

**STRENUOUS OBJECTIVE LIFE CIRCUMSTANCES
AND SUBJECTIVE RESPONSES: PERCEPTIONS
OF WELL-BEING WHEN LIVING IN POVERTY
AND PRECARIOUS PROSPERITY IN ROMANIA^{1,2}**

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The purpose of this paper is to analyse the subjective well-being of two socio-structural groups (the poor and the precarious prosperous), in comparison to the group living in secure prosperity. We look at these groups trying to depict the living circumstances of these categories as filtered by their personal standards, while highlighting how these groups fare compared to each other. This endeavor is theoretically underpinned in the subjective well-being literature, in order to define subjective well-being and focuses on the relationship between objective living conditions and subjective well-being outcomes, in the attempt to disentangle the mechanisms that govern individuals' subjective responses to objective realities. The data come from the European Quality of Life Survey on Romania carried out in this country in 2011. The analysis is done with the help of ANOVA and OLS regression. The results show overall similar low levels of subjective well-being for people living in poverty and those in precarious prosperity in comparison to the individuals in secure prosperity. For both groups under scrutiny here, analysis across life domains revealed problematic spheres along with more positive realms of life, subjective data reflecting the interplay between objective strenuous conditions and subjective mechanisms like social comparisons or adaptation.

Keywords: *subjective well being, poverty, precarious prosperity.*

INTRODUCTION

The poor have limited resources at their disposal in order to satisfy their needs and to live a good life. Poverty is often associated with multiple disadvantages: poor health, unemployment, low quality or precarious jobs, low education, poor housing,

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social isolation. Consequently, the risk of low subjective well-being is much higher for poor people. So far, we know a lot on the consequences of income on subjective well-being (Easterlin, 1974, 2001, 2003; Veenhoven, 1991; Frey and Stutzer 2002, 2012; Sacks et al., 2010; Stevenson and Wolfers, 2013). Also, evidence exists on the pathways between poverty and low subjective well-being and the effects in various life domains. Poverty erodes social networks, social relations, and social participation, thus setting off a vicious circle of social exclusion (Paugam, 1995; Gallie et al., 2003), and reinforcing disadvantages in several domains of life. Falling into poverty increases the risk of weakening social relations and decreasing (civic and political) participation (Mood and Jonsson, 2016). Poverty was also proved to be associated with negative affects like depression and anxiety (Belle, 1990; Palomar Lever et al., 2005). At societal level, poverty, relative deprivation or low social status present in unequal societies are associated with deep seated social problems, like morbidity and mortality, obesity, teenage birth rates, mental illness, homicide, low trust, low social capital, hostility, and racism (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2007). Moreover, it was shown that gaps in income between the poor and the rich translate into even greater gaps in subjective well-being (Okulicz-Kozaryn and Mazelis, 2015).

Studies concentrated for a long time on the relationship between material resources and well-being in general, but less is known about the subjective well-being of the poor as a specific group, and how it compares to those who live immediately above the poverty threshold and those who are better off in a certain society. The social consequences of the limited income stretch far from basic material deprivation and the subsequent inability to afford nutritional meals, buying clothes, or having appropriate accommodation to the impossibility to engage in meaningful relationships and fully participate in society. The question here is how inadequate objective circumstances of people living in poverty and those in the vicinity of poverty are impacting on subjective well-being.

Cramm et al. (2012) found that social capital, marital status, health and income are strongly associated with subjective well-being in poor individuals living in poor neighborhoods, and they concluded that deprived people living in deprived neighborhoods report lower subjective well-being.

One of the few works looking at the subjective well-being of the poor in comparison to the moderately poor and the non poor in Mexico (Palomar Lever et al., 2005) found a direct relationship between poverty and subjective well-being, and concluded that deficient life circumstances have a negative impact on the perception of subjective well being. Furthermore, poverty was found to promote the presence of attitudes and behaviors that have an important impact on subjective well being: passive, evasive coping strategies, external locus of control, a lack of orientation towards competitiveness and mastery. When comparing the three groups (Palomar Lever, 2004), it was observed that there are statistically significant differences in the subjective well-being of the groups studied, with the poorest individuals reporting less well being, followed by the moderately poor and finally the non poor. Low well-being in case of poor people was also found in life domains like recreational activities, personal development, social environment and couple relationship.

Suter et al. (2015) also looked at the subjective well-being of the lowest against the highest income groups, of the employed and unemployed, and of the deprived and non-deprived population groups in Switzerland. The authors found significant differences in well-being between groups and showed that the well-being of underprivileged income groups depended on the evolution of unemployment, poverty and deprivation.

In addition to the important evidence proving the relationship between poor objective circumstances and low subjective well being, there is also strong evidence (Crettaz and Suter, 2013) that people in poverty tend to lower their expectations and preferences and adapt to a certain extent to their limited material resources.

Very recently, several studies looked at the well-being of people living in the vicinity of the poverty line, who even though they are not considered poor, still face high deprivation and a lot of constraints in their lives. The growing literature dedicated to the *precarious prosperity* stratum in various societies (Budowski et al., 2010; Vlase and Sieber, 2015; Amacker et al., 2011; Amacker et al., 2003; Budowski et al., 2015; Preoteasa et al., submitted, 2016; Vlase and Sieber manuscript, 2016; Vera Rojas et al., 2016) made important contributions to the knowledge on the subjective well-being of vulnerable people and the mechanisms that govern their subjective responses to strenuous objective circumstances.

Although different in terms of income from the poor, it was proved in a study on Romania that households in precarious prosperity share with those in poverty similar socio-demographic factors: low education, rural residence, unemployment, presence of dependent children in the household and household production (Precupetu et al., 2015). These factors point out to analogous vulnerability risks for the poor and the precarious prosperous, and to possible similar low levels of well being. A qualitative analysis of subjective well-being of individuals from households in precarious prosperity in Switzerland and Spain (Budowski et al., 2015) found it to be related with the evaluation of the objective circumstances, with the perceived available opportunities, as well as future prospects for improvement of their situation. When individuals felt they lacked opportunities and were unable to deal with precarious objective situations, they tended to resort to adaptation and reframing. Mechanisms of adaptation and comparison came out in another study of quality of life perceptions (Vlase and Sieber, manuscript, 2016): individuals living in households in precarious prosperity, when subjectively assessed their quality of life, either compared their situation to that of other generations or contexts/countries, they downsized their aspirations to their perceived circumstances, or even re-interpreted the past events in their lives.

Objective life conditions are critical in various spheres of life for households in precarious prosperity, like is the case with working conditions. A qualitative analysis of the households in precarious prosperity in rural Romania (Preoteasa, 2015) shed light on the combination of individual (low education and low qualification) and structural factors (poor opportunities on the labour market, lack of caring services for children and elderly, lack of transport infrastructure) that make the life

sphere of work to be unfavorable for the precarious prosperous. Precarious jobs characterized by instability, insecurity, low incomes, poor working conditions, risk of injuries turn into vulnerability risks in the long term, due to the exclusion from medical and social insurance. However, despite poor conditions in the working realm, the precarious employment conditions might not always be perceived as precarious by individuals, especially to the extent that the labour market is not favourable.

Although evidence accumulated in the literature on the well-being of the poor and recently along with the subjective well-being of the precarious prosperous, there is little knowledge that binds the two strands of literature together, and comparison of the poor and the lower middle income strata remains scarce.

The purpose of this paper is to document how similar structural groups (the poor and the precarious prosperous) evaluate their subjective well being. We look at these groups trying to understand their levels of subjective well-being in relation to those who are better off and to underline the highs and lows of their lives' circumstances. By doing so, we depict the living circumstances of these categories as filtered by their personal standards, while highlighting how these groups fare compared to each other.

Our endeavor will start with a review of subjective well-being literature. We will first define subjective well-being and focus on the relationship between objective living conditions and subjective well-being outcomes, trying to disentangle the mechanisms that govern individuals' subjective responses to objective realities. Then, we will concentrate on the structure of subjective well-being and try to understand the relationships between various domains that compose the individual sphere of life. Next, we proceed with an exploratory analysis of subjective well-being of three groups: people living in poverty, individuals living in precarious prosperity and persons in secure prosperity, by concentrating on satisfaction with life domains and satisfaction with life as a whole. We also test, with the help of the regression analysis, whether belonging to the two population groups significantly influences well-being measured as life satisfaction. Finally, we discuss our results in the light of the theory we first outlined.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Subjective well-being

Subjective well-being describes individuals' subjective experiences of their lives. Diener (1999) defined subjective well-being as a broad category of phenomena that includes people's emotional responses, domain satisfactions, and global judgments of life satisfaction. Subjective well-being consists of a combination of cognitive and affective interrelated components: life satisfaction (global judgments of a person's life), positive affects (pleasant emotions and moods), negative affects (unpleasant emotions and moods) and satisfaction with important domains (Diener, 2000). By looking at satisfaction with life domains, it is possible to explore and understand

the structure of subjective well being, and portray a multifaceted picture of people's lives (Diener, 1984). For the purpose of this article, we focus on the cognitive components of well-being, in the attempt to explore the reports of subjective well-being of the three groups under scrutiny.

Measures of subjective well-being are very useful when we try to provide an accurate picture of the quality of life of different groups in society. Because these measures capture the distribution of life circumstances, as well as the impact of values and aspirations, they provide valuable information for policy-makers when comparisons are made across sub-groups of the population (OECD, 2013). Their strength resides in their particular capacity to incorporate the different weights that groups of population attach to various aspects of their quality of life (Diener et al., 2013).

Many authors concentrated on life satisfaction and satisfaction with life domains, and tried to understand the relationships between domains and the overarching evaluation of life (Cummins, 1996; Headey and Wearing, 1992; Meadow et al., 1992; van Praag et al., 2003; van Praag and Ferrer-i-Carbonell, 2004; Rojas, 2009).

According to Rojas (2009), life domains capture the multidimensional of human beings and they can depict areas of experienced poverty that goes beyond economic poverty. Furthermore, these domains can inform on the satisfaction with life. He considered that it is possible to substitute satisfaction in one domain of life by satisfaction in another domain. This happens in the case when even if satisfaction with economic domain is low, satisfaction with other domains is high, and, ultimately, life satisfaction is high.

The choice and the number of life domains vary in the literature. Cummins (1996) considered seven life domains: material well-being, health, productivity, intimacy, safety, community, and emotional well-being. Van Praag et al. (2003) explained overall life satisfaction as a function of satisfaction with six specific life domains (job satisfaction, financial satisfaction, house satisfaction, health satisfaction, leisure satisfaction and environmental satisfaction. Rojas (2006) explored the relationship between life satisfaction and different life domains related to health, economic situation, job, family, friendship, personal development, community environment.

Even though there are many possible partitions of a human life, Rojas (2009) argued that any partition must value parsimony (the number of domains must be manageable and domains should refer to clearly separable information), meaning (the domains of life, as delimited by the researcher, must relate to the way people think about their lives), and usefulness (the delimitation must contribute to the understanding of the subject).

For the purpose of this article, we employ a model that includes seven life domains (standard of living, job, health, education/training, family/personal relationships, housing, social life) and life satisfaction. We follow Rojas (2009) in considering that the subjective well-being approach can help us to "expand our understanding of what means to be human and what is meant by well-being deprivation" (Rojas, 2009: 195).

Objective circumstances and subjective well-being responses

The relationship between objective conditions and subjective evaluations has long been debated in the literature, the key issue being the extent to which subjective well-being mirrors the objective reality and to which it involves other cognitive processes, personality traits or cultural preferences.

Many authors argued in favour of the crucial role of objective circumstances in determining well being. Some took a hard stand and maintained a strong relation between objective circumstances and subjective well-being outcomes, especially when analysing the role of income and material resources in well being. They argued that “money buy happiness” and proved in a series of analyses the contribution of income to subjective well-being (Sacks et al., 2010; Stevenson and Wolfers, 2013). Other researchers focused mainly on objective living conditions, but assigned a secondary role to cognitive processes that come into play in the formation of subjective well being. In his liveability theory, Veenhoven (1995) emphasised the role of objective circumstances and needs fulfilment as the main determinants of subjective well being. However, beyond a certain level of needs gratification, he admitted that subjective well-being (Veenhoven, 1991) depends also on other factors. These factors have been debated by researchers who maintained the relative nature of subjective well-being and, while acknowledging the role of objective circumstances, they concentrated considerably on adaptation and social comparison in order to explain the formation of subjective well being.

Cummins (2000) proposed the theory of homeostatic control in order to explain the poor correlation between objective and subjective indicators of quality of life. Subjective quality of life has the capacity to adapt to environmental circumstances; therefore, subjective indicators depart from objective situation and vary within a narrow range. Subjective well-being is kept in a sort of equilibrium through personality traits and various cognitive mechanisms that keep people feeling positive about their lives (Lai and Cummins, 2013). This will explain why people who faced important problems in their lives like illness or unemployment experience a drop in subjective well-being, but return after some time to their base-line levels (Headey and Wearing, 1989). However, according to Cummins, adaptation is not universal, when objective conditions are very poor, homeostatis is no longer active, and objective and subjective indicators are stronger correlated. This will explain why the relation between income and subjective well-being was found to be stronger at lower levels of income (Diener, 2009).

Michalos (1985) showed in his multiple discrepancy theory the possible variety of social comparisons and comparisons to various standards that determine subjective well: peoples’ own needs, desires and aspirations, reference groups, the past, expectations in the past and in the future.

Easterlin (2003) proposed a theory of subjective well-being where adaptation and social comparison occur and operate differently across life domains. In areas like family and health, which are private spheres of the individual, hedonic adaptation

and social comparison are less important than in the domain of material resources which is more exposed to public scrutiny. In terms of income and positional goods, like homes or cars, processes of adaptation and social comparison increase aspirations to a high extent and leave people with little gains in subjective well being. In fact, many authors (Frey and Stutzer, 2012; Clark et al., 2015; Crettaz and Suter, 2013) found proof that adaptation is a fundamental process in the formation of subjective well being, even though the degree of adaptation differs across experiences. Social comparisons, either external (to reference groups) or internal (of individual with themselves across time) were proved to affect well-being (Tibesigwa et al., 2015).

Other views mention personality traits as important determinants of subjective well-being (Doyle and Youn, 2000; Vitterso and Nilsen, 2002), while there are also authors that consider culture as a major determinant of well-being, especially when accounting for differences in well-being across countries (Inglehart and Rabier, 1986: 43; Inkeles, 1989).

In Romania, Mărginean et al. (2004) suggested that life domains can perform as support elements or critical elements in people lives, and thus making up a specific configuration of quality of life. Several other authors also looked at the relationship between objective conditions and subjective well-being (Zamfir and Maggino, 2013; Bălătescu, 2009; Mărginean and Precupețu, 2011).

In this paper we employ a micro level, sociological perspective of subjective well-being that tries to explain the patterns in subjective well-being data with reference to objective social and economic conditions delineated by the disadvantaged socio-economic positions for the poor and precarious prosperous groups, while also making use of theoretical perspectives that focus on adaptation and comparison mechanisms.

The structure of subjective well being: life domains

Material resources

The relationship between material resources, with a special emphasis on income, and subjective well-being has long been debated. One major trend in literature maintains the strong relation between income and subjective well being: at individual level, higher incomes are associated with higher levels of life satisfaction, while at country level, more affluent countries have higher levels of subjective well-being. Lately, a number of authors (Sacks et al., 2010; Stevenson and Wolfers, 2013; Deaton, 2008) proved on large sets of data that within-country, between country, and over-time there is a similarly powerful relationship between subjective well-being and absolute income, this suggesting that differences in subjective well-being reflect actual dissimilarities in objective conditions.

Another key trend in literature concentrates around the Easterlin Paradox, trying to lessen the role of income in subjective well being. Following Easterlin (1974), who asserted that increasing income is not accompanied by higher well-being, many authors argue in favour of a more complex relationship between income and

subjective well being, bringing up the idea of relative subjective well being. Over time, many researchers maintained the existence of a threshold beyond which income becomes less important for well being. Diener et al., 2010 highlighted the declining marginal effects of income on subjective well-being, showing that material resources (standard of living and ownership of conveniences) mediate the effect of income on subjective well being. Veenhoven (1991) generally argued the powerful relation between material resources and subjective well being, but admitted that the latter partly depend on comparison standards which can adjust to circumstances to a certain extent. However, he posited very strongly that subjective well-being is not relative to the extent it depends on the gratification of basic bio-psychological needs, which indicate the limits of human adaptability.

Easterlin (2001) unified his findings in the conclusion that subjective well-being is a direct function of income and indirect function of aspirations, which tend to increase over the life cycle.

Very recently, the evidence continues to be mixed, with some authors arguing the absolute contribution of income to subjective well-being (Stevenson and Wolfers, 2013; Diener et al., 2013), and others (Tibesigwa et al., 2015) contending the role of internal and external comparisons in subjective well being.

Health

Health is a basic precondition for quality of life relating to individuals' capabilities to make choices in accordance to their values and abilities in their lives. Studies showed that self rated health has a strong and positive effect on SWB (Haller and Hadler, 2006; Cramm et al., 2012; Marmot, 2013). While the relationship between objective health and well-being is usually smaller, health conditions impairing everyday functioning negatively impact SWB (Easterlin, 2003). Even though adaptation processes occur, in the sense that people with certain illnesses can report positive levels of well being, severe health conditions often lessen SWB. The relation between health and well-being runs both ways as positive well-being can improve health through pathways that are not completely known, most probably involving both physiological and psychological factors (Diener and Seligman, 2004).

Education

Education has an important effect on SWB, as higher education draws higher chances of employment, better jobs, higher incomes, better health status, and generally, more active and enriched lives. People with higher education have higher levels of SWB than those with lower education, and this is a pattern maintained over the life cycle (Easterlin, 2003). The effects of education on well-being have been proven to be both direct and indirect via income and labour status (Cuñado and de Gracia, 2012). Although higher education is accompanied by higher aspirations which might moderate well-being (Clark et al., 2015), there is

still overwhelming evidence on the positive effects of education (Di Tella et al., 2003, Easterbrook et al., 2015, Salinas-Jimenez et al., 2010).

Job and employment/unemployment

The effects of work on well-being are evident in studies focused on employment/unemployment, as well as in those surveying job satisfaction. Unemployment significantly influences well-being, and the negative effect was found to be stronger in richer than in poor countries (Helliwell, 2003), and in communities where unemployment was low than in communities where unemployment was high (Clark, 2003). Unemployment in itself can lower well being, but the pattern described shows that its powerful effect comes also from comparison mechanisms and psychological factors, such as a decrease in self-respect. When unemployment happens in contexts where it is not a largely spread phenomenon and is not related to satisfying basic needs, as richer countries compensate the loss in income through welfare benefits, social comparison appears as a moderating factor.

Comparisons appear to explain also why job satisfaction depends on the pay relative to other workers with the same education and job classification, and not on absolute pay (Clark and Oswald, 1996). However, jobs increase well-being, as recently demonstrated by Hai and Cummins (2013), because they are a source of positive activities, social contacts, engagement, challenge, personal meaning, while also providing structure in people's lives (Diener and Seligman, 2004; Filiz, 2014).

Social relations

Social relationships are key to well-being, as they provide support, feelings of social belonging and positive social environment. Positive affect underscores negative emotions in social situations (Pavot and Diener, 1993). Social participation contributes to subjective well-being, while happier people tend to involve more in social activities, community service and giving support to others, the relationship going, thus, both ways (Diener and Seligman, 2004).

Participation can help integrate individuals into the society through social pathways (access to friends, networks, jobs, resources) and personal rewards (personal fulfillment through giving to others, esteem, fulfilling passions and commitments) (Wallace and Pichler, 2008).

Family, marriage, personal relationships

Close personal relationships are a key predictor of well being. Nuclear families, as well as extended family, are the main source of support, especially in crucial areas of life that involve long term commitment (Harlow and Cantor, 1996). Family life proved to be the most satisfying life domain in a study of 28 European countries (Böhnke, 2005), with family values and having children being highly appreciated

in the transition countries of the EU, and family solidarity more strongly accentuated than in the old members of the EU. Furthermore, family integration, measured as being married proved to affect positively well-being. In general, being the closest to the individual, and less subject to policy, family tends to be positively evaluated, in comparison to other areas of life (Cummins, 2003).

Housing

Housing is another crucial component of well-being as provides shelter, security, opportunities for social networks, status, access to community services and facilities, as well as access to jobs and control of the environment (Vera-Toscano and Ateca-Amestoy, 2008). Good housing was proved to have an impact on subjective well-being (Cracolici et al., 2011), but housing can also be a positional good in society that is a source of satisfaction to the extent it depends on its distribution in society: the more unequal, the more satisfaction creates for those in advantaged positions, comparatively to others (Foye, 2016).

METHODS AND ANALYSIS

Groups under scrutiny

For the purpose of this analysis we compare three population groups: people in poverty (defined by the relative poverty threshold set at 60% of the median income), individuals in precarious prosperity and persons in secure prosperity. This type of design is based on the literature dedicated to precarious prosperity (Budowski et al., 2010) that highlighted the need to look at the well-being of a social stratum that lives above the poverty threshold, but is still in a vulnerable situation. This stratum was defined as a structural feature “located in between poverty and secure prosperity and characterized by ambivalence between a limited, yet non-poor living standard and (perceived) insecurity that individuals and households deal with on a daily basis” (Budowski et al., 2010: 269).

The population in precarious prosperity has been the focus of research in Switzerland, Chile, Costa Rica, Spain and Romania, and was defined relative to each country by taking into consideration two hard criteria: income and material deprivation (Budowski et al., 2010; Amacker et al., 2011; Amacker et al., 2013; Budowski et al., 2015; Vera Rojas et al., 2016; Precupețu et al., 2015).

In Romania, this stratum of population is situated right above the relative poverty threshold, and has incomes between 60% and 100% of the equivalised median income³, or higher than 100% of median income, while simultaneously being severely deprived (lack four or more items that are customary in a certain society at a certain point in time). In Romania, 22.8% of the population live in

³ The median equivalised net income in 2011 was 2 089 Euro/year.

poverty (under the 60% relative threshold), 36.8% in precarious prosperity and 40.4% in secure prosperity.

Data and variables

The data come from the third wave of European Quality of Life Survey⁴ (EQLS 2011–2012) carried out on nationally representative sample in 34 countries: 27 EU Member States at the time, and Croatia, Iceland, FYR Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, Turkey and Kosovo. Our analysis is focused on Romania, and is carried out on 1 286 cases out of the total sample of 1 542. Only cases with income data that allowed classification into groups have been considered.

EQLS includes a block of questions measuring satisfaction with seven life domains: standard of living, job, housing, health, education, family and social life, plus satisfaction with life. Satisfaction with life domains is measured through the question “Could you please tell me on a scale of 1 to 10 how satisfied you are with each of the following items, where 1 means you are very dissatisfied and 10 means you are very satisfied? a. your education, b. your present job, c. your present standard of living, d. your accommodation, e. your family life, f. your health, g. your social life”. Life satisfaction is measured with the question “All things considered, how satisfied would you say you are with your life these days? Please tell me on a scale of 1 to 10, where 1 means very dissatisfied and 10 means very satisfied.”

Data analysis started with means and standard deviations of life domains by groups and total sample (*Table no. 1*). Next, one way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used, in order to test significant differences between the three groups: a Levene’s test for homogeneity of variance was first applied, followed by Games-Howell post hoc tests to reveal which group differ from the other two (*Table no. 2*). Finally, an OLS regression analysis was carried out, in order to ascertain whether belonging to the two population groups significantly influences their life satisfaction. In the regression model we controlled for sex, age, education and household structure. The gender variable was used as a dummy variable of 1 for ‘female’ and 0 for ‘male’. The respondent’s age was recoded into four categories: 18–34 years; 35–49 years (used as reference); 50–64 years and 65+ years. The variable for household structure included the following categories: couple, single, couple with children, other (used as reference). Education was recoded into three levels: primary, secondary and tertiary education (used as reference). In this survey, the employment status was measured through the use of the following categories: employed, unemployed, unable, retired, homemaker, student and other. In our analysis, this employment status variable was used as four categories: employed, retired, homemaker and other (used as reference).

⁴ European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (2014). *European Quality of Life Survey, 2011-2012*. [data collection]. 2nd Edition. UK Data Service. SN: 7316, <http://dx.doi.org/10.5255/UKDA-SN-7316-2>.

Table no. 1

Means and standard deviations of satisfaction with life domains by groups and total sample

	PR			PP			SP			Total		
	N	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD
Standard of living	292	5.17	2.7	519	5.93	2.6	471	7.49	2.0	1283	6.39	2.6
Job	51	7.63	2.4	318	7.31	2.5	154	8.25	1.7	524	7.91	2
Housing	292	6.95	2.7	473	7.83	2.1	519	8.35	1.8	1284	7.84	2.2
Health	292	6.43	2.9	473	6.56	2.7	518	8.1	2.1	1282	7.15	2.7
Education	290	8.05	2.2	467	7.97	2.0	519	8.64	1.6	1276	8.26	1.9
Family	288	7.56	2.7	468	8.14	2.2	468	8.77	1.8	1271	8.26	2.2
Social life	289	6.49	2.7	452	7.05	2.4	517	8.23	1.7	1258	7.41	2.3
Life satisfaction	292	5.71	2.6	471	6.34	2.6	519	7.69	1.7	1282	6.74	2.4

Source: EQLS 2011.

Table no. 2

Significant differences in satisfaction with life domains between groups (ANOVA results)

		PR	PP	SP	Significant differences		
		Standard of living	Mean	5.17	5.93	7.49	PR and PP
d.f.	(2, 1279)						
F	98.8						
Job	Mean	7.63	7.31	8.25		PP and SP	
d.f.	(2, 520)						
F	11.9						
Housing	Mean	6.95	7.83	8.35	PR and PP	PP and SP	PR and SP
d.f.	(2, 1280)						
F	39.1						
Health	Mean	6.43	6.56	8.1		PP and SP	PR and SP
d.f.	(2, 1279)						
F	59.1						
Education	Mean	8.05	7.97	8.64		PP and SP	PR and SP
d.f.	(2, 1273)						
F	17.7						
Family	Mean	7.56	8.14	8.77	PR and PP	PP and SP	PR and SP
d.f.	(2, 1267)						
F	29.7						
Social life	Mean	6.49	7.05	8.23	PR and PP	PP and SP	PR and SP
d.f.	(2, 1255)						
F	66.0						
Life satisfaction	Mean	5.71	6.34	7.69	PR and PP	PP and SP	PR and SP
d.f.	(2, 1279)						
F	80.1						

Results are significant at $p < 0,001$.

Table no. 3

Life satisfaction (OLS regression results)

	B	SE B	β
Sex			
Female	.010	0.137	0.002
Age (35–49 reference)			
18–34	0.620	0.204	0.099**
50–64	–0.202	0.224	–0.037
65 +	–0.087	0.307	–0.015
Household structure (other reference)			
Couple	0.456	0.181	0.078*
Single	0.119	0.192	0.020
Couple with children	0.737	0.206	0.109***
Education (primary reference)			
Secondary	0.044	0.230	0.008
Tertiary	0.176	0.296	0.026
Employment status (other reference)			
Employed	0.200	0.268	0.038
Retired	0.080	0.317	0.016
Homemaker	0.124	0.298	0.018
Category (SP reference)			
PR	–1.870	0.201	–0.310***
PP	–1.229	0.158	–0.240***
R ²	0.146		
Adjusted R ²	0.137		
F statistic	15.800 df (14.1292)		

* significant with $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUDING REMARKS

The poor (PR) have a low level of subjective well-being especially in life domains like standard of living, health and social life. The most critical realm of life is, in line with expectations, living standard, the low satisfaction showing that the basic needs of this category are most certainly not fulfilled. Generally, there is a strong relationship at individual and national level between material resources and subjective well-being (Sacks et al., 2010; Helliwell et al., 2013), the relationship being proved many times, even stronger at low levels of income (Diener et al., 2009). Given that in Romania the relative poverty threshold is extremely low, we can assess that lowest level in satisfaction with standard of living reflects the meager objective conditions of the PR. The high gap in satisfaction between the PR and the secure prosperity (SP) stratum speaks of the high income inequality in Romanian society (Precupetu, 2013) and the subsequent difference in how people feel about their life situation, as inequality in income can translate into inequality in wellbeing (Okulicz-Kozaryn and Mazelis, 2015).

Health stands out as another critical life domain for the PR, mirroring, thus, in subjective data the well-known social gradient in health. In all countries, irrespective of their level of development, people with a low socio-economic status have a poor health status in comparison to the better off (Mackenbach, 2012), while Romania is no exception (Precupețu and Pop, manuscript, 2016). Satisfaction with health of the PR is low, and the gap in this respect between the PR and SP is the second highest after the one in satisfaction with living standard, pointing, thus, to another type of social inequality.

The low satisfaction with social life indicates a third crucial realm of subjective well-being which is unfavorable in case of PR. Generally, the levels of personal income, as well as the relative income position have an effect on social capital (in terms of social trust and participation) (Alesina and La Ferrara, 2002) while at national level, societies which are more homogeneous, with low income inequality tend to be richer in social capital (Fischer and Torgler, 2007). In Romania *bonding* relations, mainly developed within the family and kinship groups, outweigh the *bridging* relations, outside the primary groups. The general lack of resources, the highest concentration of the poor in the rural residence, characterized by poor structural opportunities, can explain a poor social life and the consequent low level of satisfaction in this respect.

The PR appear to be deprived in all essential high level drivers of subjective well being: income, health and social connections. However, in other life domains like family, education and job (for those employed) higher satisfaction is evident in data.

In Romania, family has been, for a long time, the main buffer against the difficulties of transition and, later on, of the economic crisis, acting as the essential safety net for all major risks that individuals might encounter in their lives: unemployment, illness, material hardships, etc.

Education is highly valued, and this is evident in the highest level of satisfaction of all life domains in case of the PR. This is a constant finding of quality of life in Romania, where people tend to place a special emphasis on education (Mărginean et al., 2006).

A high level of satisfaction with job (even higher than that of the PP) can suggest a high value placed on existing employment, if we take into consideration that jobs are rather scarce resources for the PR.

Life satisfaction, an output indicator of all life circumstances, indicates the low level of subjective well-being and reinforces the same pattern of scarcity present in many areas of PR lives.

Overall, the PR, who face an important shortage of material resources, also have a poor subjective well being, they systematically placing themselves below the mean of the sample in all analysed domains. When looking across domains, we notice problematic spheres, but also areas of life in which the PR tend to be markedly more satisfied than in others, despite poor objective conditions. Subjective data reflect the interplay between objective strenuous conditions and subjective mechanisms,

like social comparisons or adaptation. The PR structure of subjective well-being might reflect a system of homeostatic control (Cummins, 2000) in which subjective quality of life is maintained within a narrowly clear scope allowing for processes of adaptation to take place. However, when a low objective threshold of living exists, as is the case of standard of living, health and social life, it compromises homeostasis, and shows a negative influence in well-being that is too strong to permit adaptation. Consequently, the poor face essential constraints in regard to standard of living, health and social life, but they find support in their family, take pride in their education, and value their job when they have it.

People living in PP have a low level of subjective well-being, particularly in spheres of life like standard of living and health, while satisfaction is rather high with housing and family domains. These levels of subjective quality of life largely reflect the objective circumstances of the PP stratum, characterized by a low level of income coupled with high material deprivation. They display similar levels of subjective well-being to the PR in health, job and education, and differentiate themselves from those living in poverty especially in areas like standard of living, housing and social life. In fact, analogous objective household-level factors, like unemployment and low level of education, contribute to both poverty and precarious prosperity, constituting, thus, common vulnerability risks (Precupețu et al., 2015).

In a similar way to the PR, the PP group has a low life satisfaction placing them in a disadvantaged position in comparison to the better off. In fact, belonging to one of the two vulnerable groups significantly impacts on their life satisfaction, when the better off group is taken as reference. This is a significant divide between groups that illustrates the poor living circumstances that separate them from the better off in their society and the feeble macro structural context that provides little opportunities for these groups to employ strategies that will enable better lives.

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Scopul acestui articol este analiza comparativă a bunăstării subiective a trei grupuri diferite: persoanele care trăiesc în sărăcie, cele care se află în prosperitate precară și cele aflate în prosperitate sigură. Analiza pune în evidență condițiile de viață ale celor trei grupuri filtrate prin intermediul standardelor personale și relevă similaritățile și diferențele între aceste grupuri.

Perspectiva teoretică a bunăstării subiective fundamentează definițiile adoptate și permite concentrarea asupra relației dintre situațiile obiective de viață ale celor trei grupuri (circumscrise de venituri și deprivare) și evaluările subiective ale componentelor calității vieții. Astfel sunt relevate principalele mecanisme care guvernează răspunsurile subiective la realitățile obiective ale celor trei grupuri sociale. Datele utilizate provin din Cercetarea Europeană a Calității Vieții desfășurată în România în anul 2011. Analiza se bazează pe ANOVA și regresie OLS. Rezultatele arată niveluri scăzute similare ale bunăstării subiective pentru cei care trăiesc în sărăcie și prosperitate precară în comparație cu persoanele aflate în prosperitate sigură. Pentru primele două grupuri analizate, analiza domeniilor vieții a dezvăluit atât sfere problematice cât și pozitive ale calității vieții, datele subiective reflectând interacțiunea între condițiile obiective dificile și mecanismele care apar în evaluări subiective, de tipul comparației sociale sau adaptării.

Cuvinte-cheie: bunăstare subiectivă, sărăcie, prosperitate precară.