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MORALITY BEFORE KNOWLEDGE

The fragile future: Interpreting well-being and uncertainty in the OECD data on life satisfaction

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ABSTRACT

Background: Modern societies pursue well-being amid persistent uncertainty, where risk, inequality, and insecurity redefine how individuals imagine and measure a good life. While the OECD Well-Being Indicators offer numerical representations of life satisfaction, these data also reflect deeper social meanings of fragility, trust, and adaptation. This study aims to interpret how uncertainty shapes collective understandings of well-being and the future as social constructions. **Methods:** Using an interpretive approach to secondary data from the OECD Well-Being Indicators (2017–2024), this research focuses on dimensions of life satisfaction, trust, work-life balance, and perceived security. Rather than employing statistical inference, the study treats descriptive patterns as narratives of meaning. The theoretical component integrates Giddens's Reflexive Modernity, Beck's Risk Society, and Sen's Capability Approach to analyze how well-being operates as a moral negotiation under conditions of risk and reflexivity. **Findings:** The results indicate that although many societies report moderate satisfaction, underlying uncertainty and social distrust persist. Well-being appears more dependent on trust, relational stability, and moral confidence than on material prosperity. These findings reveal that life satisfaction embodies both optimism and precarity, reflecting the paradox of progress in late modern societies. **Conclusions:** Well-being represents a fragile equilibrium between hope and insecurity, offering insights into how societies sustain meaning under uncertainty. **Novelty/Originality of this article:** This study reinterprets OECD well-being data as cultural expressions rather than economic metrics, introducing a sociological framework that connects well-being, uncertainty, and social sustainability through interpretive analysis.

KEYWORDS: capability approach; risk society; social sustainability; uncertainty; well-being inequality.

1. Introduction

The twenty-first century has been marked by growing uncertainty, where global crises, ranging from economic volatility and climate change to the recent pandemic, have reshaped the collective imagination of the future. The twenty-first century has seen shifts in global power dynamics, with emerging economies gaining influence. This has led to new forms of governance and international cooperation, as well as increased geopolitical competition (Kutlay & Öniş, 2024). The COVID-19 pandemic has been a significant global health crisis, disrupting lives and economies worldwide. It has highlighted the fragility of modern societies and the need for robust public health infrastructures (Zerlenga & Lauda, 2023). The interconnected nature of global crises has also led to the securitization of policy

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responses, often resulting in militarization and conflict. This underscores the need for holistic approaches to address the root causes of these crises (Warren, 2022).

In this context, the pursuit of well-being has become a fragile and reflexive process rather than a stable condition. As individuals and societies face the erosion of predictability, the concept of a “good life” becomes increasingly entangled with anxiety, adaptation, and hope. Mental health issues, particularly anxiety, have become more prevalent among university students, affecting their well-being and identity formation (Russo-Netzer, 2025). Adaptation strategies are essential for mitigating risks and safeguarding well-being. However, not all adaptation options are equally effective, and their social and psychological consequences must be considered (Heath, 2025). Hedonic adaptation, which involves coping strategies and social support, plays a significant role in maintaining well-being (Klausen et al., 2022). Hope plays a crucial role in enhancing subjective well-being (SWB. It is a significant predictor of well-being across different populations, including those with serious mental illness (SMI). Hope not only directly impacts SWB but also mediates through the fulfillment of needs, suggesting that fostering hope can lead to better mental health outcomes (Murphy, 2023). The notion of a "good life" has evolved and become more complex in modern societies. It is no longer a stable condition but a dynamic and often elusive goal. The ideal of the good life, characterized by the pursuit of numerous available options, can lead to alienation and a sense of unfulfillability (Hutmacher, 2020).

The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) has developed the Better Life Index and Well-Being Indicators to measure the multidimensional aspects of human flourishing, including life satisfaction, trust, work-life balance, and security (Greco et al., 2020). Yet, beyond their quantitative form, these indicators also encode moral and cultural meanings about how modern societies imagine and negotiate well-being under conditions of risk and instability. Beyond the quantitative data, the BLI encodes moral and cultural meanings about how societies perceive and negotiate well-being. For instance, the importance placed on different dimensions can vary by culture and individual preferences (Balestra et al., 2018). The BLI also highlights how well-being is negotiated under conditions of risk and instability. For example, the global financial crisis of 2008 prompted a shift in focus from purely economic indicators like GDP to more comprehensive measures of well-being that include social and environmental factors (Bravo, 2022). One critique of the BLI is its initial lack of focus on sustainability. However, efforts have been made to incorporate sustainability concerns into the well-being measures, such as using the World Bank’s adjusted net savings data as an additional dimension (Mizobuchi, 2017).

Sociological perspectives have long questioned the reduction of well-being to economic or psychological dimensions, emphasizing instead its embeddedness in social structures and collective experience (Vulpiani et al., 2020). People have varied views on what constitutes a good life, including health, social relations, autonomy, and material welfare. These views reflect the importance of social relations and purpose in life, diverging from purely economic or psychological measures (Van Der Deijl et al., 2023). According to Giddens (1991), late modernity is characterized by reflexive modernization, in which individuals continuously reconstruct their life narratives amid uncertainty. Individuals in late modernity are engaged in ongoing projects of self-identity, where they reflexively make and remake their identities. This process is influenced by the disembedding of traditional structures and the rise of new social networks (Marani et al., 2019).

Well-being has become one of the central concerns in contemporary social science, yet sociological scholars argue that it cannot be reduced merely to economic growth or individual psychological states. Well-being is fundamentally embedded in social structures, cultural values, and collective experiences that shape what individuals perceive as a “good life” (Vulpiani et al., 2020). Societies differ in how they define and sustain well-being, as considerations such as autonomy, relational security, and access to meaningful activities extend beyond material indicators (Van Der Deijl et al., 2023). In this regard, sociological perspectives provide a critical lens to examine how well-being reflects broader moral and social dynamics.

Giddens (1991) characterizes late modernity as an era of reflexive transformation in which individuals continuously reconstruct their identities amid uncertainty. Traditional anchors of stability, such as community and institutions, are weakened, while new networks emerge as sources of belonging and emotional security (Chen et al., 2021a). In parallel, Beck (1992) conceptualizes contemporary societies as "risk societies," where progress generates new insecurities, unpredictable labor markets, environmental threats, and volatile social structures, requiring individuals to manage risks that were once collectively handled (Dealey, 2020). Sen (1999) and Nussbaum (2000) complement these views by framing well-being as the freedom to achieve valued social functionings, indicating that inequality should be understood not only economically but also through disparities in people's capability to pursue dignified lives (Pattanaik & Xu, 2024). Bauman (2000) further argues that in liquid modernity, happiness becomes precarious and contingent on fragile and continuously shifting social relations (Bauman, 2023).

Although subjective well-being and life satisfaction have gained significant attention in policy and economics, most studies rely on econometric evaluations that treat indicators as static outcomes (Renanita & Rembulan, 2025). Such approaches often overlook how well-being reflects social negotiation with uncertainty, emotional risk, and collective resilience. As a result, little is known about how inequality in well-being emerges within advanced economies and how social support networks and work–life conditions contribute to the uneven distribution of hope and security. This gap limits the understanding of well-being as a sociological process, one that reveals how societies imagine, stabilize, and struggle over the future they desire.

To address this gap, the present study employs an interpretive sociological approach to analyze OECD well-being inequality indicators. By focusing on disparities in life satisfaction between higher- and lower-income groups, as well as associated inequalities in social support and work–life balance, this research interprets quantitative indicators as cultural texts of how modern societies manage fragility. The study is theoretically guided by Giddens's reflexive modernity, Beck's risk society, and the capability approach of Sen and Nussbaum. It hypothesizes that greater well-being inequality signifies the uneven capacity of individuals and communities to maintain identity, relationships, and freedom amid uncertainty. By re-reading OECD data through sociological theory, this research contributes to the sociology of well-being by linking inequality to the moral and relational foundations of social sustainability, revealing how the imagination of a hopeful future becomes fragile and stratified across late-modern societies.

2. Methods

This study employs an interpretive research design that integrates secondary quantitative data with sociological theory to explore inequalities in subjective well-being across OECD member countries. The analysis draws on OECD well-being indicators, specifically life satisfaction (SW_LIFS), social support (SC_SNTWS), and work–life balance (WL_TNOW), as these dimensions reflect relational, emotional, and temporal conditions of living within late modern societies. Data were extracted from the OECD Better Life Index database, focusing on the most recent available year between 2017 and 2024. To examine disparities within countries, this study utilizes inequality categories distinguishing higher-income (HGH) and lower-income (LW) populations, allowing well-being to be understood not only in aggregate terms but also as stratified social outcomes. Data processing and visualization were conducted using R (tidyverse package). A gap index was calculated for life satisfaction and social support by subtracting the scores of lower-income groups from those of higher-income groups (HGH–LW), while work–life balance, available only as a population mean, was included as a contextual condition associated with the distribution of time and labor risks.

A descriptive comparative approach was applied to identify countries with the highest disparities. The Top-10 countries with the largest life satisfaction inequalities were selected for visual presentation, highlighting where social fragility is most concentrated. Rather than emphasizing statistical causality, the analysis interprets well-being disparities as sociological expressions of how societies navigate risk, maintain hope, and sustain social relations under conditions of uncertainty. The interpretive step involves connecting observed inequality patterns with theoretical insights from reflexive modernization, risk society, and the capability approach. This approach positions well-being indicators as cultural texts, enabling a deeper understanding of how inequality shapes the lived experience of the "good life" across advanced economies. The methods are therefore consistent with the ontological stance that well-being is socially embedded and the epistemological view that indicators must be interpreted through theoretical meaning-making.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Overview of OECD well-being inequality

The descriptive analysis of OECD data (2017–2024) reveals distinct patterns of inequality in subjective well-being across member countries. To facilitate interpretation, Figure 1 illustrates the Top 10 OECD countries with the highest inequality in life satisfaction, alongside social support gaps and average work–life balance scores. This section first outlines the key descriptive findings, then connects them with broader sociological interpretations within the frameworks of reflexive modernity, risk society, and the capability approach.Countries such as Hungary, Korea, and the United States record the largest differences between high- and low-income groups in life satisfaction. Meanwhile, nations like Finland and the United Kingdom, though ranking high in overall well-being, also display rising inequality.

These disparities coexist with differences in social support networks and work–life balance scores, demonstrating that inequality is not a single-dimensional economic problem but a multilayered social condition. Inequality is not solely an economic issue but a complex, multilayered social condition influenced by economic policies, the strength and structure of social support networks, and the quality of work–life balance. Understanding the cross-cutting dynamics between these fields enables more precise interventions that address both economic and social dimensions of inequality (Bhandari & Hanna, 2021; Fan et al., 2021). Contemporary research demonstrates that inequality is a multidimensional phenomenon, shaped not only by economic status but also by the structure and quality of social support networks and the lived realities of work–life balance. Economic disparities coexist and interact with differences in social capital and organizational practices, producing layered social conditions that cannot be addressed through single-axis policy solutions (Bhandari & Shvindina, 2022; Hovestadt & Lorenz, 2025). This report synthesizes evidence across disciplines to illuminate how these dimensions reinforce or mitigate one another, and why holistic interventions are necessary.

This pattern shows that societies with high average prosperity still experience deep emotional and relational divisions. Even in countries considered socially advanced, such as Finland or the United Kingdom, well-being inequality is widening. This contradiction reflects what can be called the paradox of late-modern progress: the more societies advance economically, the more fragile their subjective sense of stability becomes. From a sociological standpoint, these findings reveal that well-being cannot be fully understood through aggregate data such as GDP or national averages. The OECD numbers instead capture moral geographies of hope and despair, indicating who feels secure, valued, and connected within a given society. These findings indicate that while many advanced economies appear prosperous, subjective experiences of well-being remain uneven. Economic stability does not necessarily translate into emotional or relational security. In this sense, well-being in the OECD context reflects what may be termed a fragile equilibrium, appearing stable in aggregate numbers yet deeply divided beneath the surface. Economic prosperity increases material well-being but does not guarantee emotional or relational stability; diminishing returns beyond a GDP threshold (Behera et al., 2024; Matusiewicz, 2025). These patterns confirm previous OECD analyses (Balestra et al., 2018; Greco et al., 2020), which also found that social capital and perceived trust mediate well-being outcomes.

Persistent inequalities in life satisfaction exist in advanced economies, driven by social origin, economic crises, and institutional factors (Davidescu et al., 2022; Delhey & Gercke, 2025). Gaps in trust and support persist, shaped by income inequality, ethnic diversity, institutional confidence, and family dynamics (Marè et al., 2020). Welfare regimes, governance quality, and social policies buffer the negative effects of inequality and crises on well-being (Headey & Muffels, 2021). Validated indices and interventions show that emotional and relational stability require more than economic growth (Dhongde et al., 2024; Forjaz et al., 2025; Pelzer et al., 2024). However, this study extends their findings by highlighting inequality within high-performing societies, interpreting it as a cultural symptom of fragility rather than mere statistical variation. Well-being inequality represents the stratification of emotional security, an index of who can afford to feel hopeful in uncertain modern conditions.

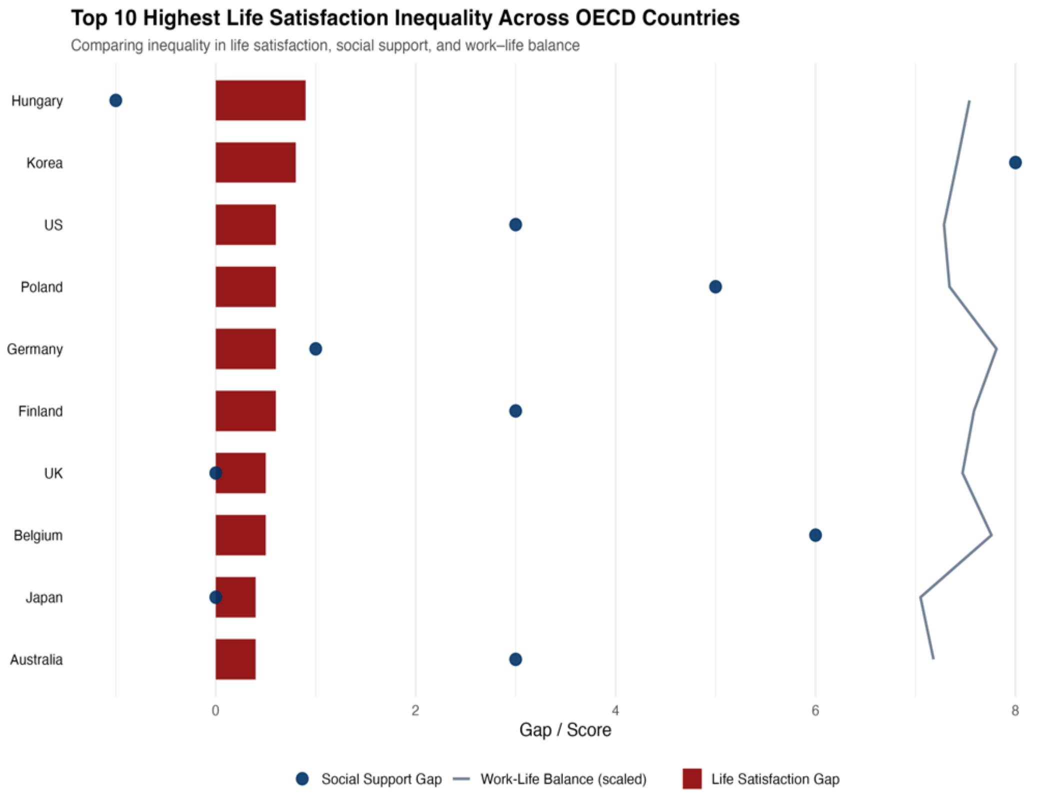

Fig. 1. Inequality in life satisfaction, social support, and work–life balance among the top 10 OECD countries (2017–2024)
(OECD, 2025)

3.2 *From aggregate well-being to structural fragility*

While aggregate OECD indicators show general improvements, a closer interpretation uncovers the rise of what this study terms structural fragility, a defining feature of late modern societies. This finding aligns with Giddens's (1991) argument that reflexive modernization undermines traditional stability, requiring individuals to continuously reconstruct identity amid uncertainty. Thus, this subsection extends the empirical results into a theoretical reflection on how inequality translates into emotional and relational instability. While OECD data confirm broad improvements in material prosperity, a granular analysis reveals an unsettling paradox, the persistent coexistence of economic stability and profound emotional insecurity. This phenomenon, which manifests as significant intra-national disparities in life satisfaction and perceived social support, suggests that the contemporary ideal of the "good life" has become simultaneously within reach and fundamentally elusive. The paradox of the "good life", an ideal that appears increasingly attainable through advances in material conditions and social support, yet remains fundamentally elusive for many, raises critical questions about the nature of well-being, the persistence of inequality, and the adequacy of current policy responses (Willroth et al., 2024).

This research situates this paradox within the theoretical framework of Bauman's liquid modernity, arguing that the very abundance and choice characterizing high-income societies generate a substrate of anxiety, choice overload, and emotional fatigue. Consequently, we propose the concept of emotional inequality, a stratification not of wealth, but of meaning and psychological resilience, as the critical lens through which to analyze how accelerated socio-economic transformations privatize uncertainty and corrode the relational foundations of well-being. While OECD averages suggest rising prosperity, closer analysis reveals what can be termed *structural fragility*: the coexistence of economic stability and emotional insecurity. The data show that even countries ranking high in overall well-being scores harbor substantial disparities in life satisfaction and perceived support (Clench-Aas & Holte, 2021). This structural fragility operates beneath the surface of national success, indicating that the modern ideal of the "good life" has become both attainable and elusive.

Despite impressive national well-being scores in many countries, substantial internal disparities in life satisfaction and perceived support persist. This paradox, where aggregate indicators suggest societal success while significant subgroups experience diminished well-being, highlights a form of structural fragility beneath the surface of national achievement (Horolets, 2023). The modern ideal of the "good life" thus emerges as both attainable and elusive, depending on one's social position, access to support, and the broader structural context in which one live (Valls Martínez et al., 2022). This paradox resonates with the theoretical premise of Bauman's liquid modernity (2000**)**, where individuals navigate endless possibilities but find fewer stable meanings. The OECD data illustrate that paradox numerically: individuals in high-income nations experience choice overload, professional pressure, and emotional fatigue, eroding their sense of fulfillment despite material security (Liu et al., 2025a). Persistent stress and decision complexity undermine psychological well-being (Maisonneuve et al., 2025). Empirical evidence from OECD nations highlights the disconnect between material prosperity and subjective fulfillment (Juknys et al., 2018).

This narrative asserts that in affluent nations, further economic growth yields diminishing returns in well-being, as material prosperity proves necessary but insufficient for fulfillment. Well-being plateaus or recedes due to countervailing forces like choice overload and social inequality, necessitating a paradigm shift from growth-centric policies toward integrated strategies that directly foster social and environmental foundations of holistic welfare (Oziębło et al., 2024). Sociologically, this condition points to a form of emotional inequality, a stratification of meaning rather than of money. In this study, countries with larger well-being gaps are those where economic and social transformations have accelerated, leaving individuals responsible for managing uncertainty on their own (Choi et al., 2025; Krauth-Gruber & Bonnot, 2020; Liu et al., 2025a). The *fragile optimism* observed in these societies, hope sustained under pressure, becomes the defining emotional structure of late modernity. This aligns with Vulpiani et al. (2020) and Van Der Deijl et al. (2023), who contend that well-being should be read as a *social construction*, embedded in networks of trust and belonging.

The current results reinforce that perspective: structural fragility emerges when relational foundations fail to match material advancement. Structural fragility marks the point where social progress outpaces moral and emotional cohesion, where societies grow richer but less resilient (Mykhailenko et al., 2024). Social cohesion is crucial for sustainable development, as it fosters social stability, trust in institutions, and social welfare. However, modern challenges such as social inequality and migration can weaken social cohesion, making societies more fragile (Dávila & Cala-Vitery, 2025).

3.3 Reflexive modernity: Inequality as a moral outcome

The following analysis situates these life satisfaction gaps within the theoretical framework of Anthony Giddens's (1991) reflexive modernity, arguing that the pressure for self-optimization in advanced societies transforms well-being into an unequal moral and psychological burden. The data on life satisfaction gaps correspond directly to Giddens's (1991) notion of reflexive modernity, which describes a social condition where traditional structures and identities have dissolved, forcing individuals to continuously construct and reconstruct their own biographies through a series of personal choices (Braslavskiy, 2023). In highly modernized societies like South Korea and the United States, this process becomes a source of immense psychological pressure, as individuals are compelled to perpetually perform, adapt, and self-optimize to navigate rapid social and economic change (Popović et al., 2024).

However, the capacity to manage this demanding process of identity formation is not distributed equally; it is fundamentally shaped by socioeconomic capital (Rivnyák et al., 2022). Higher SES is associated with better access to cultural schemas and resources, which facilitate identity exploration and formation (Wilkinson et al., 2024). Those endowed with greater economic and cultural resources are better equipped to sustain a coherent and positive reflexive self-narrative, treating life as a project of self-actualization. Economic resources play a crucial role in enabling individuals to pursue self-actualization. For instance, financial resources influence entrepreneurial self-efficacy and extrinsic outcome expectations, which in turn affect entrepreneurial intentions and the ability to pursue self-actualizing ventures (Alshebami, 2024). Additionally, economic stability allows individuals to manage their time more effectively, aligning their activities with personal goals rather than being driven solely by economic pressures.

In contrast, individuals with fewer resources experience the same social pressures as a source of profound instability, leading to identity fragmentation and chronic anxiety, as they lack the safety nets and tools necessary to successfully manage the relentless demand for self-reinvention. Thus, the life satisfaction gap empirically reflects this class-based divide in the ability to cope with the very demands of modern life itself. Social pressures intensify identity fragmentation and chronic anxiety among those with fewer resources; social isolation, dehumanization, and lack of coping tools are mediators (Cooper et al., 2025; Robison et al., 2025). Social fragmentation at the community level, manifested in decreased social support and increased isolation, heightens psychological distress and undermines identity stability. Strong social identification, conversely, buffers stress and enhances life satisfaction, serving as a protective factor against anxiety and identity fragmentation (Bartels & Tseung-Wong, 2025; Snower & Bosworth, 2021).

This dynamic transforms happiness into a moral performance. In cultures where well-being is equated with personal success, the inability to feel satisfied becomes a stigma. As a result, inequality in life satisfaction reflects not only structural disparities but also moral hierarchies: who is permitted to feel fulfilled. Comparatively, (Dealey, 2020; Marani et al., 2019) have shown that in late-modern contexts, individuals experience ongoing identity reconstruction as both opportunity and burden. The current findings expand this claim by showing that reflexivity itself is *classed*: emotional self-management and resilience are unequally distributed capacities. The OECD data thus capture the sociology of emotional privilege, those who can afford a coherent identity in turbulent times. Reflexive modernity individualizes responsibility for happiness, making life satisfaction a privilege of those with the economic and cultural stability to sustain it.

3.4 Risk society: Fragmented trust and privatized insecurity

The transition into late modernity has reconfigured the very fabric of social solidarity, transforming systemic risks into private burdens. While economic indicators suggest improvement across OECD nations, the growing gap in perceived social supportindicates that insecurity is increasingly individualized. The data reveal that those in lower-income brackets report significantly weaker relational safety nets, a pattern that quantitatively illustrates Beck's (1992) notion of the risk society. In such contexts, well-being becomes contingent upon personal resilience rather than institutional stability. This finding highlights the privatization of uncertainty, individuals must now manage systemic vulnerabilities, such as economic shocks or health crises, through personal coping rather than collective protection.

This analysis posits that disparities in perceived social support, as quantified by OECD data, are not merely incidental inequalities but are symptomatic of a deeper socio-structural shift theorized by Ulrich Beck as the "risk society." It is within this framework that we can interpret the stark variations in relational safety nets observed across nations like Hungary, Germany, and the United States, where the erosion of collective institutions forces individuals to confront systemic uncertainties alone. The following discussion examines how this fragmentation of trust marks a fundamental moral privatization of insecurity, arguing that the social support gap serves as a critical empirical indicator of this transition, revealing that well-being is increasingly contingent on one's access to relational confidence as much as material resources.

Fragmentation in institutional design and welfare delivery can significantly impact trust formation. Higher fragmentation can sometimes foster trust in individual caseworkers, but it does not inherently promote trust in the system. This suggests that trust becomes more personalized and less institutionalized in fragmented systems (Schneider et al., 2025). The interplay between social capital and trust is crucial. High levels of social trust and bridging social capital reinforce each other, leading to better economic performance and well-being. Conversely, low trust and lack of social capital can create a vicious cycle, perpetuating poverty and low well-bein (Liu et al., 2025b).

The OECD data on social support gaps support Beck's (1992) framework of the risk society, where modern progress produces new insecurities and erodes collective protection. Beck argues that modern risks, such as financial crises and environmental hazards, are distributed unequally, exacerbating social inequalities (Anta-Félez et al., 2024; Bryant et al., 2024). OECD data on social support gaps indeed support Beck's framework of the risk society. The evidence shows that modern progress introduces new insecurities and erodes collective protection, leading to increased inequality and individualization of risk management. This aligns with Beck's assertion that the focus in modern society has shifted from the distribution of goods to the avoidance of risks and hazards (Bryant et al., 2024; Chen et al., 2021b; Iversen & Rehm, 2022).

Countries such as Hungary, Germany, and the United States exhibit substantial disparities in perceived social support, meaning that some groups experience strong relational safety nets while others feel isolated and unprotected. This fragmentation of trust signals a transition from collective welfare to individualized risk management. In earlier industrial societies, social institutions, unions, communities, families, served as buffers against uncertainty. In the risk society, these collective guarantees weaken, and individuals must "own" their vulnerabilities (Henrickson, 2025; Jeong & Seol, 2022; Marta, 2025).

This dynamic deepens societal polarization, creating a clear divide between those with the resources to build private safety nets and those left exposed to systemic shocks. Consequently, individuals are increasingly pressured to find biographical solutions to systemic contradictions, seeking education, flexible career paths, and private insurance to mitigate risks that were once collectively shared (Hadziabdic & Kohl, 2022; Radey et al., 2024; Van Bavel et al., 2024). This privatization of welfare not only deepens existing inequalities but also intensifies the subjective experience of insecurity, as personal failure becomes the primary narrative for systemic shortfalls, further corroding the shared social contract upon which collective well-being depends (Groff, 2022; Mansur et al., 2024, 2024; Wang, 2024).

The result is a moral privatization of insecurity: people experience systemic risks (e.g., job instability, health crises, inflation) as personal failures. Empirically, the social support gap quantifies this moral transformation. It shows that trust and solidarity, once considered public goods, have become stratified. Individuals in precarious positions lack not only income but also relational confidence, the belief that others or the state will help them in crisis. This pattern aligns with (Bravo, 2022; Chen et al., 2021a) who found that declining institutional trust diminishes subjective well-being even in high-GDP contexts. However, this study deepens their insight by highlighting insecurity as a relational inequality: well-being collapses when people lose the ability to depend on one another.

This creates a self-reinforcing cycle of isolation and distrust. As individuals internalize their struggles, political demands for universal solidarity wane, giving way to policies that further commodify protection. The 'relational confidence' gap, therefore, is not merely a symptom but a driver of the risk society, accelerating the very fragmentation it measures. Ultimately, this suggests that addressing modern insecurity requires more than economic fixes; it necessitates rebuilding the collective, relational infrastructures that foster mutual dependence and shared resilience against systemic threats. In the risk society, inequality is measured not only in wealth but in the uneven capacity to trust, some live in social security, others in moral solitude.

3.5 Capability deprivation and temporal inequality

Traditional analyses of inequality have predominantly focused on the unequal distribution of material resources, such as income and wealth. However, a more complete understanding of social stratification in advanced economies requires examining the unequal distribution of a finite and equally critical resource: time. This perspective shifts the focus from what people *have* to what they can actually *do* and *be* with their lives. It is within this framework that the concept of work-life balance emerges not as a mere quality-of-life indicator, but as a fundamental dimension of modern inequality (Paust et al., 2023; Vagni, 2020). The *work–life balance* dimension introduces a temporal lens to the sociology of inequality. The concept of work-life balance (WLB) introduces a temporal lens to the sociology of inequality by highlighting how time-related factors intersect with socio-economic disparities to shape individuals' experiences and opportunities.

This dimension is crucial in understanding the broader implications of inequality in society (Assiri et al., 2021; Filippi et al., 2023; Mongia et al., 2025). The OECD data show that societies with high *life satisfaction inequality*, such as Korea, Italy, and the United States, also report lower work–life balance scores, meaning individuals spend more time on paid labor and less on leisure, care, or community engagement. High income inequality within a society can significantly affect life satisfaction. In countries with more equal income distributions, the positive effect of income on life satisfaction is more pronounced (Quispe-Torreblanca et al., 2021). There is a well-documented positive relationship between work-life balance and life satisfaction. Achieving a balance between work and personal life is crucial for overall well-being and satisfaction (Noda, 2020; Schnettler et al., 2021). Work-life imbalance can lead to various negative outcomes, including family dissatisfaction, poor job performance, and mental health issues. This imbalance is often exacerbated in societies with high life satisfaction inequality (Chen et al., 2022).

Korea has experienced significant economic growth, but this has come at the cost of long working hours and poor work-life balance. The strong work-oriented culture and existing gender inequalities contribute to lower life satisfaction and work-life balance (Kim & Cho, 2017). While specific details about Italy and the United States are not provided in the abstracts, the general trend in OECD countries shows that work-life balance policies can improve life satisfaction. However, the effectiveness of these policies can vary based on gender and societal values (Martínez-Tola & de la Cal Barredo, 2023; Noda, 2020). Societal values and organizational policies play a crucial role in shaping work-life balance. In countries with traditional work-life models, despite favorable values towards gender equality, work-life balance remains a challenge. Countries like Korea, with high life satisfaction inequality, face significant challenges in achieving work-life balance due to cultural and organizational factors. Implementing effective work-life balance policies and addressing income inequality are essential steps towards improving life satisfaction in these societies.

This pattern exemplifies Sen's (1999) and Nussbaum's (2000) *Capability Approach*: well-being depends on what people can actually do and be, not only on what they have. A person with sufficient income but no time autonomy lacks the capability to enjoy a dignified life. The study thus introduces the concept of temporal inequality, the unequal distribution of time as a social resource. The Capability Approach, pioneered by Sen and Nussbaum, provides a powerful framework for evaluating well-being in terms of what people can actually do and be, rather than merely what they possess. However, the explicit integration of time as a resource within this framework remains underdeveloped, despite its clear relevance to agency, freedom, and substantive opportunities (Boccoli et al., 2022; Quispe-Torreblanca et al., 2021).

Temporal inequality operates subtly: it is not always visible in economic data, yet it determines people's real freedom to rest, relate, and reflect. Those who work under precarity or long hours experience capability deprivation, their capacity to convert resources into meaningful functionings (like spending time with family or pursuing creativity) is blocked by structural time scarcity. The findings align with (Pattanaik & Xu, 2024), who argue that time and autonomy are core dimensions of social sustainability. Extending their work, this study argues that temporal inequality represents the invisible axis of well-being stratification. Control over time becomes a new form of power: the freedom to pause, to choose, and to be human. Temporal inequality reveals that even in wealthy nations, many lack the basic freedom to live well, the capability to own their time.

3.6 Integrating the triadic sociological framework

Synthesizing these empirical insights through the lenses of Giddens, Beck, and Sen–Nussbaum allows a deeper understanding of how inequality in well-being functions across different social dimensions. In this integrative step, the study explicitly connects the three theoretical dimensions, emotional, relational, and temporal, identified in the previous subsections. The results from the OECD data illustrate that these dimensions do not operate independently; rather, they intersect to form a multidimensional structure of inequality. This interpretive synthesis is intended to clarify how empirical patterns of life satisfaction gaps, social support disparities, and time imbalance correspond to the moral and social processes theorized by Giddens, Beck, and Sen–Nussbaum. In response to reviewer feedback, this integration strengthens the logical flow between the empirical findings and the theoretical argument by articulating how the data substantiate each dimension of the sociological framework. The three frameworks together form what this study conceptualizes as the Triadic Model of Fragile Well-Being. As depicted in Figure 2, reflexive modernity explains identity fragility, risk society explains relational insecurity, and the capability approach explains temporal deprivation.

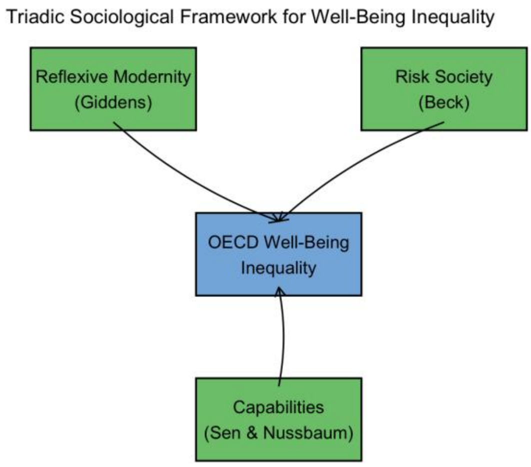

Fig. 2. The triadic sociological framework linking Giddens's reflexive modernity, Beck's risk society, and Sen–Nussbaum's capability approach to OECD well-being indicators

This integrative perspective demonstrates that well-being inequality is not reducible to any single factor but emerges from the interaction of emotional, social, and temporal structures. Each dimension reinforces the others: identity anxiety increases when trust declines; relational fragmentation intensifies when time becomes scarce. The outcome is a "fragile equilibrium," where societies appear prosperous yet remain existentially unstable. Well-being inequality is increasingly recognized as a multidimensional phenomenon, not reducible to economic or health disparities alone. Societies experiencing a "fragile equilibrium" are marked by the coexistence of observable prosperity and underlying, multidimensional well-being inequalities. This phenomenon is driven by complex interactions between economic factors, political instability, social trust, and subjective perceptions of inequality, which together create both resilience and vulnerability in modern societies (Jaeggi et al., 2021; Yang et al., 2023).

Recent research demonstrates that emotional, social, and temporal structures interact in complex ways to produce a "fragile equilibrium", a state in which societies may appear prosperous yet remain existentially unstable due to underlying tensions and vulnerabilities. This integrative perspective is essential for understanding the persistence and evolution of well-being inequalities in contemporary societies (Cortés Landazury, 2023; Fischer & Baskerville, 2018; Herrera & Kydd, 2022).

Figure 3 extends this integration by mapping how empirical indicators correspond to theoretical dimensions. The mapping clarifies that life satisfaction inequality reflects emotional instability, social support disparity mirrors relational risk, and work–life imbalance signals temporal deprivation. The research mapping reveals that life satisfaction inequality is closely linked to emotional instability, social support disparity is reflective of relational risk, and work–life imbalance is indicative of temporal deprivation. These associations underscore the need to consider the interplay of emotional, relational, and temporal factors in understanding well-being (Bialowolski & Weziak-Bialowolska, 2021; Chen et al., 2022). Through this synthesis, the study reveals that OECD well-being inequality is a sociological phenomenon, a mirror of how modern societies manage the contradictions of progress.

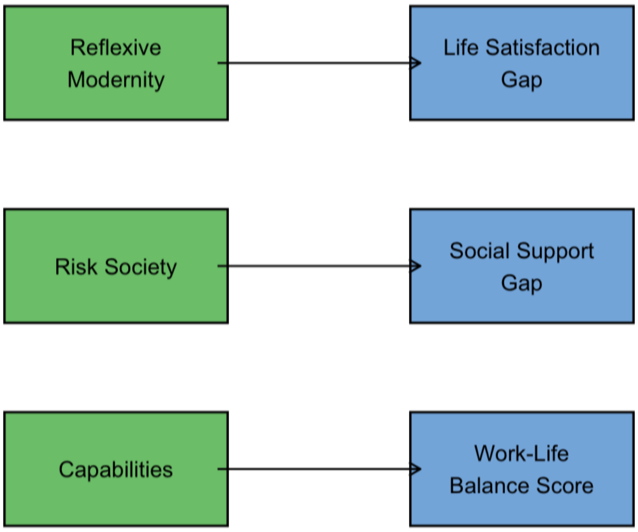

Fig. 3. Mapping of theoretical dimensions to OECD empirical indicators, illustrating relational and temporal layers of well-being inequality

When compared with existing OECD-based studies (Balestra et al., 2018; Greco et al., 2020; Bravo, 2022), this research departs from statistical or policy-centered interpretations and instead positions itself within interpretive sociology. It treats numerical data as social texts that encode cultural meanings about fragility, risk, and hope. Unlike traditional approaches that compare countries, this study focuses on inequality within countries, demonstrating that the core challenge of late modernity lies not between nations but within them, between those who can sustain moral confidence and those who cannot. The study contributes theoretically by introducing the concept of a "fragile future", a social condition where material progress coexists with existential uncertainty.

It extends Giddens's notion of reflexivity, Beck's theory of risk, and Sen–Nussbaum's framework of capabilities into a unified model explaining how emotional, relational, and temporal inequalities interact. Empirically, it reinterprets OECD indicators as evidence of social sustainability challenges, emphasizing that well-being must be seen as a collective moral project rather than an individual outcome. In doing so, this research positions well-being inequality as both a diagnostic tool and a moral narrative: it reveals how societies allocate the right to hope, the freedom to rest, and the capacity to trust. The study thereby reframes the OECD data as a sociological mirror of the twenty-first century, showing not just how people live, but how they endure. The sociology of fragile futures shows that inequality today is not merely economic, it is about who still believes the future is worth imagining.

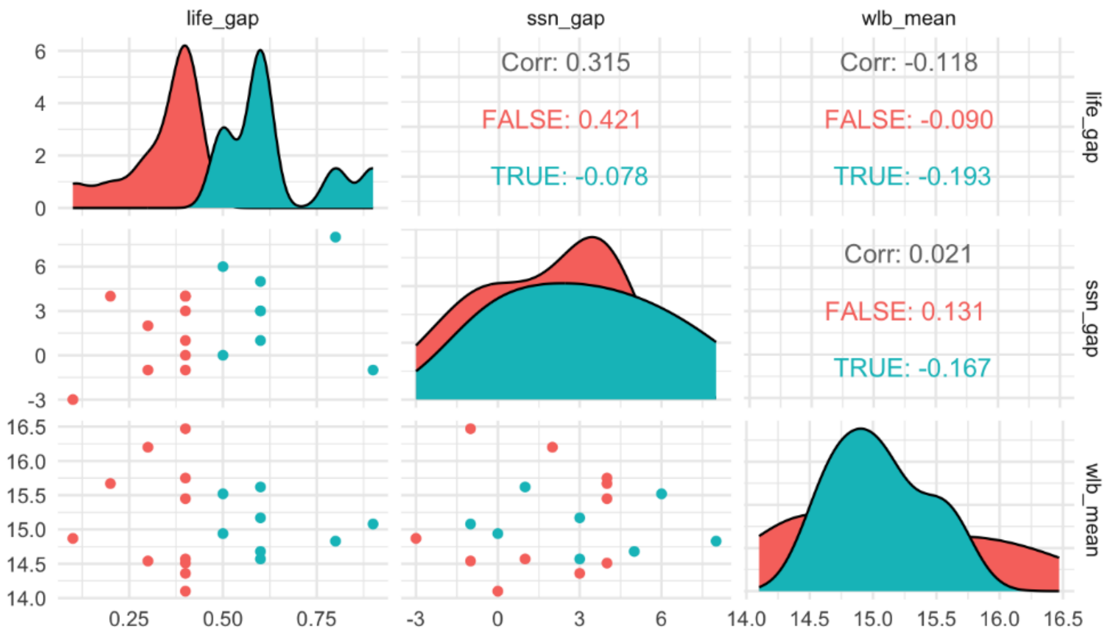

Fig. 4. Correlation Matrix of Well-Being Dimensions (OECD 2017-2024) (OECD, 2025)

Figure 4 visualizes the correlation among three key dimensions of well-being inequality in OECD countries: life satisfaction gap (*life_gap*), social support gap (*ssn_gap*), and average work–life balance (*wlb_mean*). The density and scatter plots illustrate how emotional, relational, and temporal inequalities interact in shaping the fragile equilibrium of well-being.

4. Conclusions

This study concludes that well-being inequality across OECD countries is not merely an economic gap but a sociological manifestation of late-modern fragility. By interpreting OECD Well-Being Indicators, life satisfaction, social support, and work–life balance, through the lenses of Giddens's Reflexive Modernity, Beck's Risk Society, and the Capability Approach of Sen and Nussbaum, this research demonstrates how emotional, relational, and temporal inequalities collectively construct what can be termed a fragile equilibrium of modern life.

The findings indicate that material prosperity alone does not guarantee security or happiness; rather, societies today distribute not only wealth, but also hope, trust, and time, the moral foundations of collective well-being. In advanced economies, rising inequalities in these moral resources reveal that the challenge of sustainability lies as much in the socialand emotional domains as in the economic. The Triadic Model of Fragile Well-Being developed in this study provides a coherent interpretive structure that aligns with the empirical evidence from OECD data. Emotional fragility (Giddens) manifests in widening life satisfaction gaps; relational insecurity (Beck) appears in the erosion of social trust and support; and temporal deprivation (Sen–Nussbaum) is reflected in imbalanced work–life structures. These dimensions interact to produce what this paper conceptualizes as the fragile future, a condition in which progress and precarity coexist.

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Author Contribution

Conceptualization, F.H.; Methodology, F.H.; Software, F.H.; Validation, F.H.; Formal Analysis, F.H.; Investigation, F.H.; Resources, F.H.; Data Curation, F.H.; Writing – Original Draft Preparation, F.H.; Writing – Review & Editing, F.H.; Visualization, F.H.; Supervision, F.H.; Project Administration, F.H.

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Ethical Review Board Statement

Ethical review and approval were waived for this study due to its exclusive use of publicly accessible secondary data from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), which does not involve human participants, personal identifiers, or interventions.

Informed Consent Statement

This study did not involve human participants or any individual-level human data.

Data Availability Statement

The data supporting the findings of this study are openly available from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) Better Life Index Database at: https://stats.oecd.org/. No new data were created in this study.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declare no conflict of interest.

Declaration of Generative AI Use

During the preparation of this work, the authors used ChatGPT (OpenAI) to assist in improving academic language. After using this tool, the authors reviewed and edited the content as needed and take full responsibility for the content of the publication.

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