

Inequality in Education and Happiness: Explaining the Heterogeneous Link between Higher Education and Life Satisfaction in East Asia and Beyond

Recent research shows that the socio-economic return to education is unequally distributed. Nonetheless, we know little about the heterogeneous effect of higher education on happiness, the “ultimate goal of human life”. One may assume from the positive selection perspective that socio-economically advantaged individuals leverage their degree to realize favorable psychological well-being, whereas the disadvantaged fail to enjoy such outcomes despite their equally high educational attainment. In contrast, should negative selection be at work, individuals with the least likelihood of college completion gain most from education. Examining this potentially heterogeneous structure is of particular importance to East Asian societies, where averagely low subjective well-being is reported despite their high educational achievement. In this paper, using the large-scale World Values Survey data, I conduct propensity score (PS) matching analyses to reveal (1) how the happiness return to education varies across PS strata and its specific components in East Asia and other regions, and (2) how such a heterogeneous/homogeneous education-happiness relationship differs across countries/regions. Implications and directions for future research are also discussed.