broader institutional and material circumstances and cannot be narrowed down to either social support or freedom. This perception is aligned with the fact that the subjective well-being depends on a variety of drivers, and their relative significance can be different depending on economic and social conditions (Arrondo et al., 2021). The continuous growth of the GDP and the health among the ordered well-being groups is a positive sign that in the current research, the favorable conditions of living still take center stage in terms of the national well-being. In comparison, the variation in generosity was relatively small, implying that not all contextual indicators play an equal role in cross-national differences in subjective well-being.

The fact that the social support played a significant role in the current results is particularly crucial following recent research that has revealed that the phenomenon remains relevant in uncertainty and disruptive situations. Potential studies have revealed that social support can predict future subjective well-being, showing that it is not only the background correlate, but a significant factor in future well-being outcomes (Mao et al., 2024). Similar evidence also indicates that social support is intertwined with loneliness and income in determining mental health, and it has a protective and integrative effect on the rest of social life (Egana-Marcos et al., 2025). The present research supplements these results on the cross-national scale by demonstrating that societies that are better support systems report to have higher average levels of well-being. This strengthens the notion that favorable social conditions are not incidental to well-being but part of it.

The findings are to be construed within the methodological limits of the research. The study has been done with country level and cross-sectional data and thus should not be causally inferred. The associations that are claimed here are to be interpreted as inter-country associations as opposed to causal influences. Moreover, the analysis covers the differences among countries, but not the inequalities within countries, and hence, it cannot measure the differences within countries based on the classes, sex, ethnicity, or any other stratification axis. However, these drawbacks do not reduce interpretive value of the findings. Instead, they emphasize the significance of considering subjective well-being a socially constructed outcome which is a product of relational, institutional and material conditions. On the whole, the research suggests that more socially supported countries, those with higher perceived freedom, healthier populations, and more positive economic contexts are more likely to report a higher level of subjective well-being. This supports the perception that well-being inequalities reduction initiatives should not only focus on the individual outcomes, but also on the larger social systems, where human well-being is facilitated, limited and allocated.

## 5. Conclusion

This study has investigated cross-national disparities in subjective well-being with respect to the contribution of social support, liberty and the chosen contextual circumstances across countries. The results indicate that there is an uneven distribution of subjective well-being among the countries and that the disparities are highly correlated with the broader social and structural contexts. Specifically, social support was the most positively correlated with subjective well-being, and freedom appeared to mean a lot as well. Highly well-being countries also were more likely to report more positive economic conditions, health, and corruption-related confidence, which suggests that the national well-being is institutionalized and embedded in broader institutional and material environments. The study adds to the literature by demonstrating that subjective well-being cannot be regarded as an individual psychological effect only. Instead, it is a product of interaction of relational resources, perceived agency, and structural conditions which influence how individuals experience and evaluate life in society. The distinct gradient found among the ordered well-being groups indicates that disparities in well-being are connected with disparities in social environments, particularly with regard to support and enabling conditions. This supports the need to understand well-being in a wider context of social context and comparative inequality. Meanwhile, the results are to be interpreted in the confines of a cross-sectional, nationwide study. The analysis shows cross-national relationships as opposed to causal impacts and it fails to measure intra-country inequalities. However, the findings provide a valuable understanding of the pattern of well-being across countries. In general, the research indicates that the factors to tackle the inequalities in subjective well-being must not be confined

to individual-level interventions, but to the broader social, economic, and institutional environment that facilitates the supportive relations, freedom, health, and dignified living.

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