

City profile

Dissatisfaction with city life? Latin America revisited

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ABSTRACT

Data from the World Values Survey and AmericasBarometer are used in ordinal logistic models to evaluate life satisfaction in rural and urban areas in Latin America. Our findings indicate that, unlike the United States, in Latin America there is no evidence of rural–urban happiness differences. In Latin America familism is the key driving force, aspatial and transcending location.

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1. Introduction

In an earlier study [Berry and Okulicz-Kozaryn \(2009\)](#) explored global differences in dissatisfaction with urban life. Controlling for well-documented sources of individual happiness/unhappiness that transcend place of residence (age, gender, marriage, employment, income, education, health and leisure) they concluded that there was no evidence that either rural or big-city residence raised or reduced unhappiness at the global level. However, in countries at higher levels of development rural residence increased happiness at double the rate that big-city residence boosted malaise, a pattern most pronounced in societies with an Anglo-Saxon heritage, as hypothesized earlier by [Choay \(1965\)](#). Another exception was detected in rapidly-urbanizing Asia, where life dissatisfaction decreased with big-city residence. In the subsequent study by [Easterlin, Angelescu, and Zweig \(2011\)](#) on the impact of economic growth on life satisfaction showed that the excess of urban happiness tended to vanish and even reverse as occupations, incomes and education in urban and rural areas converged.¹

In the 2009 analysis, which was conducted using data collected in the early waves of the World Values Survey, Latin America was poorly represented. The purpose of this follow-up study is to fill that gap

using the more comprehensive data sets produced by the World Values Survey (WVS) for the period of 2010–2014² and the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) AmericasBarometer for 2012–2014.³ These sources provide information for a broader set of countries ([Appendix A](#)) and enable models to be run both for the entire set of countries and for individual nations. We thus address Easterlin's call for further investigation of the variety of urban–rural differences that his analysis found among the LDC's ([Easterlin et al., 2011, p. 2195](#)).

Our principal finding is that despite demonstrating remarkably similar determinants of happiness at the individual level,⁴ Latin and North Americans respond differently to urban and rural life. In North America the preference for rural living and lower-density life is

² The World Values Survey data was designed to enable cross-national comparison of values and norms on a wide variety of topics and to monitor changes in values and attitudes across the globe. Surveys have been completed for 1981–1984, 1990–1993, 1995–1997, 1999–2004, 2005–2009, and 2010–2014. We chose to analyze the most recent wave because it contains the largest number of Latin American countries. Of particular interest is the question: *All things considered, how satisfied are you with your life as a whole these days?*

³ The AmericasBarometer surveys 26 nations across North, Central, and South America and the Caribbean every two years. The survey has a variable called “tamano” which is used to indicate the town sizes where respondents lived. This variable varies by country. For the years of 2012 and 2014, a variable for municipal size was added that was consistent across countries, however, enabling continent-wide analysis. The happiness question in this survey asks: *In general how satisfied are you with your life? Would you say that you are very satisfied, somewhat satisfied, somewhat dissatisfied or very dissatisfied?*

⁴ First demonstrated by [Graham and Pettinato \(2001\)](#) and supported by all existent Latin American studies ([Ateca-Amestoy et al., 2014](#), [Graham & Felton, 2006](#), [Lora, 2008](#), [Rojas, 2006](#), [Valente & Berry, 2015b](#)). In both Latin America and the United States marriage, high levels of education, religion, friendship, and employment are all positively related to happiness.

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¹ According to [Easterlin et al. \(2011\)](#) at low levels of economic development there are substantial gaps favoring urban over rural areas in income, education, and occupational structure, resulting in a large excess of urban over rural life satisfaction. However, at more advanced development levels, these economic differentials tend to disappear, and rural areas approach or exceed urban in life satisfaction.

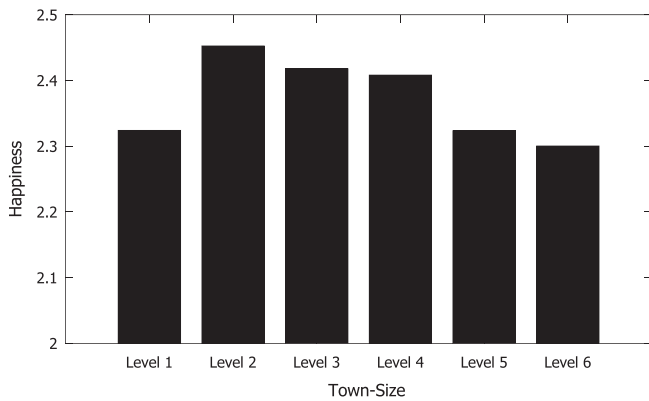


Fig. 1. Happiness by town size in Latin America not corrected for variations among individuals.

Source: WVS.

apparent but in Latin America there are no statistically significant differences in the happiness/unhappiness of urban and rural residents.

As in the [Berry and Okulicz-Kozaryn \(2009\)](#) study, this conclusion runs counter to that of [Veenhoven \(1994\)](#), who had argued that in developed countries rural people tend to be equally satisfied with life as city-people but in underdeveloped countries rural dwellers are markedly less happy than city-dwellers. Seeking explanations for our finding, we are drawn to classical social development theory as enriched by social psychologists who have studied cultural variations along “the most well-researched dimension of culture to date ... individualism and collectivism” ([Triandis & Gelfand, 2011](#)). This axis is central to classical theories of social development, from [Tönnies' \(1887\)](#) account of the transition from *Gemeinschaft* to *Gesellschaft* through [Durkheim \(1893\)](#) and [Simmel \(1903\)](#) to [Weber \(1922\)](#). It took its modern form following the publication of [Hofstede \(1984, 2001\)](#), and has been codified as the theory of individualism and collectivism by [Triandis and Gelfand \(2011\)](#).

The individualism–collectivism contrast also appears in the work of [Emmanuel Todd \(1985\)](#), who postulates that it is different family types that shape culture, values, beliefs and behavior. The family, he says, shapes the worldview of its children, reproducing people who share the same beliefs and values. Each generation absorbs parental values and bases its own child rearing on those values: the system is self-perpetuating. In turn, the values shape the individual's expectations about larger social, economic, and political relationships beyond the family at the level of region, nation–state, and civilization. The resulting ideologies are no more than family relations writ large. There are, Todd says, only eight basic family types across the globe.⁵ Of these, two are of interest here. The absolute nuclear family of the Anglo-Saxon world socializes children to individualized values: They must strive to succeed to be able to support their own independent nuclear family units. One result has been a preference for utilitarian concepts of individual rights and liberties: Individuals must be the ones to act to maximize their own welfare; the best society is one in which each individual has maximized his or her happiness and in the eyes of [Choay \(1965\)](#) some of this happiness resides in the lower-density residential settings preferred by nuclear families, as exemplified by Frank Lloyd Wright's prairie style housing and Broadacre City. Standing in contrast to this is the egalitarianism brought from Latin Europe to Latin America in which the family⁶

⁵ Todd lists them as the absolute nuclear family, exogamous community family, authoritarian family, egalitarian nuclear family, endogamous community family, asymmetrical community family, anomic family, and African family systems.

⁶ Recent social change in Latin America has resulted in the rise of non-traditional families due to the legalization of same-sex marriage and laws allowing same-sex couples to adopt children. Unfortunately, LAPOP and WVS do not ask respondents for their sexual orientation, rendering impossible to include these non-traditional families in our study. Future research would be imperative to analyze whether there's a difference in type of residence happiness for these families.

Table 1
Ordered logistic regressions of happiness – WVS (odds ratios).

Variable	W1	W2
Level 1	1.227*	1.173
Level 2	1.176*	1.159
Level 3	1.110	1.080
Level 4	1.067	1.026
Level 5	0.990	0.946
Income	1.043***	1.043***
Married	1.452***	1.432***
Age	0.966***	0.966***
Age2	1.000***	1.000***
Female	1.088*	1.044
White	0.991	0.985
Education		
Hs	1.024	1.003
Techs	0.916	0.901
College	1.143	1.104
University	1.081	1.027
Unemployed	0.796**	0.813**
Crime	0.987	0.989
Health	2.099***	2.061***
Importance of		
God		1.052***
Friends		1.190***
Family		1.550***
Country dummies	Yes	Yes
Year dummies	Yes	Yes
N	10,411	10,411

* $p < 0.05$.

** $p < 0.01$.

*** $p < 0.001$.

is an extended one including grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, second cousins, and even people who are not biologically related but are close friends, and in which the relationships are characterized by loyalty, interdependence, cooperation and the importance of face-to-face interactions that are equally-likely within urban or rural households ([Ateca-Amestoy, Aguilar, & Moro-Egido, 2014](#)). We believe that the individualism–egalitarianism contrast lies at the base of the urban–rural happiness differences between North and Latin America.

In what follows, we present our models and methods, provide the results, and draw together our main conclusion.

Table 2
Ordered logistic regressions of happiness – LAPOP (odds ratios).

Variable	L1	L2
Level 1 Pequeña	1.018*	1.006
Level 2 Mediana	1.028*	1.011
Income	1.126***	1.131***
Married	1.033	1.013
Age	0.953***	0.952***
Age2	1.000***	1.000***
Female	1.017	0.967
White	1.107***	1.097**
Education		
Hs	1.127***	1.139***
College	1.269***	1.305***
University	1.268***	1.302***
Graduate	1.795***	1.802***
Unemployed	0.955	0.952*
Crime		0.856***
Religion		1.234***
Country dummies	Yes	Yes
Year dummies	Yes	Yes
N	32,754	32,367

* $p < 0.05$.

** $p < 0.01$.

*** $p < 0.001$.

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