
A municipal-level sample survey on subjective well-being. Indications emerging from the case of Agrigento

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Abstract: The importance of the survey of subjective well-being is linked to the awareness, now widely shared, of the need to use additional and alternative measures to the purely economic ones such as, for example, income. The dimensions of well-being on which we have focused our attention are the cognitive one linked to the retrospective evaluation of one's life and the hedonic one linked to one's emotional state of the moment. We present the main results of the research on subjective well-being in Agrigento. This was a probability sample survey with face-to-face and telephone interviews using a mobile device (smartphone or tablet) or computer and via the web. The interview campaign lasted from 10 January to 6 March 2020. We conducted 4464 interviews, having contacted 971 people (507 refusals). Just focusing on the cognitive dimension of subjective well-being, we can say that on a scale of 0 to 10, the people of Agrigento have an average satisfaction score of 8.03. This is a very high score; higher not only than the national average but also than Finland, which is the country with the highest score in the world. Even with a rather high margin of error, given the small sample size, the score remains high. Nor can the figure be said to be unreliable due to a possible self-selection of the sample, which was basically very low (971 contacts in total, as mentioned). The impression of unreliability is also affected by the stereotype of a backward and sore South, but there are also mechanisms at work that produce a sort of hyperdramatic vision of the world. Psychologists call it an inclination to negativity, i.e. a propensity to note more carefully and react more readily to negative things, threats, aggressions, violations, damage, than to positive things. It is an ancestral cognitive mechanism inscribed in survival strategies and therefore it

is not a matter of opposing it because that would be vain but of not being fooled by it when evaluating. We also surveyed the opinion of our sample on this and the result confirmed the strength of this distortion: the people of Agrigento believe that their fellow citizens are 37.3% satisfied, while they are 70.5%. One might think this is a Pirandellian persistence: in Pirandello's land, being and appearance are intrinsically divergent. But here, beyond literary suggestions, what interests us is to account for this datum, to provide a plausible key to its interpretation, and, then, to better understand what exactly we are detecting with this question. Satisfaction has to do with the satisfaction of needs in an overall sense, needs related to material needs (food, housing, security) and post-material needs such as quality of life, social relations, work. The question on satisfaction invites an assessment of the balance between giving and having, between what is expected and what is obtained. The hypothesis we put forward is that the question investigates a private dimension of satisfaction, prompting the respondent to take stock of his or her life between aspirations and results, between the fulfilment of duties and the satisfaction of needs and expectations. Public dimensions such as those involved in evaluations of what has been given and what has been received by the community of reference (the city, the region, the nation, the company, etc.) are excluded from this screening. We also advance another hypothesis. We do not have data to support this, but we could assume that the overall average satisfaction rate is high because the most dissatisfied, those who would lower the average, have left, belong to the very large population who, for work reasons, but increasingly also for study reasons, have moved elsewhere and are therefore not part of the sample universe. On the other hand, those who do arrive are, for the most part, foreigners who are not included in the sampling lists and therefore their level of satisfaction is not measured. This should lead to caution in drawing direct indications from the indicator at municipal level. Account must be taken of the multiplicity of populations in a municipality and the increasingly fluid nature of a municipality's population. Therefore, in the general perspective of the construction of alternative indicators to the purely economic ones for measuring well-being, the use of life satisfaction, at the municipal level, must be done with great caution, especially if one expects that it will serve to give indications linked to the public dimensions involved in the production of citizens' well-being.