



‘Subjective Europeanization’: do inner-European comparisons affect life satisfaction?

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ABSTRACT

Research in the social sciences has shown recurrently that life satisfaction varies across countries. More recently, the question was raised whether Europeans are comparing living conditions in European countries, and whether these comparisons are affecting the way they assess their personal situation. The paper uses original survey data from nine European countries in order to answer these questions. We analyze the way European citizens assess the living conditions in the various countries under analysis. And we test whether assessments of other countries are significantly interrelated with reported levels of life satisfaction. Finally, we measure the extent to which these effects hold if other reference groups (friends, neighbors, own country) and individual socio-demographic traits are included in the analysis. Our findings paint a mixed picture. Assessing living conditions in other European countries is widely diffused and attests a marked ‘cognitive Europeanization’. However, comparisons with other countries play a less relevant role for reported life satisfaction, when compared to the assessment of the own national economy and the own household situation. Moreover, Switzerland as a non-EU-member is a more significant target than most other EU-members, attesting that we are rather speaking of a European frame of reference, than an EU-related one.

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1. Introduction

Research in the social sciences has shown recurrently that life satisfaction varies across countries. It has also highlighted that life satisfaction is affected not only by individual-level factors such as income, unemployment or material deprivation, but also by the countries’ socio-economic and institutional environment (Diener and Oishi 2000; Frey and Stutzer

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2000; Böhnke 2008). Additionally, we know from many studies that comparisons with reference groups and related feelings of relative deprivation are crucial, too (e.g. Walker and Smith 2002; Praag 2011). In recent times, scholars have started to adapt these insights to the study of the European integration process and the building of the European Union. In particular, they discuss controversially whether these processes are altering the frame of reference of European citizens, and whether comparisons between countries are affecting the way they assess their personal situation (Delhey and Kohler 2006; Whelan and Maitre 2009).

This paper aims to add new insights to this recent research debate by answering the following two core questions. Is there a process of Europeanization of reference groups under way; that is, do European citizens evaluate the living conditions in other European countries, as they do in regard to their own country and closer reference groups, such as friends or neighborhoods? And do these perceptions and assessments influence the way they assess their personal situation; that is, do these references influence life satisfaction? These questions are of outmost importance for a sociological research agenda that wishes to take a closer look at the implications of the European integration process. On the one hand, much is known about the different living conditions between member states and the widening gap since the beginning of the economic crisis (Beckfield 2006; de Beer 2012; Heidenreich 2016). But we know little about whether and how this has affected the way European citizens assess their lives. On the other hand, this analysis will provide new insights into the study of life satisfaction, as it considers a new set of reference groups. If the economic and social performance of nations has an impact on life satisfaction (Easterlin 1974; Rose 1980; Oswald 1997; Böhnke 2008), it seems necessary to assess whether the perceived performance of other countries has a similar effect, too.

This paper will make use of survey data from nine European countries (France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Poland, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, the UK) conducted within a EU-financed research project (Livewhat) in order to assess whether European citizens evaluate their own life within a Europeanized frame of reference. For this purpose, we will first of all review scholarly writing and identify core concepts and guiding research hypotheses. After the description of our data and the methods used, we will present the main findings. In descriptive terms, we need to validate whether and how European citizens assess the living conditions in other European countries. In explanatory terms, we have to corroborate whether these assessments are significantly interrelated with reported

levels of life satisfaction. With regard to our various hypotheses, we wish to see whether these effects remain in place, once introducing other reference groups (such as friends, neighborhoods or the own country) and individual level factors (e.g. household situation, socio-demographic traits, perceived health). Finally, the findings will require a critical discussion, because the patterns we identified in empirical terms paint a rather complex picture that stimulates further theoretical debates about the effects of inner-European comparisons on personal satisfaction.

2. Theory and assumptions

Life satisfaction is known to be influenced by individual-level factors, for example, personal income, work status or household situation (Easterlin 1974; Clark *et al.* 2008). These ‘objective forces’ are permeated by subjective perceptions and evaluations (Michalos 1985; Frank 1989), which involve very often a comparison with reference groups. Indeed, earlier studies had shown that individuals’ feelings of dissatisfaction or deprivation do not mirror necessarily their ‘objective’ situation, but rather the perceived living conditions of other groups (Stouffer *et al.* 1949; Merton and Kitt 1950). Research on relative deprivations has since then corroborated the relevance of reference groups and inter group comparisons (Walker and Smith 2002). Scholars have intensively discussed whether absolute income levels are more important in explaining varying levels of life satisfaction between groups, or whether the relative income situation is more important (Diener *et al.* 1992; Clark *et al.* 2008). Research has tended to stress that income has a relative utility (Ferrer-i-Carbonell 2005; Clark *et al.* 2008), i.e. earnings are assessed according to the own position within the income or status ladder of a society (Boyce *et al.* 2010; Oshio *et al.* 2011). Life satisfaction is thus affected primarily in terms of subjective income perceptions, when people compare or rank themselves with others (Diener *et al.* 1992; Ferrer-i-Carbonell 2005; Luttmer 2005). Finally, scholars have recurrently stressed that it makes a considerable difference whether respondents compare themselves in upward or downward direction: the former are more common and consequential as they impact more clearly on life satisfaction (Delhey and Kohler 2006; Boyce *et al.* 2010).

So far, research has tended to center on specific reference groups, namely families, work colleagues, friends or neighbors (López Turley 2002; Luttmer 2005; Delhey and Kohler 2006; Praag 2011). The idea behind this research agenda seems to be that only natural groups and

palpable social entities provide socially relevant reference points, even though a comparison with others implies always some sort of abstraction. Hence, it is quite probable that reference groups might extend to more abstract, imagined entities, such as countries, although with lesser effects following the idea of social proximity. Research has testified the importance of nation states, but rather as an objective context that does affect life satisfaction by shaping the economic, social and political reality within which populations live (Rose 1980; Oswald 1997; Frey and Stutzer 2000). Some scholars have insisted that countries can be relevant 'reference spaces' in a more explicit sense (Kapteyn *et al.* 1978), because people's perceptions of their countries' economic, social and political performance have an impact on reported happiness (Frey and Stutzer 2000; Böhnke 2008). That is, even if countries are more abstract and distant reference spaces when compared to friends, colleagues and neighbors, it is an open question whether they are less relevant when people assess their personal situation. If people assess their own country as a reference group, it is fair to assume that they compare their own country with living conditions abroad.

Hence, it is advisable to expand our focus of attention and include other countries as potentially relevant reference groups. The importance of this focus is evident in the European context because living conditions are affected by the European integration process at large, and by the European economic and financial crisis in particular. This has been corroborated in regard to objective indicators of social inequality, which testify increasing discrepancies within and between countries (Beckfield 2006; Vaughan-Whitehead 2011; de Beer 2012; Heidenreich 2016). Divergent living conditions within the EU are thus associated with divergent levels of life satisfaction between member states (Böhnke 2008; Delhey and Dragolov 2015). Because the utility of one's own resource situation is perceived in relative terms, deprivation increases (implying deteriorating life satisfaction) with the assessment of other countries being better off and (vice versa for gratification).

We know from scholarly writing that the European integration process has introduced a new frame of reference for the assessment of social reality within member states (Beck 2007; Beck and Grande 2010). Indeed, the building of the EU has been paralleled by the establishment of European agencies, public policies and financial programs to promote social cohesion. This includes the constant monitoring of member states' performance in various sectors, and thus the comparison of countries and regions in regard to common standards and goals (Kangas and Ritakallio

2007; Lahusen 2013). Thus, ‘the national space is no longer the only framework of reference for the evaluation of social inequalities’ (Heidenreich 2006b: 5). Following this proposition, we might expect a greater propensity among European citizens to evaluate their own situation and happiness on the basis of more or less explicit references to the living conditions in other European countries.

Empirical evidence to prove or disprove this general proposition is scarce. This is due to the lack of data that measures inner-European references and comparisons. So far, scholars have provided answers in an indirect manner, by means of country comparisons. They either tried to validate the proposition by comparing objective indicators of deprivation with discrepant levels of reported deprivation (Heidenreich, 2006a: 24f, b). Or they refuted the idea of Europeanization of reference groups by showing that levels of reported economic stress still mirror predominantly country-specific realities (Whelan and Maître 2009). A purely comparative approach, however, is limited when trying to assess the effect of cross-national comparisons.

Significant progress has been made on the basis of a dataset (the Euro-modul) that measured people’s perceptions of living conditions of various reference groups, including other countries (Delhey *et al.* 2002). In subsequent publications, this research team has generated suggestive findings. They have shown that the assessment of living conditions in other countries has a significant impact on reported life satisfaction: in particular ‘upward comparisons’ predominate and have a negative impact on life satisfaction (Delhey and Kohler 2006). Due to the fact that this survey was conducted between 1999 and 2002, it seems promising to investigate in how far these findings can be validated within a context strongly affected by the economic and financial crisis.

This review of previous research shows that we can build only on few empirical studies and theoretical reflection when focusing on countries as reference groups. However, available evidence is sufficiently developed in order to identify a number of potential research assumptions that can be fruitfully adapted to our aims. In this sense, we propose a number of research hypotheses, both with descriptive and explanatory objectives. Our first objective is to check descriptively whether other European countries are relevant reference groups for European citizens. Scholarly writing presented before argues that the building of the EU has established a common institutional and cognitive frame of reference that makes constant comparisons very probable, through the shared standards of evaluation, the joint monitoring systems and the public information about progresses and failures it promotes

(Heidenreich 2006b; Kangas and Ritakallio 2007; Delhey and Kohler 2008). This implies not only comparisons of living conditions within Europe but also that inner-European comparisons confront citizens with significant differences (Fahey 2007). That is, European citizens should be able to evaluate the living conditions in other European countries as easily as they are able to assess their own country's situation (H1a). This means in turn that citizens will most probably assess the other countries' living conditions from their own country's perspective, and vice versa (H1b). Finally, if the European Union is the relevant frame of reference behind these comparisons, we would expect that membership does make a difference. And this means that respondents should be less prone to rank living conditions in newer member states or non-members (H1c).

A second objective of our analyses is to advance a number of explanatory hypotheses that strive to identify the effect of country comparisons on life satisfaction. For this purpose, we wish to develop two models. The first model aims at testing the potential effect of inner-European comparisons on reported life satisfaction. Research has sufficiently corroborated the proposition that feelings of relative deprivation affect happiness and well-being (Diener *et al.* 1992; Ferrer-i-Carbonell 2005; Praag 2011). The perception of being better off correlates with higher levels of happiness and perceptions of deprivation interrelate with lower life satisfaction, which means that upward and downward comparisons have distinct effects on well-being (Luttmer 2005; Boyce *et al.* 2010; Oshio *et al.* 2011). Along this line of reasoning, research argues that upward comparisons are particularly important and consequential when explaining reported life satisfaction (Delhey and Kohler 2006; Clark *et al.* 2008). Applied to countries, this means that not all nation states will be equally important when explaining varying degrees of our dependent variable. These reflections lead us to the three following hypotheses. The higher the perceived living conditions in other European countries are, when compared to the own life situation, the lower the reported life satisfaction – and vice versa (H2a). Upward comparisons interrelate more significantly with reported levels of life satisfaction, i.e. comparisons with countries being better off are more important than with those being worse off (H2b). Finally, if EU membership is a relevant factor, then we would expect that comparisons with EU member states will be more consequential for life satisfaction than with non-members (H2c). At least this is what we would expect when considering that the European integration process is committed to achieve better and equal living conditions throughout Europe.

Even if our analyses should substantiate the explanatory power of inner-European comparisons, we need to validate these effects with regard to other potential factors. For this purpose, we wish to develop a second explanatory model that consists of three sets of variables. In first instance, we need to take into consideration that the own country is a more relevant reference group than other European nation states. Research has recurrently highlighted that the living conditions in Europe are still predominantly shaped by the nation state (Whelan and Maître 2009, 2013; Vaughan-Whitehead 2011; de Beer 2012; Heidenreich 2016), and that the economic, social and political performance of countries has a differentiating impact on levels of well-being (Oswald 1997; Böhnke 2008; Delhey and Dragolov 2015). Additionally, we might stipulate that the effect of inner-European comparisons is replaced by others, when taking less distant and abstract reference groups into consideration, such as friends and neighbors (H3a). Research on relative utility has argued that social distance is an important mediator: comparisons with people who are spatially or socially closer to oneself are more probable and consequential in terms of gratification and deprivation than comparisons with more distant ones (Clark *et al.* 2008). This is true, for instance, for neighbors, whose economic situation tends to impact on happiness, both positively and negatively (López Turley 2002; Luttmer 2005). Finally, we need to test whether the effects of inner-European comparisons prevails when introducing socio-demographic factors. In fact, it is probable that reference groups (be that friends, neighbors or countries) play a less important role in explaining reported life satisfaction, when including socio-demographic factors that mirror the social-structural position of the individuals and their personal life situation (H3b). Social structural traits such as income, education, age or gender might neutralize or replace the effect of country comparisons, particularly when considering the respondents' assessment of their households' situation across time, for example, with perceptions of degradation or improvements. The analysis of country effects nourishes these assumptions, because it has shown that the perception of the countries' economic, social and political performance does have an effect on happiness particularly amongst those living in more vulnerable conditions (Oswald 1997; Frey and Stutzer 2000; Böhnke 2008). Finally, we might assume that life satisfaction is shaped more strongly by social isolation (measured in terms of marital status or the size of the household) or subjective health, than by distant and abstract comparisons (H3c).

3. Data and methods

In order to test our hypotheses, we draw on data from the LIVEWHAT project covering nine European countries: France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Poland, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland and the UK. The composition makes the data set particularly interesting as we can cover both Northern and Southern European countries but also a non-EU country (Switzerland) as well as one newer, Eastern European member state (Poland). In each country, a web-based survey was conducted with a representative sample of ± 2000 participants that matches national statistics in terms of gender, education and age. Data collection started in June 2015 and ended in August 2015, thus we expect the full effect of the Euro-crisis and the debates about economic and fiscal consolidation, but not of the more recent inner-European debate on refugees and the Schengen Treaty.¹ The list of variables used in this analysis is summarized in Table A1 (see appendix).

In regard to our dependent variable (life satisfaction), we used a standard item employed by many other surveys before (see Fischer 2009) that asked respondents to assess their current life in terms of satisfaction (see the appendix for the wording and recoding of all variables used). Following our explanatory propositions, we identified a number of independent factors. The main reference groups to be studied in this paper are other European countries. For this purpose, we used a number of questions that asked participants to rank the living conditions in each of the participating countries, starting with the resident country of the individual participant.² For our descriptive purposes, we used these questions as separate items, but for the explanatory aims, we calculated a composite variable that assesses the living conditions in other European countries, compared to the respondent's own living conditions. For each of the nine countries, we thus calculated a variable that ranges from '-10' (living conditions in country X are 10 points lower than my own) to +10 (living conditions in country X are 10 points higher than my own). A table with the frequencies of these nine variables for all respondents is part of the appendix (Table A2).

As indicated before, our calculations include a number of additional variables (see Appendix, Table A1). First, we wish to control for the effect of other reference groups: the perceived living condition in the respondents

¹More information on the project and the survey is available on the project website: <http://www.livewhat.unige.ch/> (last checked 1 January 2017).

²This set of questions was posed after the respondents were asked to assess their overall life satisfaction. Thus we do not expect a bias of the sort that European comparisons were made salient afore by the order of questions.

own country, in their neighborhood and among their friends. Second, we took a number of individual-level factors, such as the perceived deterioration of the household economic situation, social class (educational attainment and subjective class affiliation), measures of social isolation (marital status, size of the household), of health conditions and other socio-demographic traits (gender, age and migration background).

Our statistical analyses followed a two-step approach. The first set of hypotheses required the use of descriptive statistics in order to provide evidence about the readiness of respondents in the nine countries to assess the living conditions in other European nation states. For the explanatory purposes, we conducted a logistical regression for each of the nine samples and countries analyzed here. Given that reported life satisfaction is not normally distributed in our samples and that OLS regressions generated non-randomly distributed residuals, we opted to dichotomize our dependent variable. We used binary logistical regression, the effects are reported as odds ratios. Regression analysis had to be run for each country separately because the list of 'other European countries' to be assessed by respondents changed for each of the national samples included in the survey. While Delhey and Kohler (2006) calculated the effects of comparisons on life satisfaction for each reference country separately, we opted to include all eight countries into the regression models in order to identify the net effects. It is to be expected that this will reduce the number and the size of these effects.

4. Findings

In this chapter, we will present the findings of our analyses in two steps: in descriptive terms, it is necessary to validate whether European countries have become a potential reference group; in explanatory terms, we will show which effects the various factors, other countries' evaluations included, had on reported life satisfaction.

4.1. Do Europeans compare?

The easiest way of measuring the citizens' familiarity with living conditions in other countries is to identify the proportion of respondents who indicate that they are unable to assess the situation ('don't know'). [Table 1](#) summarizes these findings for the nine countries of our survey. Note that we included also the proportion of people unable to assess the living conditions in their own country (the numbers in brackets and italics).

Table 1. Proportion of respondents answering with 'don't know' (in %).

Respondents from ...	Target countries: living conditions in ...								
	Switzerland	Sweden	Germany	UK	France	Italy	Spain	Poland	Greece
Switzerland	(2.54)	5.82	2.93	5.33	4.74	3.67	4.25	10.12	2.93
Sweden	13.48	(5.85)	12.44	12.34	14.97	14.62	13.43	15.76	10.51
Germany	9.01	10.10	(7.12)	10.20	11.20	10.96	10.58	11.81	8.40
UK	11.77	11.92	12.22	(4.06)	13.06	13.70	12.46	15.48	11.57
France	10.61	13.32	10.95	11.54	(6.02)	11.40	10.16	16.63	8.29
Italy	3.28	5.39	3.04	3.53	4.02	(3.58)	4.02	7.55	3.24
Spain	5.85	6.98	5.45	5.85	5.55	6.14	(2.95)	13.42	5.01
Poland	9.36	9.78	6.92	7.46	11.22	9.93	10.97	(4.50)	9.68
Greece	8.15	8.45	7.03	7.71	9.08	10.79	9.62	17.97	(1.81)
All	8.96	8.97	7.61	8.00	9.22	10.14	9.43	13.58	7.44

The findings show that only a small minority of respondents is unable to assess the living conditions in European countries (i.e. between 7.4% for Greece and 13.58% for Poland). Hence, there is very little difference in the ability of people to assess their own country and other member states. A closer look reveals that citizens are most confident in assessing the situation in Greece and Germany, and least confident in evaluating the situation in Poland. Salience seems to play a role, given the public attention Greece and Germany have received during the Great Recession particularly during the summer of 2015, when our survey was conducted. The late accession of Poland to the EU might be a reason for the lower rates, even though membership itself is not a determining factor, given the generalized disposition to evaluate the situation in Switzerland. The good performance of Switzerland and/or the geographical and cultural proximity might be relevant factors. Indeed, Swedish and British citizens are the least capable of assessing the living conditions in Switzerland, especially when compared with Italians and Spanish respondents.

Based on these insights, we move to the answers of those respondents feeling capable of assessing the living conditions abroad. In particular, we wish to know how citizens rank the various countries, following a scale of 1 (very bad) to 11 (very good). [Figure 1](#) summarizes these findings, which reflect the aggregated assessments of all respondents – except the citizens grading their own country's living conditions. What we see is a rather expectable picture, because respondents tend to rank the living conditions along the order we would anticipate looking at macro-economic indicators (e.g. GDP, employment and unemployment rates). The median shows that Switzerland is at the top, followed closely by Sweden and Germany; the intermediate group of France and the UK is followed by Italy, Spain and Poland, thus relegating Greece to the worst position. It is interesting to note that this ranking is echoed by the degree of variances.

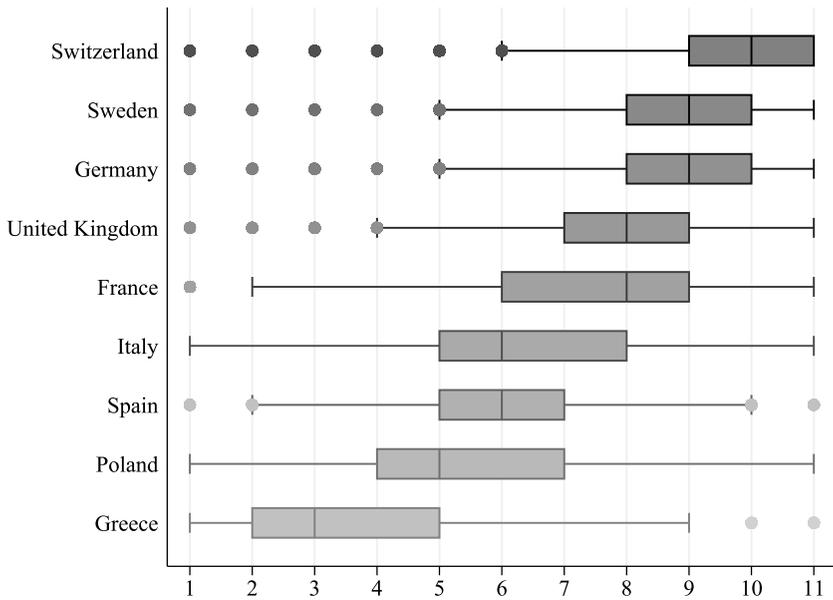


Figure 1. Living conditions in European countries (own country excluded) – Boxplot.

Respondents largely agree about the living conditions in the first four countries being very good, while they disagree more strongly in regard to the other countries, particularly in the case of France, Italy, Poland and Greece.

In a final descriptive step, we wish to highlight the different perspectives from which EU citizens assess each other's living conditions. As shown in Table 2, the evaluations of living conditions abroad diverge significantly between the various countries. When taking the French responses as the base, we see that Swiss respondents assess the living conditions in most other countries less favorable than French respondents, obviously because the Swiss assess living conditions abroad from a much higher baseline than the French. Inversely, most other countries assess the situation better than the French do. This is particularly true for the Polish and the Greek, who evaluate the living conditions abroad much more positively, thus showing that their baseline is much lower.

Our analyses thus corroborate our descriptive hypotheses (H1a and H1b), but do not validate that EU membership makes a difference. It is interesting to note, that national baselines and perspectives seem to be congruent and thus assure a complementarity of rankings. With this knowledge in mind, we now move to ascertain the potential effect these comparisons might have on respondents' general life satisfaction.

Table 2. Variance between countries (ANOVA).

<i>Deviation from French respondents' assessment of living conditions in ...</i>								
	Switzerland	Sweden	Germany	UK	Italy	Spain	Poland	Greece
<i>Base:</i>								
<i>France</i>								
Swiss		-0.122*	-0.346**	-0.649**	-0.138*	-0.314**	-0.348**	0.057
Swedish	-0.180**		0.701**	0.078	0.756**	0.631**	0.213**	0.713**
German	0.019	0.322**		-0.106	0.729**	0.312**	0.483**	0.419**
UK	0.455**	0.776**	1.127**		1.142**	0.932**	0.447**	1.313**
Italian	0.306**	0.515**	1.094**	0.921**		0.924**	0.250**	0.156*
Spanish	0.248**	0.588**	0.790**	0.702**	0.176**		0.202**	-0.132*
Polish	0.696**	1.159**	1.691**	1.752**	2.143**	1.100**		1.451**
Greek	0.627**	0.834**	1.052**	0.946**	0.717**	0.371**	0.063	
_cons	9.222**	8.583**	7.899**	7.511**	5.512**	5.603**	5.212**	3.282**
R ²	0.03	0.05	0.11	0.14	0.12	0.06	0.02	0.07
N	14,859	14,884	15,023	15,039	14,672	14,793	14,125	15,105

* $p < .05$.** $p < .01$.

4.2. Do comparisons matter?

Table 3 summarizes the distribution of respondents in regard to reported life satisfaction for each of the nine countries. It compared the share of people being dissatisfied with their life, with those reporting moderate to strong satisfaction. The group of the dissatisfied is biggest in Greece and smallest in Switzerland, Sweden and Germany, with an intermediate position for the rest of the countries. This observation, as interesting as it might be, will not be further analyzed, because we are not comparing national rates of (un)happiness. We are interested in unveiling the effects of country comparisons on individual life satisfaction within countries.

For this purpose, we conducted a logistic regression with two models: one consisting of the country comparisons as independent variables (Model A), and the second including a number of additional variables testing alternative hypotheses (Model B). In a first step, we wish to present findings of model A, thus clarifying whether a comparison of one's own living conditions with the situation in other countries has an effect at all on reported life satisfaction. Table 4 presents the correlations extracted from our nine logistic regressions.³ As we see, not all countries are a relevant reference group. In fact, only a couple of comparisons matter, and here we get a highly visible pattern. On the one hand, comparisons with countries being better off are more consequential, and

³The complete results of these regressions have not been included for limitations of space but are available upon request.

Table 3. Reported life satisfaction (dichotomized; *N* and %).

Country	Switzerland	Sweden	Germany	UK	France	Italy	Spain	Poland	Greece
Dissatisfied	319 (15.8)	315 (16.1)	355 (17.7)	399 (20.1)	509 (26.2)	538 (26.9)	423 (21.1)	515 (25.9)	952 (46.8)
satisfied	1698 (84.2)	1644 (83.9)	1655 (82.3)	1584 (79.9)	1435 (73.8)	1460 (73.1)	1578 (78.9)	1471 (74.1)	1081 (53.2)
<i>N</i> (%)	2017 (100)	1959 (100)	2010 (100)	1983 (100)	1944 (100)	1998 (100)	2001 (100)	1986 (100)	2033 (100)

Table 4. Dissatisfaction with one's life (effects of country comparisons, logistic regression – Model A: only country comparisons).

Country being better off than oneself	Respondents								
	Swiss	Swedish	Germans	UK	French	Italian	Spanish	Polish	Greek
Switzerland		1.435	2.198***	1.715*	2.523***	1.388*	1.656*	1.948**	1.641**
Sweden	1.651***		1.269	0.763	0.983	1.073	0.892	1.297	1.004
Germany	0.918	1.413		2.246***	0.986	1.620**	1.855***	1.004	1.572***
UK	1.202	1.508*	0.988		1.127	1.246	1.227	1.002	0.937
France	1.111	1.193	0.959	0.778		0.927	0.677*	0.808	0.898
Italy	1.337	0.810	1.195	1.262	0.911		1.281	1.537***	1.093
Spain	1.090	1.328	1.376	1.041	1.217	0.915		1.057	0.977
Poland	1.205	1.130	0.974	1.058	0.999	1.060	1.022		1.272*
Greece	1.087	1.248	1.318*	1.074	1.510**	1.438***	1.553***	0.964	
Constant	0.283***	0.261***	0.233***	0.290***	0.321***	0.201***	0.197***	0.175***	0.350***
Observations	1575	1402	1568	1458	1366	1545	1624	1445	1502
Pseudo <i>R</i> -squared	0.134	0.206	0.181	0.093	0.158	0.165	0.171	0.142	0.132

***Significance level at $p < .001$.

**Significance level at $p < .01$.

*Significance level at $p < .05$.

here we can name Switzerland, and to a lower extent Germany. For the Swiss, only Sweden is a country that generates effects. These findings are a clear indication that upward comparisons do matter, but that these comparisons are not constrained to EU member states. Beyond these comparisons, only Greece is an important reference group, but only for Germans, French, Italian and Spanish respondents. Apart from that, there are some relevant comparisons (Polish referring to Italy, Greece to Poland etc.). In the vast majority, we are speaking of a 'positive' correlation, i.e. respondents believing that the living conditions abroad are better than their own are also significantly more often represented in the group of the dissatisfied. Respondents ranking their personal living conditions more positively than the situation in other countries are more satisfied with their life. Only the Spanish respondents comparing with the French situation are an exception to this rule.

These observations need to be interpreted with caution, because the direction of this effect is not predetermined. In fact, we are speaking of correlations. This gives room for two interpretations. On the one hand, respondents tend to feel better or worse, depending on whether they assess the living conditions in other countries as being worse or better. On the other hand, it could also be the case that respondents' reported rates of life satisfaction influence the way they assess the living conditions in other countries. That is, people satisfied with their life might believe that people in other countries are exposed to worse living conditions than they are in their own countries – and vice versa.

These effects might turn out to be spurious, when considering other, more proximate reference groups, the household included, and when checking for other potentially relevant factors (e.g. reported health, social isolation, socio-demographic traits of the respondents) introduced in the chapters before. [Table 5](#) summarizes the findings of this second model, each column presenting the effects of the country-specific logistic regressions. The correlations between life satisfaction and inner-European comparisons do not disappear completely after the introduction of further variables, but they are limited to very specific countries. Switzerland plays a significant role for Germans, French, Spanish and Polish respondents, Germany is relevant for Italian, Spanish and Greek citizens, and Greece is a consequential reference group for Italians and Spanish people. These effects point to the fact that countries with perceived high – respectively low – living conditions are more prone to correlate with life satisfaction of respondents. This resonates in the fact that other countries are not at all a relevant reference group for the more affluent countries, i.e. the

Table 5. Dissatisfaction with one's life (effects of country comparisons, logistic regression – Model B: with additional items).

Variables	Respondents								
	Swiss	Swedish	Germans	UK	French	Italian	Spanish	Polish	Greek
<i>Country being better off than oneself</i>									
Switzerland		1.224	1.718*	1.585	1.603*	0.942	1.549*	1.674*	1.241
Sweden	1.227		1.146	0.675	1.066	1.079	0.856	1.104	1.019
Germany	1.055	1.359		1.257	0.807	1.486*	1.839***	0.923	1.373*
UK	1.070	1.277	1.090		1.092	1.223	1.157	0.916	0.854
France	1.134	1.442	1.207	1.170		0.852	0.607**	0.878	0.978
Italy	1.392	0.972	1.101	1.130	0.929		1.260	1.524**	1.160
Spain	0.951	1.065	1.259	1.100	1.344	0.950		0.939	0.979
Poland	1.070	0.853	0.791	0.953	0.902	1.030	0.883		1.200
Greece	0.844	1.068	1.019	0.908	1.255	1.320*	1.462**	0.946	
<i>Living conditions in</i>									
Own country	0.763*	0.835	0.803	0.626***	0.639***	0.750*	0.651***	0.889	0.709***
Neighborhood	1.302	0.859	0.808	1.100	0.919	0.914	1.233	1.156	1.054
Own friends	0.734*	0.761	1.068	0.898	0.864	0.978	1.023	0.895	0.954
Household (change)	0.440***	0.702**	0.561***	0.402***	0.557***	0.546***	0.574***	0.558***	0.503***
<i>Highest level of education (ref: < secondary level)</i>									
University and above	0.754**	0.768*	0.957	1.271*	1.031	0.833	1.113	0.921	1.028
Completed secondary	0.917	0.932	1.009	1.074	0.939	0.857	1.066	0.862	1.018
<i>Perceived social class position (ref: upperclass)</i>									
Middle class	1.520*	1.385	0.700*	1.298	0.977	0.920	1.337	1.030	1.283
Lower middle class	1.566*	1.136	0.898	1.112	1.027	0.986	1.520	0.969	1.427*
Lower class	2.058***	1.450	0.954	1.015	1.277	1.065	1.508	1.258	1.562*
<i>Marital status (ref: separated/widowed)</i>									
Non-married	0.948	1.146	0.960	1.231	1.084	0.910	1.108	0.893	1.146
Married/civil union	0.838	1.094	0.814	0.967	0.966	0.815	0.821	0.805	0.953
No. of people in household	1.026	0.804	0.948	0.948	0.965	1.006	1.023	1.122	1.076
Subjective health	0.482***	0.314***	0.442***	0.291***	0.487***	0.482***	0.522***	0.534***	0.571***
Migration (1.–3. generation)	1.042	0.990	1.070	0.971	0.982	1.082	1.185	0.805	1.048
Gender (ref.: male)	0.997	0.814	0.988	0.891	0.977	1.024	0.953	1.052	1.028
Age	0.735*	0.618***	0.741**	0.657***	0.910	0.936	0.905	0.795*	1.254*
Constant	0.275***	0.217***	0.220***	0.220***	0.185***	0.142***	0.162***	0.153***	0.214***
Observations	1575	1402	1568	1458	1366	1545	1624	1445	1502
Pseudo R-squared	0.293	0.392	0.318	0.367	0.296	0.280	0.282	0.249	0.233

***Significance level at $p < .001$.**Significance level at $p < .01$.*Significance level at $p < .05$.

Swiss and Swedish respondents. Other countries are also negligible (France for Spanish respondents, Italy for the Polish), while others are insignificant altogether (Sweden, UK and Spain).

The comparison with other reference groups included into model B is particularly revealing. In first instance, we see that the assessment of living conditions in the respondents' own country is a highly significant reference point for most countries (except for Swedish, German and Polish respondents); persons who assume living conditions in their country as better are also more satisfied with their own lives and vice versa. Quite revealing is the observation that the proximate reference groups (neighbors, friends) included into the analysis do not play a role concerning reported life satisfaction. Only in Switzerland, where other countries are not a relevant reference group, the living conditions of friends play a role. This means that the assumed importance of social proximity is refuted for most countries (H3a). Hence, 'countries' might be quite abstract communities, but they are a relevant reference group. The social-structural position of the respondents is not a significant factor, even though education has a weak effect in three countries, thus refuting our hypothesis H3b. In both cases (friends and social structure) Switzerland deviates from the picture, thus suggesting that Swiss respondents are impacted more strongly by the situation of their own and their fellow citizens' position, than by other European countries' living conditions. While social inclusion, measured in terms of marital status and the household size, does not generate a significant effect, we see that subjective health perception is the strongest factor in all countries (and age in some of them), thus validating H3c only partially.

5. Discussion and conclusion

Comparing one's own life with other Europeans seems to be a normal aspect of today's thinking. This is what scholarly writing on European integration and the Europeanization of societies is arguing (Beck 2007; Beck and Grande 2010), and this is what the statistical analysis of survey data from nine European countries has proven to be the case. A more cautious conclusion needs to be drawn when asking about the implications of this 'cognitive Europeanization', namely the potential effects it has on reported life satisfaction. Inner-European comparisons do matter when reported life satisfaction is at stake, but this is true only for a couple of countries. Upward comparisons with the most affluent countries (in particular, Switzerland and Germany) are consequential for the way

respondents assess their life, and downward comparisons with the worst off country (Greece) is relevant for Southern Europeans. However, the perceived situation of the national economy and the economic situation of the household and the personal health matter much more when assessing respondents' life satisfaction across all countries. References to living conditions abroad remain an important, yet, secondary factor. The most surprising finding, however, is that countries matter much more than other, proximate reference groups, like neighbors and friends. An important exception is Swiss respondents, who seem to be overall much more inward looking. Hence, our findings corroborate a partial process of 'cognitive Europeanization' that does not, however, transcend necessarily national categories, given the importance of countries (the own residency included) as pervasive reference points.

More research is required to disentangle the factors or mechanisms mediating or moderating the effects of inner-European comparisons. Obviously, European citizens are confident in assessing living conditions abroad. But what are the implications? Proponents of Europeanization theory argue that European integration is not only providing citizens with more information about other countries, but is establishing also common norms of what an acceptable standard of living is (Heidenreich 2006b; Beck 2007; Delhey and Kohler 2008). This should boost effects of inner-European comparisons on life satisfaction. Others would contend that citizens are still cognitively tied to their countries' economic, institutional and cultural realities (Rose 1980; Frey and Stutzer 2000; Whelan and Maître 2013). The assessment of the own countries' performance would thus remain at center stage, and all inner-European comparisons would be mediated by the assessment of the nation's situation. Finally, we might expect that effects on life satisfaction will be moderated by factors such as the vulnerability of the respondents (Oswald 1997; Fahey 2007), the perceived performance of national welfare states in attenuating hardships (Böhnke 2008), or the perception of conflicts and patterns of blame attribution in the public sphere (Delhey and Dragolov 2014).

Our own findings paint a mixed picture that tends to support and disprove these assumptions at the same time. On the one hand, we have seen that inner-European comparisons matter much more than the skeptical voices claim. On the other hand, however, we see that citizens tend to compare themselves with the more affluent countries, in this case, Switzerland, which is not a member state of the EU. This means that Europe as a cultural, geographical and historical area is a much more relevant frame of

reference than the European Union. Additionally, this shows that citizens tend to confer more importance to some reference countries when compared to others. Previous research has suggested that inter-country comparisons influence life satisfaction *per se* (Delhey *et al.* 2002; Delhey and Kohler 2006). However, our analyses demonstrate that this is only the case when looking at reference countries separately. Do we check for country comparisons jointly, we see that only ‘core’ reference countries impact on life satisfaction, thus ‘neutralizing’ the effects of the others. Three observations seem pertinent when interpreting this finding, even though more research will be necessary to substantiate them. First, our data show that European citizens are quite familiar with life conditions in other European countries, but they highlight at the same time that these perceptions and assessments do not necessarily affect them personally. Differences between living conditions might be part of what is considered to be normal within Europe, particularly in times of economic crisis. In the worse sense, we might be witnessing a cognitive retraction from the idea of common standards of living within Europe. The fact that inner-European comparisons seem to be taken as a normal aspect of European citizens’ way of thinking might thus entail chances as well as risks for the further integration of Europe in economic, political and cultural terms.

Second, salience seems to be a mechanism that mediates the effects of upward or downward comparisons on life satisfaction. It is indicative that Germany and Greece are the second most relevant target countries, because these two countries have played an outstanding role in public debates about the European economic and financial crisis and its political antidotes. In this regard, we have to remember that our survey was conducted in the summer 2015,⁴ where debates centered on the degrading economic situation in Greece and the attempts of the Troika to prevent a bankruptcy of the Greek state, with the leading role of the German government. This means that inner-European comparisons are a relevant latent factor to be taken into consideration when trying to understand levels of life satisfaction. More than that, in times of crisis, it is quite probable that inner-European comparisons become a manifest driver of feelings of life dissatisfaction, and even of more confrontational forms of social discontent and political protest.

⁴The survey was conducted before migration issues took over as the most salient European topic in late summer 2015. It can be assumed that, like the Brexit-vote in the summer of 2016, issues of (inner) migration, perceived as crises, likewise affect European comparisons of living conditions.

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Appendix

Table A1. List of variables and the related survey questions

Variables	Questions and codings
<i>Dependent variable</i>	
Life satisfaction	'All things considered and using the scale on where 0 means 'Completely dissatisfied' and 10 means 'Completely satisfied', how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with your life as a whole these days?' The variable was dichotomized because we detected problems of heteroscedasticity and a non-normal distribution of cases. The dichotomization followed theoretical considerations to focus on the 'dissatisfied': responses from 0 to 4 were coded as 1 (dissatisfied), answers 5 to 10 as 0 (rather or clearly satisfied).
<i>Independent variables</i>	
Model A:	
Country being better off than oneself: country X	[living conditions in country X] – [respondent's personal current living conditions]
Living condition in country X	Still thinking about living conditions, where would you place each of the following countries compared to the [respondent's country of residence] (asked for all nine countries)
Respondent's personal current living conditions	Please place yourself on the scale where 10 means the 'Best living conditions you can imagine' and 0 means the 'Worst living conditions you can imagine' for each of the following: Your current living conditions
Model B:	
Own country	Where on this scale would you classify the living conditions in the UK? (... where 10 means 'Very good living conditions' and 0 means 'Very bad living conditions'.)
Neighborhood	Please place yourself on the scale where 10 means the 'Best living conditions you can imagine' and 0 means the 'Worst living conditions you can imagine' for each of the following: Living conditions of the people in your neighborhood
Friends	Living conditions of your friends
Household situation	'On a scale from 0 to 10 where 0 means "Much worse" and 10 means "Much better" would you say that the economic situation of your household now is better or worse than it was - 12 months ago?' - 5 years ago?' [Variable 1 + Variable 2/2] The constructed index is reliable, when considering the reliability test (alpha = 0.81)
Education	What is the highest level of education that you have completed? [Nine point scale recoded into three groups: University and above, completed secondary education, less than secondary education]
Subjective social class	People often say that they belong to the working class, the middle class, upper class and so forth. Which of the following classes do you feel that you belong to? [Seven categories recoded into four: upper class, middle class, lower middle class, lower class
Migration	Were you born in country? Thinking of your father, was he born in this country? Thinking of your mother, was she born in this country? [migration = yes if respondent or father or mother = yes]
Household size	How many people (including children) currently live in your household?
Marital status	Which one of the following best describes your legal marital status now?
Health	How would you describe the state of your health these days? Place your views on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means 'Extremely poor health' and 10 means 'Extremely good health'
Gender	Are you male or female?
Age	What is your age?

Table A2. Comparison with living conditions abroad (frequencies for all respondents): living conditions in [country] are X points better than the personal ones.

	Switzerland	Sweden	Germany	UK	France	Italy	Spain	Poland	Greece
-10 points worse	1	2	3	3	6	6	9	15	73
-9	1	0	1	0	3	12	10	31	139
-8	2	5	5	6	11	37	36	62	421
-7	6	7	14	24	15	104	103	163	861
-6	8	13	21	46	68	241	245	430	1448
-5	21	20	63	122	157	537	536	904	2227
-4	50	57	127	274	315	968	1043	1423	2330
-3	105	159	256	569	631	1550	1642	2002	2177
-2	259	360	586	1092	1190	2208	2155	2221	1786
-1	592	771	1208	1663	1995	2325	2402	2146	1229
0 (the same)	1650	2029	2510	2573	2987	2426	2385	1885	1111
1	2152	2395	2395	2167	2316	1502	1562	1063	529
2	2507	2383	2188	1808	1688	1040	1007	663	276
3	2186	2077	1786	1500	1193	674	616	422	127
4	1631	1494	1232	1056	838	372	384	246	71
5	1448	1230	1023	817	561	273	240	158	60
6	815	698	571	468	312	131	121	48	21
7	578	474	395	323	191	64	85	58	19
8	332	266	237	183	133	33	41	20	11
9	168	135	124	88	41	12	7	10	8
10 points better	206	158	155	109	54	20	17	16	8
Total	14,718	14,733	14,900	14,891	14,705	14,535	14,646	13,986	14,932