



## Article

# Community Social Capital Enhances the Subjective Well-Being of Urban Residents: The Mediating Role of Psychological Flourishing and Moderating Effect of Educational Attainment

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**Abstract:** According to Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory, the interaction between micro- and macro-factors improves human development. Previous studies suggest that community social capital, which refers to the interaction between residents and communities, promotes the subjective well-being of residents in residential communities. However, little is known about the mechanisms underlying this relationship. This study explored the link between community social capital and life satisfaction among urban residents and examined the mediating role of psychological flourishing and moderating effect of educational level. Data were obtained from a cross-community survey of 816 urban residents in China aged 20–60 years. The results indicated that psychological flourishing mediated the link between community social capital and life satisfaction among urban residents after controlling for gender, age, marital status, dwelling time, and monthly income. Furthermore, educational attainment moderated the association between community social capital and psychological flourishing. The mediating effect of psychological flourishing was stronger among residents with low educational attainment than those with high educational attainment, indicating that the benefits of community social capital were greater among the former group. This study extends our knowledge of the effect of community social capital on urban residents' subjective well-being, including its role in reducing educational inequality in human well-being.

**Keywords:** community social capital; subjective well-being; psychological flourishing; educational attainment; urban residents



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## 1. Introduction

According to the United Nations (2018), the global urbanization rate increased from 30% to 55% in 2018. In China, the urbanization rate has exceeded 60% due to economic development (Lei et al. 2023). Rapid urbanization in China has resulted in significant challenges to community governance. Community researchers have focused on investigating methods of improving public well-being in residential communities, with community social capital considered important for promoting well-being (Lu et al. 2016). Community social capital is a resource reflecting the characteristics of social relationships in communities and contains trust, community identification, social support, and collaboration as its core facets (Kwon et al. 2013). In recent decades, community social capital has been found to be a critical determinant of an individual's health (Carpiano 2007; Van Hooijdonk et al. 2008; Mohnen et al. 2011).

According to the ecological theory developed by Bronfenbrenner (1979), the interaction between micro- and macro-factors improves human development. Community social capital, which refers to the interaction between residents and communities, promotes

human well-being in residential communities (Inaba et al. 2015; Lu et al. 2016; Maass et al. 2016). A previous study indicated that the association between social capital and subjective well-being was consistent across cultures (Elgar et al. 2011). In residential communities, trust in and frequent interactions with neighbors were found to be positively correlated with subjective well-being (Helliwell and Putnam 2004; Powdthavee 2008; Oshio 2017). Cross-sectional population surveys revealed that community social capital had a stronger impact on subjective well-being than on self-rated health (Inaba et al. 2015; Maass et al. 2016). These findings suggest that community social capital promotes subjective well-being in residential communities. However, little is known about the mechanisms underlying this relationship. Therefore, this study aimed to identify the mechanisms through which community social capital improves subjective well-being in urban residential communities.

The improvement of residents' personal well-being is clearly a vital issue for residential communities. Ryan and Deci (2001) have indicated that there are two basic types of personal well-being. One is hedonic well-being, which often refers to life satisfaction (Ryan and Deci 2001). The other is eudemonic well-being, which focuses on psychological functioning and self-actualization (Ryff 1989; Ryan and Deci 2001). Huppert and So (2013) suggest that flourishing is an important factor in eudemonic well-being. Flourishing can be defined as "a combination of feeling good and functioning effectively, and the experience that life is going well" (Huppert and So 2013). A previous study has indicated that flourished individuals experience personal growth and have sufficient psychological resources and strength (Keyes and Haidt 2003). Based on the theory of psychological and social well-being, Diener et al. (2010) developed the Flourishing Scale (FS), which assesses individuals' perceived levels of social and psychological prosperity in six areas: purpose in life, social engagement, competence, social relationships, optimism, and contributions to others' welfare and self-esteem.

As previously mentioned, flourishing and life satisfaction are related but distinct constructs because they reflect different theoretical perspectives on well-being (Davis et al. 2020). Life satisfaction assesses the individual's sense of general satisfaction with their life as a whole, while flourishing refers to the individual's perceived social-psychological prosperity. These are complementary aspects of human well-being. Flourishing, which emphasizes the individual's sociopsychological functioning, has been found to be related to life satisfaction (Davis et al. 2020). Individuals with high scores on the FS view themselves positively in important areas of social-psychological functioning and, therefore, have a general sense of satisfaction with their whole life.

Flourishing reflects an individual's positive emotional status and ability to function effectively (Keyes 2003). Previous studies have found that social capital was positively associated with flourishing in immigrants, resulting in positive outcomes in immigrant adaptation (Ando 2014). Another study reported a significant positive correlation between social capital and flourishing (Guo and Qu 2021), indicating that social capital improves psychological flourishing. Considering the importance of psychological flourishing in improving life satisfaction, psychological flourishing may mediate the link between community social capital and subjective well-being among urban residents. In particular, urban residents' community social capital, operationalized as a strong social network, trust, and sense of belonging in the community, may positively affect their psychological flourishing, thereby enhancing their life satisfaction.

Social inequality is an important topic in studies on human well-being. One large-scale study indicated that the level of psychological flourishing increased with educational attainment (Keyes and Simoes 2012). Another study examining the relationship between sociodemographic factors and psychological flourishing found that higher education was associated with greater psychological flourishing (Schotanus-Dijkstra et al. 2016). Thus, community research should focus on improving the well-being of residents with low educational attainment. Moreover, a study in the Netherlands indicated that the link between community social capital and subjective well-being was significantly stronger among less-educated people than among those with high educational attainment (Hoogerbrugge and

Burger 2018), suggesting that community social capital is critical for individuals with low educational attainment. Considering the link between community social capital and well-being, community social capital may improve well-being among less-educated residents. We predicted that urban residents with low educational attainment would benefit more from high community social capital than those with high educational attainment. This study aimed to extend our knowledge of the impact of community social capital on urban residents' subjective well-being, including its role in reducing educational inequality.

## 2. The Current Study

Improving human well-being in various contexts is a key topic in social psychology research. Based on the ecological theory developed by Bronfenbrenner (1979), this study focused on promoting life satisfaction in urban residential communities. Despite a growing body of research showing that community social capital plays an important role in improving resident life satisfaction, studies focusing on the specific psychological mechanisms underlying this relationship are scarce. Understanding the mechanism through which community social capital improves life satisfaction is critical for policymakers (Buijs et al. 2016). Therefore, this study explored the mediating role of psychological flourishing in the link between community social capital and life satisfaction. Furthermore, to explore the role of community social capital in reducing educational inequality in human well-being, this study investigated whether educational attainment moderated the mediating effect of psychological flourishing among urban residents. This study posed the following hypotheses (Figure 1):

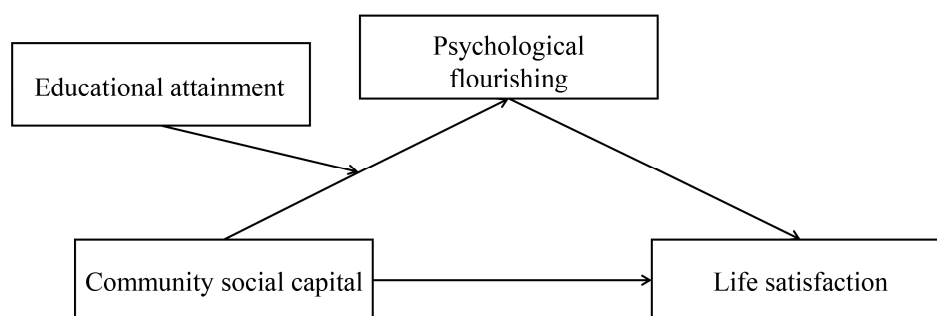
**Hypothesis 1 (H1).** *Community social capital positively predicts life satisfaction.*

**Hypothesis 2 (H2).** *Community social capital positively predicts psychological flourishing.*

**Hypothesis 3 (H3).** *Psychological flourishing positively predicts life satisfaction.*

**Hypothesis 4 (H4).** *Psychological flourishing mediates the link between community social capital and life satisfaction.*

**Hypothesis 5 (H5).** *Educational attainment moderates the mediating effect of psychological flourishing in the relationship between community social capital and life satisfaction.*



**Figure 1.** The hypothesized link between community social capital and life satisfaction: a moderated mediation model.

## 3. Materials and Methods

### 3.1. Participants and Procedure

A self-administered online survey was conducted in ten residential communities in Chengdu, a large city in southwestern China. Survey questionnaires were sent through the online WeChat groups. The survey used a convenience sample and included residents 20–60 years old who had lived in the local community for more than one year. The

survey obtained information about the respondents' sociodemographic characteristics (i.e., age, gender, educational attainment, marital status, monthly income, and dwelling time), community social capital, psychological flourishing, and life satisfaction (Please see Supplementary Materials). In total, 816 respondents completed the survey. Participant characteristics are listed in Table 1. Participation in the study was voluntary and anonymous. Each respondent received 10 RMB for participation. The data were collected in accordance with the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki. The study was reviewed and approved by the Ethics Committee of Research Institute of Social Development, Southwestern University of Finance and Economics. Informed consent was obtained from all the participants.

**Table 1.** Individual characteristics of the respondents ( $N = 816$ ).

Characteristics	N (%)	Mean (SD)
Age		39.34 (11.27)
Education		
Graduated from high school or below	321 (39.3%)	
College-educated or above	495 (60.7%)	
Marital status		
With a spouse	607 (74.4%)	
Single (unmarried/divorced/widowed)	209 (25.6%)	
Monthly income (RMB)		
<3000	451 (55.3%)	
3001–5000	263 (32.2%)	
5001–10,000	97 (11.9%)	
>10,000	5 (0.6%)	
Dwelling time		9.46 (8.35)

Note. SD = standard deviation.

### 3.2. Variables

#### 3.2.1. Community Social Capital

Community social capital was the main independent variable in the current study. It was measured using the community social capital scale (Bi 2019). This scale was designed to measure cognitive community social capital among adult residents in urban China (Bi 2019). The scale contains 14 statements used to assess various aspects of residents' experiences with community social capital, classified into four domains: community identity (e.g., "I am proud to be a member of the local community"), community trust (e.g., "Overall, I trust the majority of the residents in the local community"), community interaction (e.g., "The local residents help each other out"), and voluntarism (e.g., "I often discuss community issue with my neighbors"). Responses are responded on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree). The Cronbach's alpha of this scale was 0.97 in this study.

#### 3.2.2. Life Satisfaction

The Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS), which was designed by Diener et al. (1985), was used to measure the level of life satisfaction. The SWLS has been found to be suitable for a wide range of age groups and cultural contexts (Pavot et al. 1991). Respondents rate their general satisfaction with their lives on a seven-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree). An example item is "I am satisfied with my life". The Cronbach's alpha of the SWLS in this study was 0.93.

### 3.2.3. Psychological Flourishing

The Flourishing Scale was used to measure psychological flourishing (Diener et al. 2010). This scale comprises eight positive statements to assess self-perceived success in positive relationships, social contribution, purpose and meaning, self-esteem, optimism, and competence. An example item is “I lead a purposeful and meaningful life”. Responses are rated on a seven-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree). High scores indicate positive self-perception in these areas of functioning. Flourished individuals experience personal growth and have sufficient psychological resources and strength (Keyes and Haidt 2003). The Cronbach’s alpha of the Psychological Flourishing Scale was 0.97 in our study.

### 3.2.4. Moderator and Covariates

The covariates were the respondents’ sociodemographic characteristics, including age, gender, monthly income, dwelling time, and marital status. The moderator was the respondents’ educational attainment. Respondents who graduated from high school or below were classified as having low educational attainment, whereas those with an educational level above high school were classified as having high educational attainment. This classification was consistent with that used in previous studies (Sheikh et al. 2014; Wang et al. 2022).

### 3.3. Data Analysis

This study used SPSS (version 22.0) for all statistical analyses. Raw data were transferred into Z-scores for further analyses. Sociodemographic variables (i.e., age, gender, income, marital status, and dwelling time) were treated as covariates. First, descriptive analyses were conducted to evaluate the sociodemographic characteristics of the respondents. Second, the relationships between community social capital, psychological flourishing, and life satisfaction was examined by Pearson correlation analysis. Third, a baseline regression analysis was performed to test whether community social capital could predict psychological flourishing and life satisfaction. In addition, we conducted a regression analysis with psychological flourishing as the predictor and life satisfaction as the outcome. To explore the mechanism underlying the association between community social capital and life satisfaction, the mediation analysis was conducted using Model 4 in PROCESS for SPSS (Hayes 2013). Finally, the moderated mediation model with bootstrapping (Model 7) in PROCESS was conducted to investigate whether educational attainment moderated the relationship between community social capital and psychological flourishing.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Descriptive Statistics

The respondents’ sociodemographic characteristics are presented in Table 1. The respondents’ ages ranged from 20 to 60. Among the respondents, 62.7% were women and 37.3% were men. A total of 27.5% of the participants were in the age group 20–30, 30.5% were in the age group 30–40, 21.1% were in the age group 40–50, and 21% were in the age group 50–60. The majority of the participants ( $n = 607$ ) were married.

### 4.2. Correlation Analysis

As shown in Table 2, the Pearson correlation analysis revealed significant relationships between community social capital, psychological flourishing, and life satisfaction. The results of the Pearson correlation analysis suggested that community social capital was correlated with psychological flourishing positively. Furthermore, community social capital was associated with life satisfaction positively. In the end, psychological flourishing and life satisfaction were significantly positively correlated.



**Table 2.** Descriptive statistics and the correlations between variables.

Variables	Mean $\pm$ SD	1	2	3
1. Community social capital	49.4 $\pm$ 11.95	—	0.52 **	0.44 **
2. Psychological flourishing	40.72 $\pm$ 9.98		—	0.63 **
3. Life satisfaction	23.21 $\pm$ 6.98			—

Note. SD = standard deviation, \*\*  $p < 0.01$ .

#### 4.3. Regression Analysis

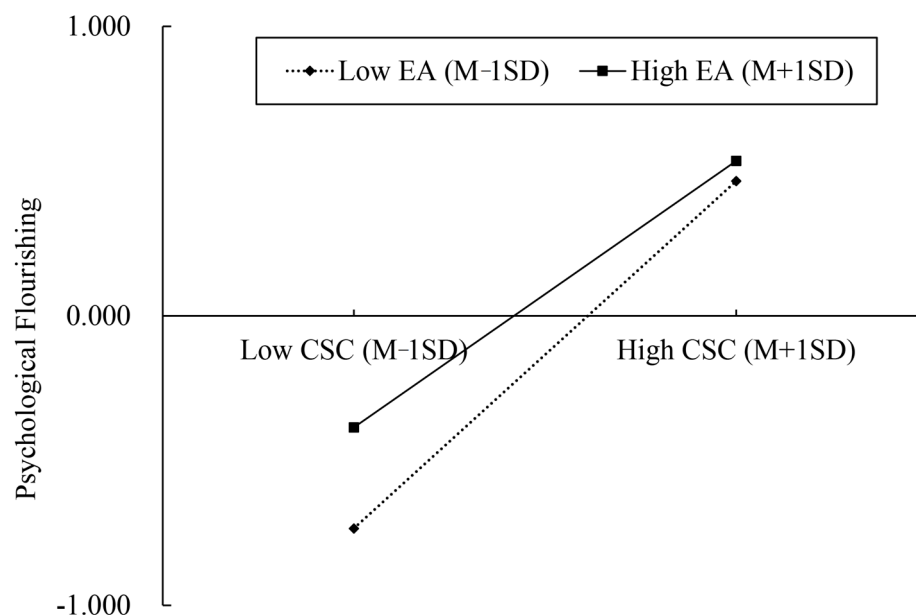
To further clarify the association between community social capital and life satisfaction, the present study conducted the linear regression analysis. A significant positive effect on life satisfaction was observed ( $F_{(1,814)} = 191.1, p < 0.001$ ) with community social capital as a predictor. Higher scores on the community social capital scale were associated with increased life satisfaction ( $R^2 = 0.19$ ). Moreover, psychological flourishing positively predicted life satisfaction ( $F_{(1,814)} = 533.89, p < 0.001$ ). Respondents with higher levels of psychological flourishing were more likely to be satisfied with their lives ( $R^2 = 0.4$ ). Furthermore, community social capital was a significant predictor of psychological flourishing ( $F_{(1,814)} = 294.76, p < 0.001$ ). Respondents with higher community social capital reported higher levels of psychological flourishing ( $R^2 = 0.27$ ).

#### 4.4. Mediating Role of Psychological Flourishing

To identify the mediating effect of psychological flourishing in the link between community social capital and life satisfaction, we developed a bootstrapped mediating model. The results demonstrated that community social capital significantly and positively affected life satisfaction ( $\beta = 0.44, p < 0.001$ ). Furthermore, community social capital significantly and positively impacted psychological flourishing ( $\beta = 0.51, p < 0.001$ ). Considering the mediating role of psychological flourishing, the indirect effect of community social capital on life satisfaction was 0.28 (LLCI = 0.227, ULCI = 0.331). The direct residual effect was statistically significant ( $\beta = 0.16, p < 0.001$ ).

#### 4.5. Moderating Role of Educational Attainment

A moderated mediation model was used to evaluate the interaction between community social capital, educational attainment, and psychological flourishing. The results revealed a significant and negative interaction effect of community social capital and educational attainment on psychological flourishing ( $\beta = -0.15, p < 0.05$ , LLCI =  $-0.265$ , ULCI =  $-0.026$ ). The results of the simple slope analysis indicated that the positive effect of community social capital on psychological flourishing was stronger among residents with low educational attainment than those with high educational attainment. Figure 2 illustrates the moderating effect of educational attainment. In addition, the results demonstrated that the mediating effect of psychological flourishing on the relationship between community social capital and life satisfaction was stronger in the low educational attainment group (indirect effect = 0.33, LLCI = 0.259, ULCI = 0.398) than in the high educational attainment group (indirect effect = 0.25, LLCI = 0.192, ULCI = 0.309). The index of the moderated mediation model was  $-0.08$ . Further details are presented in Table 3. Our findings suggested that the positive impact of community social capital on psychological flourishing was most pronounced among residents with low educational attainment.



**Figure 2.** Simple slope analyses. Educational attainment moderated the association between community social capital and psychological flourishing. CSC = community social capital; EA = educational attainment.

**Table 3.** The moderated mediation model.

Variable	Psychological Flourishing	Life Satisfaction
Direct effects		
CSC	0.75 ***	0.16 ***
Psychological Flourishing		0.54 ***
Educational attainment	0.2 **	
CSC × Educational attainment	−0.15 *	
Conditional indirect effects [95% CI]		
Low educational attainment		0.33 [0.259, 0.398]
High educational attainment		0.25 [0.192, 0.309]
Index of moderated mediation [95% CI]		−0.08 [−0.151, −0.007]

Note. SD = standard deviation, \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ . CSC = community social capital.

## 5. Discussion

Previous studies in the field of social psychology have emphasized the promotion of human well-being. With the development of urbanization, studies have explored the social environmental factors that improve residents' well-being in urban areas (Helliwell and Putnam 2004; Verduyn et al. 2017; Guo and Qu 2021). Community social capital is considered an important indicator of residents' resources in terms of social relations in communities and is known to be associated with well-being. Previous studies have demonstrated that community social capital enhances residents' mental health, psychological well-being, and life satisfaction (Kwon et al. 2013; Inaba et al. 2015; Lu et al. 2016; Maass et al. 2016). Nevertheless, few studies have focused on the mediating and moderating mechanisms underlying the link between community social capital and subjective well-being. This study aimed to fill this gap by investigating the mediating effect of psychological flourishing and moderating effect of educational attainment in the link between community social capital and life satisfaction.

The results revealed positive relationships among community social capital, psychological flourishing, and life satisfaction. In addition, the linear regression analysis indicated that community social capital, defined as a feature of social interaction in communities, positively predicted psychological flourishing and life satisfaction among urban residents. Urban residents who have frequent interactions with and trust their neighbors have high levels of psychological flourishing and life satisfaction, suggesting that strong community

social capital may prevent negative mood and mental illness in urban communities. These results are consistent with those of previous quantitative studies suggesting a positive effect of community social capital on residents' well-being (Helliwell and Putnam 2004; Powdthavee 2008; Oshio 2017).

In addition, we found a mediating effect of psychological flourishing. The results indicated that the pathway from community social capital to life satisfaction via psychological flourishing was significant. Psychological flourishing partially mediated the relationship between community social capital and life satisfaction, and the mediation model accounted for 63.38% of variance in life satisfaction. This finding indicated that strong community social capital promoted social functioning and positive emotional status, which positively influenced life satisfaction among urban residents.

Moreover, the results demonstrated that social capital may be more beneficial for residents with low educational attainment than for those with high education. Our findings revealed that educational attainment moderated the relationship between community social capital and psychological flourishing. Simple slope analyses were performed to investigate the educational differences in the association between community social capital and psychological flourishing. The results indicated that the positive effect of community social capital on psychological flourishing was stronger among residents with low educational attainment than those with high educational attainment. Furthermore, the mediating effect of psychological flourishing on the relationship between community social capital and life satisfaction was moderated by educational attainment. The mediating effect was more pronounced among less-educated residents than among those with high educational attainment. Prior studies have found that highly educated people are more likely to achieve high subjective well-being than those with low educational levels (Kratz and Patzina 2020; Chen 2012; Durst 2021). Moreover, educational inequality in human well-being increases over the life course (Kratz and Patzina 2020). Thus, identifying crucial resources that promote the well-being of less-educated people is critical. Our findings indicate that increasing community social capital may reduce educational inequality in human well-being in residential communities.

Besides the strong positive effect of community social capital on the improvement of individual well-being among less-educated residents, the present study also suggested that the community social capital could enhance the psychological well-being in urban residents with high educational attainment. As reported, results of the moderated mediation model analysis demonstrated that there is a significant positive relationship between community social capital and psychological flourishing among residents with high educational attainment. Furthermore, the mediating effect of psychological flourishing on the link between community social capital and life satisfaction was also significant for residents with high educational attainment. Previous work has noted that the association between educational attainment and subjective well-being was negative after controlling the income and occupational status (Clark and Oswald 1996). A prior study with a large sample has indicated that over-educated people reported more depression symptoms (Bracke et al. 2013). The frustration of expectation may reduce the positive effect of education on perceived happiness in highly educated individuals (Ruiu and Ruiu 2019). The findings of the present study indicate that enhancing the level of community social capital may be an effective intervention for the promotion of individual well-being in the high educated residents with low level of subjective well-being.

These findings have two implications for research on well-being among community residents. Positive relationships with others are critical for psychological wellness (Ryff and Keyes 1995). To promote well-being in urban residential communities, interventions could emphasize activities that concentrate on improving residents' community social capital, including community trust and social interaction with local communities. In addition, community social capital could have a significant positive effect on psychological and subjective well-being among urban residents with low educational attainment. To reduce



educational inequality in human well-being, policymakers should encourage residents with low educational attainment to interact with their neighbors and local communities.

This study had several limitations. First, this study used a cross-sectional design, which could not identify causal relationships among the research variables. In addition, the present analysis may be biased by unobserved heterogeneity. Future studies should identify the causality of the relationships among community social capital, psychological flourishing, life satisfaction, and educational attainment using longitudinal study designs. For instance, future studies may use a sample of individuals that migrate from communities with a low level of community social capital to neighborhoods with high level of community social capital. In this way, the dynamic causality of the association between community social capital and individual well-being would be clarified clearly. Second, this study focused on residential communities in one city; thus, the findings cannot be generalized to other cities, particularly those in different cultural contexts. Therefore, future studies should employ national panel datasets or cross-country data to strengthen the external validity of this research.

## 6. Conclusions

How to improve individuals' well-being in the context of residential community is an important question for community researchers. The present study set out to clarify the mechanisms underlying community social capital and life satisfaction among urban residents. Concretely speaking, based on previous literature, we hypothesized that psychological flourishing may mediate the association between community social capital and life satisfaction. Furthermore, we assumed that educational attainment may moderate this mediation model. The positive effect of community social capital on the promotion of life satisfaction may be stronger for low-educated residents than for those with a high educational level. Using the moderated mediation model analysis, the current study investigated the mediating effect of psychological flourishing and moderating role of educational attainment in the link between community social capital and life satisfaction. We found that community social capital improved urban residents' psychological flourishing, namely, positive emotional status and social functions, thereby significantly promoted their life satisfaction. Moreover, educational attainment moderated the mediating mechanisms involved in the relationship between community social capital and life satisfaction. Community social capital may have a more positive effect on residents with low educational attainment than those with high educational attainment. These findings open new perspectives for the promotion of human well-being, as the moderated mediation mechanism suggests that community social capital may play a critical role in reducing educational inequality in human well-being in residential communities.

**Supplementary Materials:** The following supporting information can be downloaded at: <https://www.mdpi.com/article/10.3390/socsci13040214/s1>, Questionnaires.

**Author Contributions:** Conceptualization, X.D., Z.W. and H.L.; formal analysis, X.D., Z.W. and H.L.; investigation, X.D., Z.W. and H.L.; data curation, C.T. and Y.Y.; writing—original draft preparation, X.D., Z.W. and H.L.; writing—review and editing, X.D., Z.W., H.L., C.T. and Y.Y.; funding acquisition, Z.W. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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