

Does the Quality of Employment Improve the Subjective Well-Being of Migrant Workers?

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Abstract

This article uses data from the 2015 China General Social Survey (CGSS) to explore in depth the relationship between the employment quality and subjective well-being of migrant workers. The research results show that: 1) The overall level of subjective well-being of Chinese migrant workers is relatively low, with an average score of only 3.71 points, indicating that migrant workers generally lack happiness in their work and life. 2) The employment quality of migrant workers has a significant impact on their subjective well-being. Specifically, reasonable remuneration, shorter working hours, a free working environment, and a sound social security system all contribute to enhancing the subjective well-being of migrant workers, enabling them to actively engage in their work and better enjoy life. 3) It is worth noting that there are significant gender differences in the impact of the employment quality of migrant workers on their subjective well-being. For male migrant workers, increasing their labor income and reducing working hours have a more significant effect on improving subjective well-being, while female migrant workers are more susceptible to the influence of basic medical insurance and other aspects on their subjective well-being.

Keywords

Migrant Workers, Employment Quality, Subjective Well-Being

1. Introduction

The pursuit of happiness has been the common vision of mankind since ancient times, and no matter what culture or era we are in, the pursuit of happiness has always been the source of motivation that drives mankind to keep moving forward. General Secretary Xi Jinping pointed out in the report of the 19th Party Congress that “socialism with Chinese characteristics has entered a new era, and

the main contradiction in China's society has been transformed into the contradiction between the people's growing needs for a better life and unbalanced and insufficient development." It can be seen the people's pursuit of happiness has not only been limited to solving the problem of food and clothing, but has become more concerned about many aspects such as quality of life, social equity and spiritual culture. Since the reform and opening up, with the rapid growth of China's total economy, the secondary and tertiary industries in cities have flourished as never before, and a large number of rural migrant workers have begun to enter the cities, contributing an important force to the modernization of the country. According to relevant data from the National Bureau of Statistics, the total number of migrant workers in China reached as high as 29.753 million in 2023, up 0.6% year-on-year from 2022. General Secretary Xi Jinping emphasized in the 14th collective study of the Political Bureau of the CPC Central Committee that "we should promote high-quality and full employment, and continuously enhance the sense of gain, happiness and security of the majority of workers". Migrant workers, as a relatively disadvantaged group among urban employment groups, have a sense of well-being that is closely linked to the quality of their own employment. In other words, improving the employment situation of migrant workers in the city is of crucial significance to enhancing their sense of well-being.

For a long time, domestic academics have conducted extensive research on the meaning of happiness and its influencing factors from multiple perspectives, and now domestic scholars have formed a more comprehensive perception of the connotation and extension of happiness. Happiness can refer to both a person's satisfaction with the quality of life and the emotions he or she experiences (Wang, 2017), while subjective well-being refers to an individual's overall evaluation of his or her quality of life based on the standards he or she has set (You & Ma, 2023). In the research field of subjective well-being, scholars in China often take subjective well-being as the dependent variable of the study, and at the same time select factors related to demographic characteristics, economic indicators and the political system as the independent variables, and carry out multiple regression analysis on both. Employment quality is an important part of the above factors, and it is also a hot research topic in political science, management and economics. In recent years, with the rapid development of social economy and the improvement of people's living standard, the quality of employment has gradually become one of the key factors affecting the subjective well-being of individuals. Therefore, this paper takes the employment quality of rural migrant workers as a research perspective to explore in depth the influence of employment quality on the subjective well-being of rural migrant workers, which has very important theoretical value and practical significance for building a moderately prosperous society in an all-round way, constructing a harmonious society as well as realizing the revitalization of the countryside.

2. Literature Review and Research Hypothesis

The concept of "quality of employment" first originated from "decent work"

proposed by the International Labor Organization (ILO) in 1999, which is to promote workers to work in free, fair, safe and dignified conditions, while at the same time obtaining adequate remuneration, complete social insurance and full protection of rights. The concept of “decent labor” is to promote workers to work in conditions of freedom, fairness, security and dignity, while receiving adequate remuneration, complete social insurance and full protection of their rights. At present, domestic scholars have not been able to give a unified description of the connotation of employment quality, but most of the domestic scholars have comprehensively evaluated the employment quality of rural migrant workers in terms of salary level, occupational stability, labor rights and interests, working conditions and social welfare. Among them, economic income is the key driving force that prompts surplus agricultural laborers to leave the countryside and go to the cities, and the potential impact of this factor on the subjective well-being of rural migrant workers has attracted extensive attention from scholars in China. At the same time, based on the thinking triggered by “Easterlin’s Paradox”, in the process of exploring “Easterlin’s Paradox”, scholars have begun to realize that the influence of economic income on the subjective well-being of rural migrant workers is not a simple linear relationship. Therefore, when analyzing the role of income, they began to distinguish between the two dimensions of absolute income and relative income. Among them, absolute income refers to the actual monetary income obtained by an individual or a family, which is directly related to the standard of living and material needs. For rural migrant workers, higher absolute income often means better living conditions and higher consumption capacity, which are important factors in enhancing the subjective well-being of rural migrant workers. Relative income, on the other hand, refers to the income level of an individual or a family relative to other reference groups, which focuses on the process of social comparison, and people tend to compare their own income with others when evaluating their own well-being, and the level of relative income affects an individual’s self-esteem and sense of belonging, which in turn will have an impact on the subjective well-being of migrant workers. Lin Ye et al. found that absolute income significantly and positively affects the subjective well-being of migrant workers, and the higher the absolute income, the stronger the subjective well-being of migrant workers (Lin & Zhou, 2021). Huang Zuhui et al., on the other hand, from the perspective of relative income, argued that the excessive urban-rural income gap would cause great damage to the subjective well-being of migrant workers (Huang & Peng, 2016). In addition to economic income, labor time is also an important factor affecting the subjective well-being of rural migrant workers, Jiang Chunyun study that due to the rural migrant workers’ own cultural level is not high, professional ability is limited, so they can only be employed in the labor-intensive industries with long labor time and work intensity, in the long run this will cause serious damage to the physical and mental health of the rural migrant workers and their subjective sense of well-being (Jiang, 2020). In addition, social security also affects the subjective well-being of migrant workers, Lu Haiyang et al., based on CGSS survey data found that the subjective well-being of

migrant workers who participate in health insurance and pension insurance will be more intense (Lu et al., 2017) Nie Wei et al. also believe that a complete social security system can strengthen the risk resistance of migrant workers, and when migrant workers are included in the social security system, the subjective well-being of migrant workers can be significantly enhanced (Nie, 2020).

Maslow's theory of needs states: "When a person has satisfied low-level needs, they will pursue higher-level needs." Maslow's theory of needs profoundly explains the hierarchy of human needs, and this theory accurately depicts the psychological dynamics and behavioral tendencies of the migrant workers' group in terms of need satisfaction. When we look at the survival situation of migrant workers, we can see that migrant workers, after obtaining basic survival protection, i.e., stable work and income, will also develop the pursuit of high-level needs, which is like an invisible force that drives them to pursue a higher quality of life. The emergence of high-level needs of migrant workers is not only a natural psychological process, but also a reflection of social progress. It means that migrant workers are no longer satisfied with the boundaries of material survival, but begin to approach a richer spiritual world. And high-quality employment plays a crucial role in satisfying the high-level needs of migrant workers as well as enhancing their sense of well-being. Based on this understanding, this study proposes a series of research hypotheses and their sub-hypotheses, aiming to explore in depth the relationship between the quality of employment and the well-being of migrant workers.

The core hypothesis of this study is H1: Employment quality has a significant impact on the subjective well-being of migrant workers. In order to understand this relationship more deeply, this paper further refines three sub-hypotheses: First, H1-1 proposes that the level of economic income significantly affects the subjective well-being of rural migrant workers, and that higher income tends to lead to higher well-being. This is because economic income is an important means for migrant workers to meet their basic needs, improve their quality of life, and achieve their personal and family goals. Secondly, H1-2 states that the magnitude of labor intensity also significantly affects the subjective well-being of migrant workers, where low intensity labor is more likely to bring happiness. Excessive labor intensity may lead to physical fatigue and increased mental stress, which in turn reduces migrant workers' quality of life and sense of well-being. Finally, H1-3 emphasizes that the diversity of social insurance types has a significant positive effect on the subjective well-being of migrant workers. A comprehensive social insurance system can provide all-round risk protection for migrant workers, reduce their financial pressure when they encounter accidents or difficulties, and thus enhance their sense of security and well-being.

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Data Sources

The data base of this study comes from the 2015 China General Social Survey

(CGSS), which is a nationwide survey project led by Renmin University of China and jointly implemented by many well-known academic institutions in China. The survey covered 28 provinces across the country and collected a total of 10968 detailed personal questionnaire information. To meet the specific needs of the research, this article cleaned the raw data on March 14, 2024: 1) only retaining the population with agricultural household registration, in order to more accurately locate the migrant worker population; 2) Among the interviewees, the group of migrant workers who are currently unemployed were excluded. After excluding invalid samples with missing key data, this article obtained a total of 1598 valid sample data of migrant workers. Further analysis of these sample data reveals that the average age of migrant workers is 41.34 years old. In terms of age distribution, the survey shows significant age differences: among them, 62.32% of migrant workers were born before 1980, belonging to the earlier generation of migrant workers; 37.68% of migrant workers were born after 1980, representing a new generation of migrant workers. In terms of gender composition, male migrant workers accounted for 57.66% of the total effective sample, while the proportion of female migrant workers was 42.34%.

3.2. Variable Selection and Descriptive Statistical Analysis

The dependent variable. The dependent variable of this article is the subjective well-being of migrant workers. The study evaluates their subjective well-being by asking them the question “Overall, what do you think is their level of happiness in life?”. The answer options include “very unhappy”, “not very happy”, “between happiness and unhappiness”, “relatively happy”, and “very happy”, corresponding to values of 1 to 5, respectively. In the valid sample data, the average subjective well-being score of migrant workers is 3.71. Among them, 17.81% of migrant workers said they were “very happy”, 15.84% and 60.31% of migrant workers said their sense of happiness was “between happiness and unhappiness” and “relatively happy”, while the proportion of migrant workers who felt “very unhappy” and “not very happy” in all valid samples was 6.04%.

The core independent variables. The core independent variable of this paper is “employment quality of migrant workers”, which is a multidimensional concept to measure the actual employment situation of workers. This paper refers to the research results of domestic experts, and combined with the actual availability of data, the quality of employment is subdivided into five dimensions, which includes wage return, work intensity, work independence, job security and job category, totaling seven specific indicators. Specifically, this paper takes the annual economic income of migrant workers as the benchmark to judge the specific situation of their wage returns, and in order to avoid the error caused by the fluctuation of data, this paper specially conducts logarithmic processing of this value to reduce the fluctuation; as for the measurement of the intensity of the work, it is through the statistics of the actual weekly working hours of the migrant workers and the existence of whether there is part-time work behavior to carry out accurate

accounting; as for the evaluation of the independence of the work, the paper focuses on As for job independence, this paper focuses on the degree of self-determination of migrant workers in choosing their jobs; the consideration of job security is reflected through in-depth understanding of migrant workers' participation in basic medical insurance and basic social insurance; and the final classification of job type is based on the full-time or part-time status of migrant workers, with the corresponding variable value set at 0 or 1 to show the difference.

The control variables. When conducting the research on the influencing factors of subjective well-being of migrant workers, it is necessary to fully consider and control other individual factors that may have an impact. According to the results of existing research in China, individual characteristics such as gender, age and education level have a significant impact on the subjective well-being of migrant workers (Lu, 2022). In order to more accurately explore the role of each factor on subjective well-being, this study selected a series of control variables. First of all, considering that there may be a “U”-shaped nonlinear relationship between age and subjective well-being, we included age in the range of control variables. At the same time, in order to analyze the influence of education level in a more detailed way, this study takes elementary school education as the cut-off point and divides the education level of migrant workers into two levels for consideration. In addition, gender, ethnicity, marital status and political identity were chosen as control variables in this study. The introduction of the gender variable helps to analyze the differences in subjective well-being among migrant workers of different genders; the ethnicity variable takes into account the characteristics of China's multi-ethnic country and explores whether there are differences in the subjective well-being of migrant workers of different ethnic backgrounds; the marital status is benchmarked against unmarried people for the purpose of comparison, aiming to analyze the impact of marital status on the subjective well-being of migrant workers; and the political identity may affect an individual's social resource acquisition and social status, thus indirectly affecting subjective well-being. In order to facilitate the understanding and presentation of the research results, we have clearly defined and coded the above control variables, and demonstrated the specific meanings of the relevant variables and their descriptive statistical results in **Table 1**. Through the setting of these control variables, we expect to be able to reveal more accurately the influence mechanism of each factor on the subjective well-being of migrant workers.

3.3. Model Selection

Given that “subjective well-being of migrant workers” is an ordered hierarchical variable, this study aims to explore the impact of employment quality on it. In order to achieve this goal, this paper refers to Lu Haiyang's research [6], and utilizes the ordered logit model for assessment, and the formula of the ordered logit model constructed by the research is as follows:

$$Y_i = F(\beta x_i + \varepsilon_i) \quad (1)$$

Equation (1) represents a regression model without interaction terms, where Y_i is the dependent variable, Representing the subjective well-being of migrant workers. x_i is the vector of independent variables and ε_i is the randomized perturbation term that. F is a nonlinear function of the specific form:

$$Y_i = AX_i + \hat{\alpha}_i \quad (2)$$

Equation (2) A is the parameter to be estimated, α_i is the model intercept term, and after transformation, the specific form of the model can be:

$$P(y < jx_i) = \frac{\exp(\beta X_i + \varepsilon_i)}{1 + (\beta X_i + \varepsilon_i)}$$

Table 1. Variable definitions and descriptive statistics.

Variable type	Variable name	Meaning and Assignment	Am	Se
Explanatory variable	Subjective well-being of migrant workers	Very unhappy = 1; Not too happy = 2; Between happy and unhappy = 3; Happy = 4; Very happy = 5	3.712	0.712
Core explanatory variables	Wage Returns	Log of total labor income in the previous year	10.256	0.823
	Work intensity	Total hours of labor in the previous week	53.236	20.651
	Autonomy in determining the type of work	No = 0; Yes = 1	0.665	0.426
	Health insurance	No = 0; Yes = 1	0.897	0.321
	Whether to participate in social insurance	No = 0; Yes = 1	0.656	0.486
Control variable	Whether the job is full-time or not	No = 0; Yes = 1	0.845	0.367
	Sex	Male = 0; Female = 1	0.434	0.489
	Age	Actual age	41.134	12.314
	Ethnicity	Han Chinese = 0; Minority = 1	0.067	0.256
	Political appearance	Mass = 0; Party member = 1	0.131	0.356
	Marriage	Unmarried = 1; Married = 2; Divorced = 3	1.937	0.423
	Educational attainment	Primary school = 1; Junior high school = 2; High school = 3; College majors = 4; Undergraduate = 5	2.334	0.976

4. Empirical Results and Analysis

4.1. Regression Analysis of Employment Quality on Subjective Well-Being of Migrant Workers

According to the regression results in **Table 2**, there is a significant positive correlation between the improvement of job returns and the subjective well-being of migrant workers. This means that when migrant workers get higher job returns, their happiness will be enhanced accordingly, and this result provides strong support for hypothesis H1-1. Therefore, the regression results are actually telling us that the absolute income level of migrant workers has a significant positive effect

on their subjective well-being. At the same time, this study does not show the situation described by the so-called “Easterlin’s Paradox”, i.e., an increase in wealth does not necessarily lead to an increase in happiness. Therefore, increasing the absolute income of migrant workers is still an important step to improve the subjective well-being of migrant workers. Meanwhile, according to the study in **Table 2**, the working hours of migrant workers have a significant negative impact on their subjective well-being. Specifically, with the extension of working hours, the subjective well-being of migrant workers shows a decreasing trend, thus verifying the correctness of the H1-2 hypothesis. According to the relevant provisions of China’s Labor Law, the average working hours of workers should not exceed 44 hours per week. However, in this study, we found that the average weekly working hours of migrant workers reached 53.23 hours, which obviously exceeded the legal standard. Excessive labor hours not only squeeze the leisure time of migrant workers, but may also have adverse effects on their physical and mental health. Long hours of labor may lead to physical fatigue, increased mental stress, and even a series of health problems. Therefore, in order to protect the legitimate rights and interests of migrant workers and improve their quality of life, the government and all sectors of society should pay attention to the issue of migrant workers’ working hours and take effective measures to ensure that they can enjoy reasonable rest time and leisure activities. Finally, according to the regression results in **Table 2**, it can be seen that participation in basic medical insurance has a significant effect on the subjective well-being of migrant workers. The reason behind this phenomenon is that basic medical insurance effectively reduces the financial burden that migrant workers need to bear when facing illness. Through the reimbursement mechanism of medical insurance, migrant workers can receive certain financial compensation when facing medical expenses, thus reducing the financial pressure caused by illness. This not only helps migrant workers better cope with health risks, but also improves their physical health to a certain extent. A healthy body is the foundation of a happy life, so health insurance indirectly improves the subjective well-being of migrant workers in this way, and thus hypothesis H1-3 is confirmed.

Table 2. Estimation results of the model.

Variable type	Variable name	Regression results	
		Coefficient	Standard error
The quality of employment	Job Returns	0.134***	0.075
	Working hours	−0.013	0.002
	Autonomy in determining the type of work	0.465***	0.132
	Health insurance	0.624***	0.158
	Pension insurance	0.223*	0.221
	Full-time work or not	0.284***	0.142

Continued

The control variable	Age	−0.158***	0.028
	Sex	0.023	0.107
	Ethnicity	0.108	0.213
	Political appearance	0.101	0.171
	Marital status		
	Unmarried	0.831***	0.176
	Married	0.477	0.213
	Divorced	0.398	0.311
	Educational attainment		
	Primary school	0.477***	0.143
	Junior high school	0.317**	0.178
	High school	0.450*	0.225
	College majors	0.476*	0.256
	Undergraduate	0.498*	0.237

4.2. Heterogeneity Analysis of Employment Quality on Subjective Well-Being of Migrant Workers

Table 3 reflects the gender differences in the quality of employment on the subjective well-being of migrant workers. In general, the happiness of male migrant workers will be more profoundly affected by the quality of employment. Behind this phenomenon, social background and family education division of labor play a key role. Under the existing social structure, migrant workers generally face the problems of limited income and low social status. In order to improve the living standard of the family and take care of family responsibilities, a specific pattern of division of labor has gradually developed within the migrant worker's family. At this time, male migrant workers usually act as the breadwinners of the family, earning most of the family income by going out to work. In contrast, female migrant workers supplement their income from labor as a source of income for the family, and take on the responsibility of childcare and household chores in the family. Given the significant pressure on their incomes, male migrant workers are more likely to look for improvements in the rewards and intensity of their work, with a view to achieving a better quality of life and sense of well-being. At the same time, female migrant workers are more likely to encounter gender discrimination in society. Therefore, in order to safeguard their rights and interests, female migrant workers are more likely than male migrant workers to participate in basic insurance, thus ensuring that their legitimate rights and interests at work are fully protected.

Table 3. Estimation results of the model.

Variable type	Variable name	Male		Female	
		Coefficient	Standard error	Coefficient	Standard error
The quality of employment	Job returns	0.178***	0.081	0.028*	0.016
	Working hours	−0.017*	0.008	−0.005**	0.008
	Autonomy in determining the type of work	0.408***	0.229	0.992***	0.213
	Health insurance	0.417**	0.264	0.999***	0.296
	Pension insurance	0.119	0.164	0.213	0.198
	Full-time work or not	0.309*	0.198	0.207	0.226

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

5.1. Conclusion

This article comprehensively explores the impact of employment quality on the subjective well-being of migrant workers based on in-depth analysis of CGSS data from 2015. The main conclusion drawn from this article is that 1) overall, the subjective well-being of migrant workers is generally not high. Specific data shows that their average subjective well-being score is only 3.71 out of 5, which reveals the common dilemma of migrant workers in terms of life satisfaction; 2) This study focuses on analyzing the impact of employment quality on the subjective well-being of migrant workers. The results indicate that high-quality employment is a key factor in enhancing the subjective well-being of migrant workers. Specifically, when migrant workers receive higher job returns, enjoy shorter working hours, are in a more free working environment, and have comprehensive social security, their subjective well-being will be significantly improved. These findings emphasize the importance of improving the employment conditions for migrant workers; 3) This study further explores the gender differences in the impact of employment quality on the subjective well-being of migrant workers. The analysis results show that the subjective well-being of male migrant workers has a more significant impact on employment quality. Especially in terms of increasing labor income and optimizing working hours, it has a more direct effect on improving the subjective well-being of male migrant workers. In contrast, although the subjective well-being of female migrant workers is also influenced by the quality of employment, they are more concerned about the implementation of basic medical insurance and other rights protection. This finding reveals the importance of gender differences in the factors affecting the subjective well-being of migrant workers.

5.2. Recommendations

Based on the above research, this article proposes the following three policy recommendations: Firstly, work income remains an important factor affecting the

subjective well-being of migrant workers. The government needs to improve labor regulations and strengthen market supervision mechanisms to create a healthy and effective employment environment, ensuring that migrant workers can receive timely and full labor remuneration. At the same time, the government should increase policy support for vocational training for migrant workers and self-employed individuals, in order to provide them with more quality and diversified employment opportunities; Secondly, the government needs to further protect the employment rights and interests of migrant workers, especially their physical health rights. To this end, the government can provide appropriate subsidies and support to enterprises that regularly provide physical examination services for migrant workers, in order to encourage more enterprises to provide health protection for migrant workers; Thirdly, the government should establish an effective mechanism for reporting overtime work and encourage migrant workers to actively report the issue of overtime work by employers. For employers who repeatedly violate labor laws, the government should take more severe punishment measures, such as revoking their business license or ordering them to rectify within a specified period of time, in order to create a deterrent effect on other employers.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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