

HANDBOOK OF HAPPINESS RESEARCH IN LATIN AMERICA, EDITED BY MARIANO ROJAS (NEW YORK, SPRINGER, 2016)

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Latin America is a vast region with Spanish and Portuguese as the predominant languages, a shared common history, similar interests, values, culture, and relatively-high levels of happiness. But it is the latter that represent a paradox considering the low levels of income and other social indicators in this region. “*The handbook of happiness research in Latin America*” aims at determining the measures based on social-indicators that could explain the happiness of Latin Americans and demonstrate that there is no paradox.

The structure, the extended explanation of the subject and the language used to present the information allow for easy understanding. Therefore, the book offers novice researchers as well as students in the field of subjective well-being and/or decision-makers who are interested in this area a fresh perspective, both well-informed and contextually relevant, that even experts might find quite interesting.

In the introductory chapter, Mariano Rojas, a Ph.D. in economics from Ohio State University and professor of economics at the Universidad Popular Autónoma del Estado de Puebla (UPAEP), Mexico, expresses that what people are truly looking for is not happiness as an ultimate achievement but intermediate goals to increase it, such as income, schooling, and life expectancy (p. 1). Actually, this perception has been widely accepted since these goals were the measurement reference for researchers and policy makers until the last few decades, when a new conception entered into the study of happiness. The main change proposed in this conception is that happiness should be understood as a life experience people have. Therefore, happiness research must ask people directly about it, instead of trusting in the external judgments of experts who define observable variables for

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using in the construction of indicators, design social programs, and the establishment of public policies.

This book compiles 32 recent studies on the determinants of subjective well-being conducted by researchers from different countries and disciplines. The findings address the determining factors of happiness and well-being in Latin American countries, including, but not limited to, the role of values, identity, family ties, social networks, social trust, norms, culture, and tradition. For the analysis of these factors and determination of any shared tendencies a variety of quantitative and qualitative data is compiled among the different studies. The main technique used for gathering information is the survey, but additional sources are also included depending on the focus of interest, such as official data from both government and private organizations regarding GDP per capita, education rates, quality and coverage of health services, etc., as well as documentation through qualitative interviews, and/or the implementation of empirical observations and evidence.

The handbook is categorized into six broad parts that cover the relevance of happiness; the link between human relations and happiness; the role of material conditions, social factors and health; and the importance of subjective well-being indicators in Latin American countries.

The first part examines different dimensions of happiness such as macro-welfare standards, conditions and factors, the psychological mechanisms of adaptation to challenging environments, the uneven relationship between economic development and happiness, and the production of happiness research conducted by Latin Americans.

To investigate those dimensions, a list of social indicators (GDP per capita, nutrition/basic health care, education, etc.) are compared between Latin America, Western Europe and the United States (Chapter 2), which highlights the singularity of the former region that has unfavorable social indicators but a generally high self-reported level of happiness. Thus, further analysis of macro-welfare standards, conditions and factors (which in Latin America support happiness) is implemented. From a different perspective, Chapter 3 studies the social psychology involved in the coping mechanism called “Optimistic adaptation factor” used by Latin Americans to deal with challenging environments. The features of the mechanism include: being positive, enjoying what you have, and adapting to problems that can’t be solved. The relevance of these and other happiness studies is later justified in Chapter 4, especially with the argument that people in countries with very high GDP per capita do not necessarily experience satisfactory lives, as shown by the case of Chile which witnessed GDP per capita growth of 113%, but also one of the lowest surveyed levels of perceived well-being. Last, a description of the trends and

challenges regarding the scientific understanding of happiness in Latin America is presented (Chapter 5).

Evidence shows that, since happiness does not necessarily increase with income, the high levels of happiness in Latin American countries can be explained by the dynamics of social relations. Specifically, this involves close family ties and mutual support, as opposed to the situation in countries with higher levels of human development where independence is favored over collectivism. Consequently, traditionally established conceptions of progress and development must be redefined and new consideration must be given to the importance of pursuing satisfactory interpersonal relations.

The importance of relational goods in happiness is further developed in the second part of the handbook through six studies that analyze social capital, aging, family, and romantic relations; not only within different countries but also among rural and indigenous communities.

The evaluation starts with theoretical and empirical insights (Chapter 6) about the impact that several types of relational goods have on the experience of well-being in Colombia using data from the Quality of Life survey conducted in 2009 by The Center for Regional Coffee and Enterprise Studies (CRECE). Likewise, a study led by Las Segovias Leadership Institute (Chapter 7) documents the life histories of rural and indigenous women in Nicaragua. The methodological approach presents their conceptions of poverty and happiness and reinforces the importance of equality and participation in social relationships as essential constituents of happiness. Meanwhile, in Chile the focus of interest was the level of well-being of the population as they age (Chapter 8) with data collected from the Fondecyt 1090326 official survey of 2009. A general look at the effect of social capital (Chapter 9) in the evolution of the subjective well-being of Latin American citizens is also provided.

Moreover, using a non-economic framework the connection between happiness and romantic relationships is also closely observed (Chapter 10), focusing on the nature of happiness as a long-term sentiment reflected in well-being and perceived success in life; and as a short-term emotion of enjoyment and satisfaction. Findings from Mexico help understand idiosyncratic manifestations of happiness as a personal and interpersonal phenomenon that integrates individual experiences, assimilated cultural references, and emotion regulation strategies. Last, the analysis of the effect of relational goods on health problems and its implications for social policy (Chapter 11) clarifies that an increase in relational goods may be directly correlated with an increase in the probability of satisfaction with health. Thus, assuming the same health problem, people will suffer less when they possess relational goods than when they do not.

Once again, the findings suggest that happiness levels are higher when there is greater perceived access to relational goods, particularly regarding the quality of family relations (closeness). Also, when there is a high level of social trust and active participation and involvement in community life. In other words, happiness is a phenomenon of a socio-relational nature that strongly correlates with life satisfaction.

Part three of the book pays special attention to the role of material conditions. For example, an analysis of how the economy affects happiness (Chapter 12) using empirical economics and happiness surveys carried out in Argentina during 2012 shows that a majority of inhabitants say they were “happy”, but their perception of economic welfare was very low. Similar results were found for Chile (Chapter 13) regarding the determinants of job satisfaction and their relationship with relative income.

Additionally included is an evaluation of other non-income determinants of happiness, such as the correlation between food-deprivation (Chapter 14) and the experience of lower subjective well-being (The Gallup 2007 survey); a comparative empirical study that analyses the dynamics of well-being at the household level in relation to the dimensions of insecurity and precariousness within the specific welfare regimes of Chile and Costa Rica (Chapter 15); a discussion about relationships in Argentina (Chapter 16) that compares older people, and/or separated people with socially active people (the Gallup Universidad de Palermo survey 2011 and 2012); and about the benefits of using life satisfaction data to identify urban problems, monitor the quality of urban life, and prioritize local public expenditure (Chapter 17).

Overall, results from this section reveal that improvements in happiness are not correlated with the financial satisfaction of households and that job satisfaction is also influenced by a combination of factors such as schooling, individual wages, self-employment, and hours worked. Hence, economic welfare and economic growth alone is not enough to increase the subjective well-being of a population, as shown by the success of the solidarity-oriented and socially less stratified Costa Rican welfare model in contrast to the liberal Chilean model, which does not provide the same level of security and stability. These findings are quite relevant for social programs, as targeting the right issues would have a larger impact on people’s well-being.

Part four inspects the sociopolitical dimension of subjective well-being, incorporating topics such as migration, socioeconomic disparities, class identification, pension models and education, among other social factors. Most of the research in this section focuses on Mexico, starting with an analysis of the sociopolitical dimension (Chapter 18) of social capital and the performance of specific communities. Different tests of independence and association and

a multivariate analysis were conducted in different cities for this purpose. Moreover, some insight is provided into the relationship between migration and unhappiness (Chapter 19), using the Latinobarómetro Survey to identify attitudes and aspirations prior to migration. Other studies conducted in Mexico (Chapter 22) focus on the influence that Value Education (Chapter 25) could have on well-being, and on the topics of poverty, class identification and social mobility, referring to the empirical evidence obtained from studies conducted over the last ten years on the general population and from individuals living in conditions of extreme poverty. Also, some conceptual and geographical factors (Chapter 26) are considered regarding three variables of well-being (feelings of happiness, evaluation of the quality of life of a place, and desire to spend the rest of one's life in the community) from three surveys conducted in Mexico at the country, state and municipal levels.

Likewise, in Colombia the Representative Survey of 2011 evaluates socioeconomic disparities in subjective well-being (Chapter 20), particularly regarding individual-level features of socioeconomic status, while in Chile (Chapter 24) the pension policy model is revised by presenting a multilevel longitudinal analysis of the impact that old-age pension policy has on life satisfaction, as well as of the factors that may moderate this relationship.

Further examination of the individual and inter-personal social dimensions of subjective well-being across Latin American Countries is carried out (Chapter 21) using data derived from the Latinobarómetro survey (2007). In the case of the Caribbean (Chapter 23), special attention is paid to reviewing how inequality in income translates to inequality of happiness using the popular Gini coefficient as a data source.

The results of these studies permit several conclusions about subjective well-being. For instance, unhappiness can drive progress and major changes in society and migration can create unhappiness too, since unhappiness is likely to remain after migrating due to overly high expectations (p. 339). Also, that socioeconomic disparity is an important factor in variables related to happiness; for example, in the case of Colombia, where the scores for subjective well-being are statistically significantly lower among less-educated, poorer, unemployed individuals and women. Or the matter of gender as an important variable in understanding the impact that differentiated-value education schemes have on children's well-being in Mexico.

Moreover, the analyses affirm that most of the determinants exhibit the same effect on macro and micro dimensions of self-assessment, and that the explanatory variables for well-being vary according to different contexts, concepts, models, and levels of government. Hence, using only traditional, standard variables to explain well-being behavior may lead to the neglect of

variables that are particular to specific population groups, and eventually lead to the design and implementation of ineffective public policy.

Part five explores the determinants mental health, emotions, pain, and the impact of economic growth on the prevalence of health problems in Latin America. First, the objective and subjective aspects of mental and physical well-being are measured, as well as their relationship with contextual elements such as families, communities and nations (Chapter 27). Empirical evidence with a focus on the Chilean population is presented through OPHI data, the CNAP-Plus questionnaire, the Achenbach depression scale, and the UNDP-Chile survey. Then, the perceptions of emotional processes and the necessity of “grief work” for returning to well-being after traumatic events is evaluated. This is especially relevant considering that emotional challenges are complex in Latin America due to social and cultural factors that prioritize cognition over emotion. Finally, the association between rapid economic growth and a higher prevalence of health problems (e.g.: pain, anxiety, depression and psychological distress) and whether the dynamics of this phenomenon are the same between the rich and poor are taken into consideration. The investigation uses cross-sectional data from the Gallup survey 2007 and CEPALSTAT.

The results corroborate the claim that there is a higher incidence of physical and psychological health problems in countries with high rates of economic growth, with the impact differentiated between wealthy and poor individuals. But most importantly, the evidence emphasizes the importance of addressing the psychosocial components of well-being and the necessity of developing a different approach to intervention paths, theoretical models and a better understand of the interplay between emotions, health and wellbeing.

Finally, part six promotes the advantages and usefulness of well-being indicators for the analysis of different social (Chapter 30) and political domains, such as health and job satisfaction, security perceptions, education, subjective social rankings, economic status, the prediction of electoral results (Chapter 33), and perceptions of human development (Chapter 31). The overview places emphasis on psychological and subjective factors, while the main sources of data are opinion surveys administered by international organizations such as the Gallup World Poll, the Latinobarometer, and the results of the self-reported well-being module (BIARE) carried out in Mexico by INEGI in 2012.

The results presented in the book demonstrate how (1) the economic situation makes a difference to life satisfaction, but not to individual-level happiness, and that (2) the analysis of well-being indicators can make a significant theoretical contribution to predicting electoral results. This also has implications for public policy, because if subjective well-being (not income) is indeed the variable

relevant to achieving reelection, there will be greater interest in investing more into creating well-being.

The shared conclusion among all the studies covered in this book relates to the importance given by Latin American countries to non-materialistic and relational values. Hence, even though the relatively high happiness experienced by Latin Americans seems paradoxical, the contributions presented in the handbook reinforce the claim that such a paradox does not exist, but only incomplete or inaccurate theories based on insufficient social-indicator-based measures of understanding people's happiness (p. 8). The happiness of Latin Americans indicates that the conception of wealth needs to be expanded; also, that the notion of the wealth of nations must incorporate factors beyond individual income, and that the analysis of happiness requires a broader trans-disciplinary perspective (p. 12).

