



Middlebury

Does living in a high-trust society make us happier? A cross-sectional analysis using World Values Survey Wave 7 data

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Research Question

This project asks whether countries with higher levels of interpersonal trust (specifically in one's neighbors) report higher levels of happiness, on average.

Motivation

While the literature on subjective wellbeing (SWB) includes research into the role of interpersonal trust in facilitating happiness, the role of specifically neighborhood trust remains understudied. Interpersonal trust is a key element of social capital, facilitating cooperation and strengthening social cohesion. If trust is meaningfully associated with happiness at the national level, this relationship could inform policy decisions aimed at increasing SWB.

Data

I use the World Values Survey (WVS) Wave 7 (2017–2022), which includes responses from 62 countries. Key variables are life satisfaction (0-10 scale), trust in neighbors (1-4 scale), recoded household income (1-3), education (1-3), age, and sex. I calculate country-level means to examine cross-national relationships between neighborhood trust and well-being.

Data Visualization

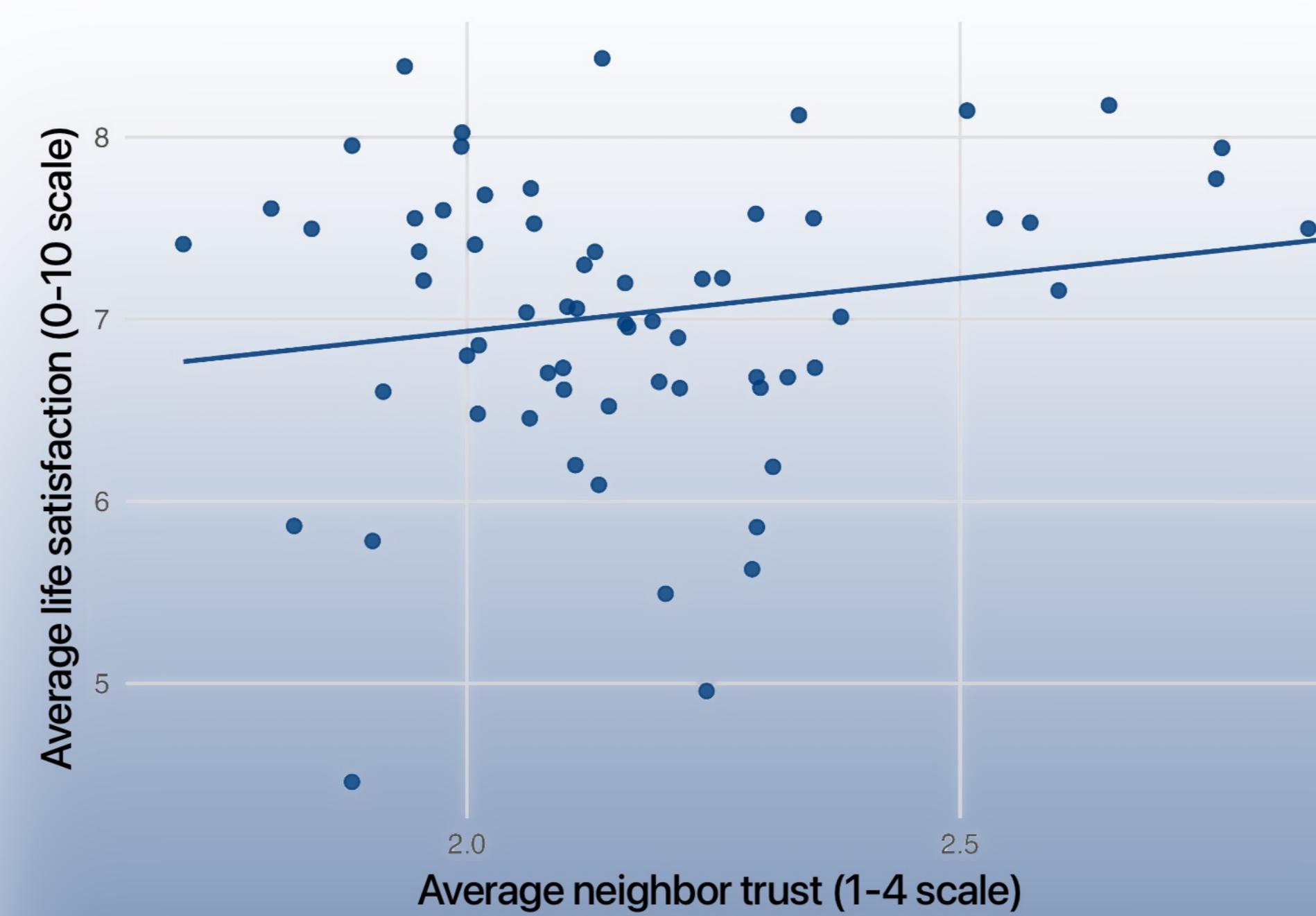


Figure 1. Trust and happiness across countries

Each point represents one country's mean neighbor-trust score and mean life-satisfaction score in WVS Wave 7. The fitted regression line shows a strong positive correlation between trust and national happiness.

Figure 1 summarizes the cross-national relationship between neighborhood trust and life satisfaction using data from WVS Wave 7. For each of the 62 countries included, I calculate the average reported trust in neighbors (1-4 scale) and the average life satisfaction (0-10 scale) and plot as a single point on the graph.

The positive slope of the regression line indicates that countries where trust in neighbors is higher tend to also report higher overall life satisfaction.

Estimation

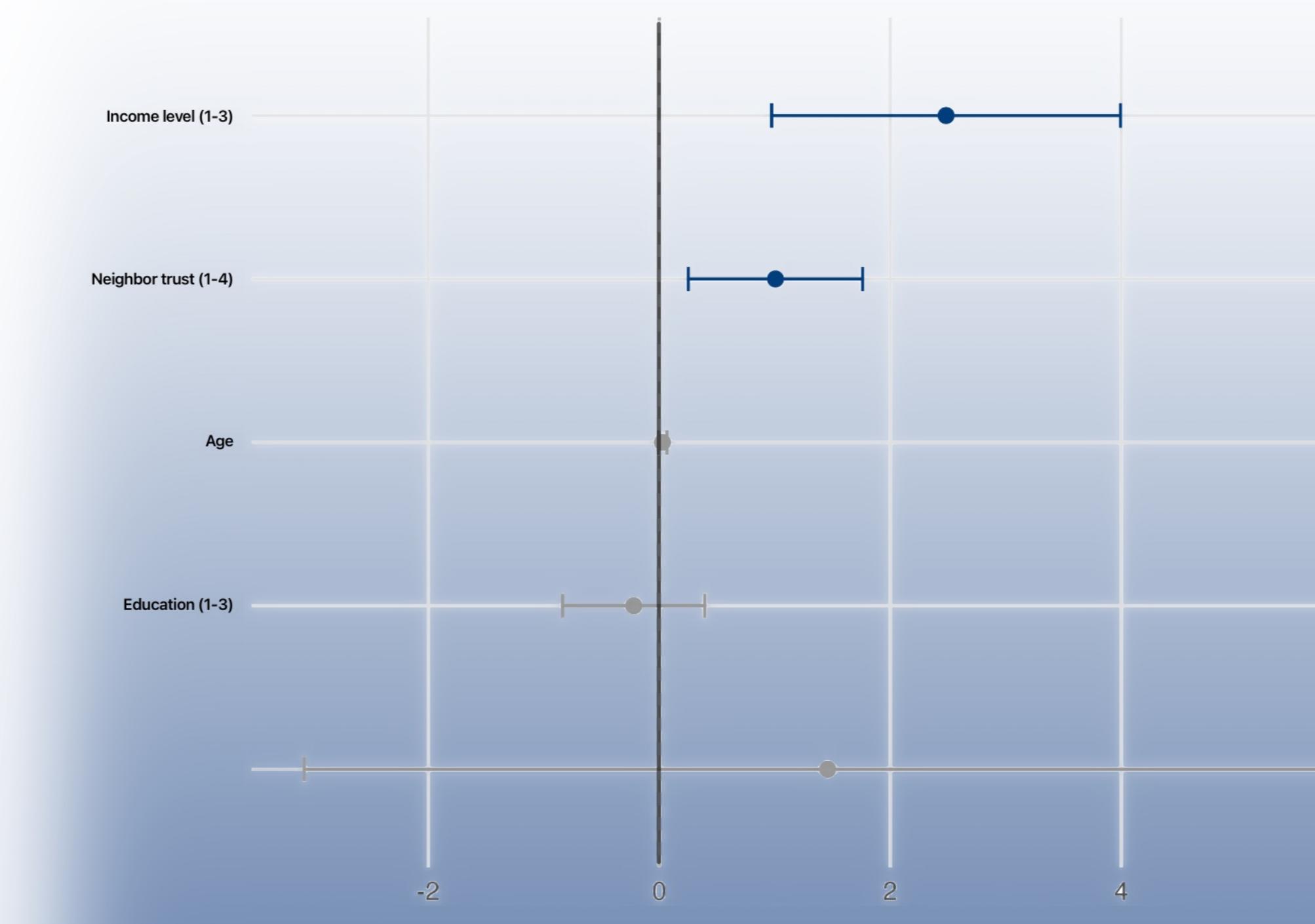


Figure 2. Estimated Effects of Neighborhood Trust and Covariates on Life Satisfaction

Displayed coefficients come from a regression using country-level averages for life satisfaction, neighborhood trust, income, age, and sex.

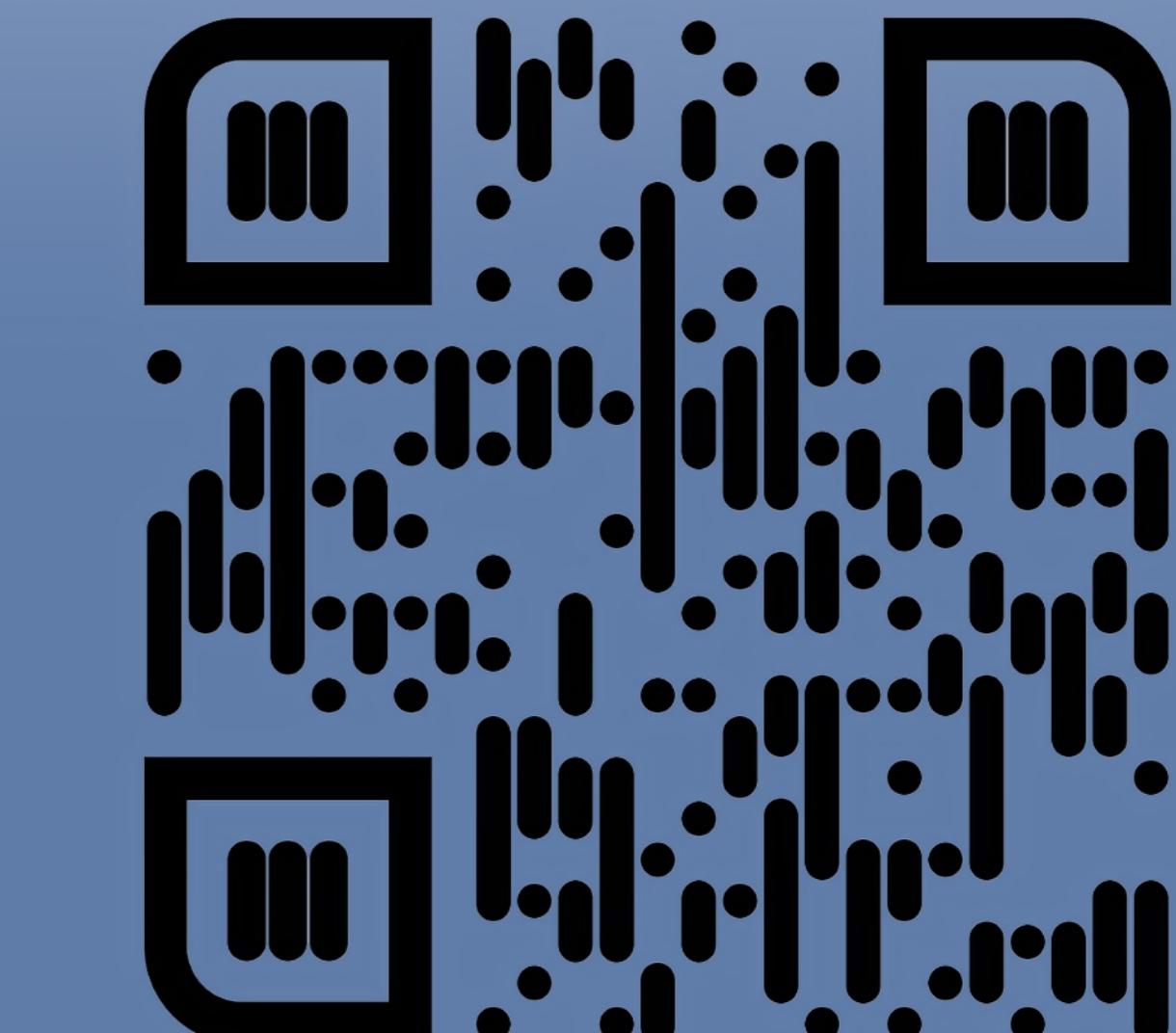
$$\text{Life Satisfaction}_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{Trust}_i + \beta_2 \text{Income}_i + \beta_3 \text{Education}_i + \beta_4 \text{Age}_i + \beta_5 \text{Sex}_i + \varepsilon_i$$

Neighborhood trust is strongly statistically significant ($p < 0.01$), and its coefficient is meaningful in size: a one-unit increase in trust (on a 1-4 scale) is associated with a roughly one-unit increase in life satisfaction (0-10 scale). Income is also significant and positive, while the other variables do not show statistically meaningful associations in this model. These associations should not be interpreted as causal, since the design is observational and cross-sectional.

Conclusions

Countries with higher levels of neighborly trust are significantly happier, even after accounting for income, education, age, and sex. This finding supports theories of social capital that portray trust as a key societal resource. It also suggests that policies that promote social cohesion and/or community building (such as local engagement initiatives or shared traditions) may positively influence social wellbeing on a national level.

Sources and more



christoforakis.com

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