**Life Satisfaction in The City: The Case of Cali, Colombia**

**Soddisfazione della vita in città: Il caso di Cali, in Colombia**

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**Abstract:**

Colombia is known as one of the happiest countries in the world despite poverty, crime and government corruption. This paper reports on a survey of life satisfaction in Cali, the third largest city in the country to analyze how life satisfaction is affected by the socioeconomic conditions of where people live and their satisfaction with government performance. We find that on the surface, Cali´s habitants are generally happy, but when we look at the deep socioeconomic differences in the city, another picture emerges. Two major findings: First, levels of happiness for home and city are relatively high with neighborhood satisfaction much more dependent on socio-economic status. Second, compared to personal subjective well-being, satisfaction with city government performance is much lower. There is a dichotomy in satisfaction levels at different spatial scales and between the private and public spheres.

**Introduction**

The promotion of the population wellbeing should be at the center of government functioning (Frey, 2008; Bok, 2010). Governments can provide "enabling conditions" for individuals to thrive and increase their personal satisfaction (Murray, 2013).

There is a bourgeoning research strand that looks at happiness and cities. For example, improving attributes of cities such as walkability, transportation and the provision of public goods such as parks can improve people´s quality of life (Leyden et al., 2011 Florida et al., 2013; Goldberg et al., 2012; Cloutier & Pfeiffer 2015; Pfeiffer & Cloutier, 2016). These studies intersect with several academic areas including urban affairs as well as urban planning and policy making. We aim at contributing to this discussion by providing evidence from Cali, Colombia, a city that despite high rates of crime, poverty, social inequality and political corruption, reports high rates of happiness. The analysis is novel insofar as there is limited research of happiness in cities in the global South.

This paper has two objectives. One is to move beyond the generalized happiness that is reported in the city. We show that there are several layers behind the declared happiness and in particular, we find differences between those who live in impoverished districts and those in the more affluent areas. The second objective is to explore how happiness relates with government performance satisfaction. Our results point to a major difference between satisfaction with personal life and satisfaction with the public realm. We refer to this as the public-private dichotomy.

For this analysis we use information from a population survey that allows us to analyze how the city and the provision of public services are related with individual happiness.

**Research on life satisfaction and its relations with government performance**

There is an increase in studies about happiness. Since the 1970's, psychologists, economists and sociologists, have developed multiple theoretical and empirical frameworks to explain the factors associated with happiness (Easterlin, 1974, 2001; Veenhoven, et al., 2004; Veenhoven & Hagerty, 2006; Blanchflower, 2009; Diener et al., 2003; Frey, 2008).

Research draws on a psychological approach concentrating on wellbeing, subjective experiences and life satisfaction (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2014; Sheldon & King, 2001; Ryan & Deci, 2001). The work is grounded in personal experiences that reflect the degree to which people feel satisfied with their life. Even though happiness, life satisfaction and wellbeing have different meanings (Diener et al, 2009), they are often used as interchangeable concepts in the literature and in this paper.

Several personal factors are permanently validated in the literature as predictors of happiness. Since the seminal work of Wilson (1967), higher education, good health conditions, optimism, employment and marriage have been positively associated with happiness. Gender and IQ show no relationship (Wilson, 1967). Generally speaking, recent comparative research with larger data sets shows that those factors –and their direction- still hold (Blanchflower, 2009). Current investigation is now focused on going beyond observable characteristics that influence happiness. Researchers are more interested on understanding the process that underlie happiness (Diener et al., 2003; Diener, 1994). Happy people appear more likely to be in good health (mental and physical), have greater self-control and self-regulatory abilities (Aspinwall, 1998; Fredrickson & Joiner, 2002; Keltner & Bonanno, 1997) and better work outcomes (Staw, et al., 1994).

The relationship between income and happiness is well studied. One of the most interesting findings is that money and the things money can buy, help achieve happiness, but only to a certain extent (Easterlin, 1973, 1974, 2001, 2003). Studies show that an increase in income doesn't make people

happier. Levels of happiness in the population remained the same in the last 50 years, despite the average increase in wealth and income. This finding shows that the societal aim of material prosperity and wealth accumulation does not necessary lead to happier societies (Diener & Oishi, 2000) and has fueled a discussion about how government define and evaluate factors that promote wellbeing within its population, which in turn, affect policy interventions and policy priorities (Bok, 2010).

Life satisfaction studies are not limited to personal characteristics. Societal factors that contribute to the individual wellbeing include a high degree of trust in the community and high social capital. Lower levels of life satisfaction are associated with poverty, discrimination, inequality, low community trust and poor governance (Helliwell et al., 2014).

Recent developments in the literature show that where people live, the services they receive from government, the safety of their streets and the quality of their children's education are important factors in making people happier with their lives (Leyden et al., 2011; Florida et al., 2013; Goldberg et al., 2012). And this leads to the conclusion that governments, and relevant public policies, have a large role to play in maintaining and improving peoples' happiness. Some have argued that the best outcomes of the welfare systems is to make citizens happier (Pacek & Radcliff, 2008), and others consider that societies should be measured by the happiness of their people (Layard 2005; Leaming, 2004; Andelman; 2010). Increasing people´s happiness as a government goal goes beyond only individual concerns. The shared space of the public sphere is important. Citizens who are satisfied with public services, not only report higher levels of happiness in their private lives (Leyden et al., 2011), but also have a higher trust in public institutions (Christensen and Lægreid, 2005). Individuals who are satisfied with government performance and the provision of public goods are, generally speaking, happier.

The quality of the built environment and the amenities and services provided in the city have a great influence on declared levels of happiness. Cities that provide convenient transportation services, access to cultural venues, affordable housing and safety are better places to live and their residents have a higher quality of life, which translates into higher levels of happiness (Leyden et al., 2011; Florida et al., 2013; Goldberg et al., 2012). A city's socio-spatial organization can also have an impact on health outcomes such as obesity, distress and physical activity (Martínez et al., 2017; Renalds et al., 2010).

The study of the many implications of life satisfaction in Latin America is an emerging field (Graham & Lora, 2010; Graham & Felton, 2005; Rojas, 2016). However, most of the information available is at the national level and the role of cities in promoting happiness is not yet widely studied in this region. In this paper we contribute to the emerging literature on measuring happiness in the global South by reporting results from a major Colombian city and explore the role of government performance on life satisfaction.

**Very happy places: Colombia and Cali**

Colombia is a country in the global South with 48 million habitants. During the last two decades, the country moved from a low income to a middle income country. The reduction in poverty rates, income increase and the expansion of a middle class are all factors improving the quality of life (Stampini et al., 2015). Colombia had a reputation around the world for all the wrong reasons: the largest civil conflict in Latin America and the violence provoked by drug-trafficking during the 1980's and 1990's. As with many countries in the global South, the new economic affluence was unevenly distributed generating deep social inequalities and promoting urban crime (Bourguignon et al., 2003).

Despite all of this, Colombians are happy. They are happier than most: at least according to the various studies that measure life satisfaction in countries around the world. Colombians declare

themselves to be very satisfied with their lives (Standish & Witters, 2014). In a 2013 survey, 39% of Colombians stated that they liked what they do and felt motivated; 46% consider themselves to have supportive relationships and love in their life; and 38% consider themselves to have good health and enough energy to get things done daily (Standish & Witters, 2014). The most recent national measurement revealed that on average, life satisfaction score for a Colombian (in a scale of 0-10) is 8.5 (DNP, 2016).

Cali is the third major city in the country with over 2.4 million of habitants (DANE, 2015). Cali is a traumatized city. During the 1980´s and 1990´s it was the scene of violence between drug trafficking cartels. It is home to people displaced by violence in the countryside who settled in city slums. Violence, poverty and marked social and racial segregation are important features of the city. It is the most violent city in the country with 66 homicides per 100,000 habitants in 2014 (Cali Cómo Vamos, 2014). Despite all the negative factors, people's life satisfaction scores mirror the high national average.

**Data and methods**

For this analysis, we use a data set from a population survey called CaliBRANDO. This is a yearly survey conducted by the Observatory of Public Policies (POLIS) of Universidad Icesi since 2014 (Martínez, 2017). This survey measures life satisfaction and is the only study in Colombia created with the main objective of measuring subjective wellbeing at a city level. The CaliBRANDO dataset is representative of the city regarding major social components of gender, socioeconomic strata and race/ethnicity.

Surveys were conducted in face-to-face interviews by trained pollsters to adults (18 and older). Informants where randomly selected. Respondents were told the objective of the study, assuring confidentiality and emphasizing that the data will be used for academic purposes. Also, it was made

clear to respondents that they could stop the survey at any time and that participation was voluntary. This analysis uses data from 2015 and 2016 for a total of 2,410 observations.

**Independent variable**

To assess life satisfaction, this study uses an *evaluative happiness approach* (Helliwell et al., 2014). The survey employs a standard and widely used scale to measure life satisfaction (1-10), with 1 the lowest and 10 the highest (Van Praag and Ferrer-i-Carbonell, 2008).

**Key explanatory variables**

In Colombia, households are classified in a strata scale of their neighborhood from one to six –one the poorest, six the richest-. The classification is used by the government in targeting social spending and the subsidizing of electricity, sanitation and running water services (DANE, n.d.). The city is composed of 22 districts and for this analysis we grouped districts into five categories of socioeconomic conditions using the neighborhood classification provided by the local government.

1.  Low-low SES (1 in the local strata scale) are the most deprived and poor neighborhoods, most of them are slums and lack basic sanitation services.

2.  Low SES (2 in the local strata scale) are poor neighborhoods with most of the basic needs covered (potable water, electricity, sewerage).

3.  Middle-low SES (3 in the local strata scale) are districts with mostly working poor population.

4.  Middle SES (4 in the local strata scale) are middle class districts.

5.  Middle high – high SES (5 and 6 in the local strata scale) are the most affluent districts.

Low-low and low SES districts present the highest rates of homicides, have the lowest number of health facilities in the city, have the lower ratio of effective public space per habitant, and host

about 56% of the population. Figure 1 presents general characteristics, safety and provision of public goods and services by district SES.

**Figure 1.  About here**

**Cali socioeconomic districts composition and general characteristics**

To control for life satisfaction based on the socioeconomic characteristics of where people live, we included variables of gender, marriage, and declared monthly income. Given the relevance of health on life satisfaction and the impact that neighborhood has on health outcomes in Cali (Martínez et al., 2017) we used two measures as proxies for mental and physical health[2]. We also control for satisfaction with living standards (yes/no question).

This analysis also includes a set of subjective measures of satisfaction, all rated in a scale 1 to 10. One set of variables are related with location (satisfaction with city, neighborhood and home). The other set of variables are referred to satisfaction with the government provision of public goods and services (safety, health services, public transportation, and parks and green areas). Table 1 present descriptive statistics by year of the surey.

**Table 1. About here**

**CaliBRANDO Descriptive Statistics 2015 - 2016**

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[2] Physical health was assessed by the question "now thinking about your physical health, which includes physical illness and injury, for how many days during the past 30 days was your physical health not good?" Mental health was measured using the question "now thinking about your mental health, which includes stress, depression, and problems with emotions, for how many days during the past 30 days was your mental health not good?" 14 days were used a threshold because practitioners use a similar timeframe to diagnose mood disorders (Lamothe-Galette, 2005)

We use a linear model (OLS) to estimate the association between happiness and the satisfaction with place and the government provision of public goods and services. We control for individuals' socio-demographic and economic characteristics using the variables described above. This analysis is descriptive and we do not claim a causal relationship between the factors studied in this exploration.

## Results

*Indicators of Happiness*

In Cali, people declared themselves to be very happy. Over 75% of individuals surveyed said that they were very satisfied with their lives, scoring 8 or more in the 1-10 scale. To the question how satisfied are you with your life, on average, individuals rate 8.6. These numbers are in sharp contrast with OECD countries where life satisfaction is rated on average at 6.2 (OECD, 2013). However, Cali is not an outlier in the country. Our survey replicates the national studies that show people in Colombia are happier than people in developed nations (Clifton, 2015).

The literature on happiness shows that there are three strong predictors of individual happiness: income, marriage and health.

The bulk of the literature on life satisfaction is dedicated to understanding its relationship with money and socioeconomic status (Deaton, 2008; Easterlin et al., 2010; Diener and Tay, 2015; Di Tella et al., 2003). Similar to most of the findings from the global North, we find that the relationship between income and life satisfaction is positive, linear and very strong: the higher the income, the higher the life satisfaction.

In our sample, 21% of individuals surveyed earn less than minimum wage (about U$245 a month), the majority (53%) makes between U$245 and U$491 monthly and only 14% makes more than U$500. Over 14% do not have income, mostly women. This is in line with the findings of the

International Labor Organization (ILO, 2013). On average, males have higher income than females despite similar educational attainment.

How does happiness change with income and the conditions of the districts where people live? Figure 2 presents results of life satisfaction and income by district SES. In summary: on average, the higher the income the higher the score on life satisfaction. Those who live in the most impoverished areas report the lowest levels of life satisfaction. In contrast, those who live in middle income SES districts report the highest levels of happiness, even higher than those in the upper income bracket. Despite the significant differences in income, over 70% of all individuals - regardless of district SES- are satisfied with their living standards (what they can do and buy with their current income).

**Figure 2. About here**

**Life Satisfaction and income by district SES**

In line with other research (Easterlin, 2003), we find that married people are happier, especially married men. Married men rate their life satisfaction at 9.3 whereas single males rate their overall happiness at 8.3. Married women are happier than single ones. In our study, married woman score 8.9 on life satisfaction whereas singles rate at 8.3. We also find that marriage is more prevalent within the affluent population (25%) whereas in the poorest districts is about 15%. Those differences are statistically significant. One particular finding in our data that deserves some discussion is that cohabitation is not related with happiness. Amongst the poor, cohabitation is more prevalent than marriage (about 30%), but compared with married people, those who cohabitate seems to be on average, poorer and less happy.

Health is probably the most important factor when explaining individual happiness, even more important that income. This also holds in Cali. In a previous study in the city it was established that people living in districts with higher rates of crime (homicides) have a higher prevalence of mental distress, and those who live in districts with low provision of parks and green areas have a higher probability of obesity (Martínez et al., 2017). In our sample we found that 11% of respondents declared feeling depressed or anxious and 16% reported bad physical health during 14 days in the last month. Generally speaking, women report a higher prevalence of days feeling depressed.

Table 2 shows how the prevalent disparities in the city affect the health conditions of the poorest. The poor in Cali are penalized in multiple ways. Lack of access to green areas, health facilities and high crime rates explain the significant differences between the rich and the poor.

**Table 2. About here**

**Health and district SES**

**Happiness and place**

Happiness can be assessed at different spatial scales, from the general urban realm to the inner sphere of privacy of the household. In this analysis, we seek to understand how the three levels of city, neighborhood and home (household) relate to individual happiness.

We use different levels to proxy for location, because each level relates to individual happiness in different ways. The literature shows that the perceived benefits from the city as a whole are different from the benefits perceived from neighborhoods and even from a more inner and intimate sphere as the household. The reported satisfaction that individuals derive from cities are related with job opportunities, income, city facilities, access to cultural activities and infrastructure (Okulicz-Kozaryn, 2013). Neighborhoods in turn, provide a sense of cohesion and community building. Also, issues like traffic, lack of public services provision and crime are usually segmented and clustered in the most impoverished areas. All these factors affect people´s satisfaction with their

neighborhoods (Hur & Morrow-Jones, 2008). Satisfaction with a household or "home" is more related with a community commitment for strengthening families and the inner circle as the same time that influence self-esteem and greater control (Rohe et al., 2013; Rohe et al., 2016).

When we look at happiness at these different spatial scales we get some interesting results. Figure 3, presents the results of city, neighborhood and home satisfaction.

**Figure 3. About here**

**City, neighborhood and home satisfaction by district SES**

In terms of satisfaction with the city and home, the five different groups all share relatively high levels of satisfaction. Those living in the most affluent districts are generally speaking, more satisfied with the city. Home satisfaction has a very similar pattern across all groups. Individuals report high satisfaction rates with their homes. This may capture the social relations and the sense of community that people build on in their inner and private sphere. As is shown in table 4, city and home satisfaction increases happiness.

When we look at satisfaction with the neighborhood a very different picture emerges. Levels of neighborhood satisfaction increase with SES. The general dissatisfaction with neighborhood, particularly in the most impoverished districts, may reflect the high crime and poor provision of public goods that the lower income population in the city is exposed.

**Satisfaction with goods and services provided by the government**

Happiness is not simply a product of individual lives but also a function of public life and civic culture. Some researchers argue that individual happiness is enhanced when people feel their cities and policymakers are able to deliver services to improve the quality of life (Leyden et al., 2011). A city with happy individuals may therefore translate into better social connections, higher public trust and a functioning civic culture. Individual happiness may have the potential to build better societies.

However, a major finding of this work is that individual happiness does not translate into major civic culture or trust in government performance. The bulk of research shows that the individual happiness is strongly related with the services and goods that people receive from governments (OECD, 2017). Based on the data collected in Cali, we argue that, different from developed countries, individual happiness is achieved despite perceived government performance.

As shown in table 3, the satisfaction is generally low with the provision of goods and services. Moreover, there are not important differences in government satisfaction by district SES. Public transportation, and safety are the dimensions that obtained the lowest evaluation from citizens. The average score in all dimensions remained steady –and low- during each year evaluated.

**Table 3. About here**

**Average Government Satisfaction -1 to 10 scale-**

Citizen discontent is understandable. In 2014, almost half of Cali's population used public transportation in the city; however, the limited capacity of the mass transit system has created discontent amongst the population. Crowded, disorganized and unsafe (a lot of petty crime is committed in buses) are major and recurring criticisms of the system (Cali Cómo Vamos, 2015).  In 2004, 91 homicides were reported per 100,000 habitants, and by 2014 this figure had declined to 66

violent homicides. But petty crime is on a rise in the city (Cali Cómo Vamos, 2014). Only 2% declared themselves to be completely satisfied with security in the city. There are, it seems, limits to the happiness syndrome. Happiness runs into the brute reality of perceived insecurity and poor government performance in the city.

Table 4, presents the results of an OLS model predicting life satisfaction controlling for sociodemographic factors, satisfaction with location, satisfaction with the provision of government services and district SES.

**Table 4. About here**

**OLS predicting life satisfaction, 2015-2016**

In line with other findings, marriage is positively correlated with life satisfaction. Income is positively associated with life satisfaction, but its significance fades when health conditions are included in the model. Mental health presents a strong negative association with happiness (it affect the most to the poorest and women). Satisfaction with living standards (what people can do and buy with their current income), is positively associated with happiness. As shown in table 1, satisfaction with living standards is high (over 70%), and does not change importantly across district SES, despite differences on income.

City and home satisfaction are strongly associated with life satisfaction. This shows the high relevance of place and happiness. Dissatisfaction with government performance in different domains (safety, health services and public transportation,) is negatively associated with happiness, although, the correlation is only statistically significant for safety.

One reading of the low satisfaction of government performance is that Cali in particular and Colombia in general, has been shifting from a low to a middle income country. In 2005, 36% of the

population in Cali considered themselves poor, by 2014, the proportion felt to 14% (Cali Como Vamos, 2014). With an increasing sense of affluence and prosperity, citizens are demanding more from public services such as better transportation, better schools, more safety, more green spaces and parks. And the gap between rising expectations and government performance is widening leading to a decline in satisfaction with the city government. In 2008, 71% of the population were satisfied living in Cali, but by 2014 this proportion had fallen to 62% (Cali Cómo Vamos, 2014). This finding is in line with a previous analysis conducted in the city. Martínez, Short and Ortíz (2015) found low scoring on satisfaction with civic norms and government performance, especially amongst the poor.

As shown in table 4, income is not significantly correlated with happiness (once health and individual variables are included in the model). Indeed, it seems that the poorest are the happiest. As compared to those in Low-low SES districts (excluded category in the model), all the respondents report, generally speaking, lower scores of life satisfaction as compared to those in the lower socioeconomic scale. Although differences are only statistically significant in the middle-low SES districts. This may seem counterintuitive. However, other analysis conducted in the city, shows that the poor informal workers in the city –trash pickers and street vendors- report high levels of live satisfaction (Martínez, 2016).

The positive evaluation of life satisfaction and happiness amongst the poorest is not new (Dowling & Yap, 2012) and by no means suggest that they are satisfied with what they are getting from the government. It may suggest on the contrary, that other values are more important when valuing happiness and life satisfaction. Health, family and community may play a more relevant role than income.

**Discussion**

The people of Cali, like most people in Colombia, are happy. But this generalized happiness changes once the deep socioeconomic disparities in the city are analyzed. We found that on the surface, people living in districts with better socioeconomic conditions are generally speaking, happier. This reaffirms the generalized notion that income generates happiness. However, the complexity arises when other factors are taken into consideration. Satisfaction varies by spatial scale. People tended to be satisfied with the city and home and much less satisfied with neighborhood. And there was significant difference with neighborhood satisfaction rising by SES. This difference reflects, we believe, the fact that residents are reacting to local public services rather than general city attitudes or perception of home. People are less satisfied with their neighborhoods, especially in low SES districtsthan the city as whole or their home in particular.

Compared to personal subjective well-being, satisfaction with city government performance is much lower. There is a dichotomy in satisfaction levels between the private space of home and the public spheres of the neighborhood. We noted a major disparity between high scores for subjective wellbeing compared to satisfaction with government performance. Caleños score high on subjective well-being but lower on satisfaction with the public sphere.  This is a countrywide problem. According to Gallup data, between 2009 and 2013 people declared low trust in the police, and high perceptions of insecurity and vulnerability to crime (Sonnenschein, 2014). Our study finds an important difference between individual feelings of wellbeing compared to civic satisfaction.

We also found that taking all together, residents in the poorest districts are more satisfied with their lives (although the differences as compared with residents from other districts are not statistically significant in all cases). This may reflect the high resilience of this population. The poorest in the city are negatively affected by crime, poor health outcomes and insufficient provision of public goods, but they display a great satisfaction with their private lives.

A growing body of literature suggests that happiness is not only influenced by individual factors such as income or health. Life satisfaction increases when people feel positively about their neighborhoods and public services (Goldberg et al, 2012). We find a clear distinction between individual and collective happiness in Cali. Behind the happiness syndrome is a disparity between the individual and collective spheres. While people are satisfied with their lives they are less content with public life and government performance especially at the neighborhood level. Colombians are happy with their lives, but not with their society.

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