



Citizen satisfaction with public goods and government services in the global urban south: A case study of Cali, Colombia[☆]



Lina Martínez ^{a,*}, John Short ^b, Marianella Ortíz ^{a,*}

^a Universidad Icesi, Colombia

^b University of Maryland, Baltimore County, United States

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ABSTRACT

In this paper we present data from a recent survey of residents' satisfaction levels with a range of urban public goods and government performance in Cali, Colombia. The more affluent report higher levels of satisfaction, especially with regard to security, public space, utilities and government performance, compared to the poor. The low scoring on satisfaction with civic norms and government performance, especially amongst the poor, undermines the notion of an aspirations paradox, suggests a lack of social capital and distrust of government, and indicates a social capital deficit. Our survey results indicate that strengthening the bonds of social capital, improving urban public space and working to improve public safety should be important areas of concern for urban and national governments.

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1. Introduction

In this paper we present data from a recent survey of residents' satisfaction levels with a range of urban public goods and government performance in Cali, Colombia. The paper draws upon and contributes to three distinct bodies of work.

First, this paper seeks to test, in one city, some of the findings emerging from the burgeoning literature on measuring happiness and life satisfaction. This large and growing body of work is based on surveys of subjective testimony on peoples' levels of satisfaction with life in general and with more specific domains such as housing, public services and the effectiveness of public policy (David et al., 2013; Delle Fave 2013; Layard & Layard, 2011; Van Praag and Ferrer-i-Carbonell, 2008). Although the term 'satisfaction' is often used, fundamentally, the work is an attempt to measure and quantify that most basic, yet elusive of human attributes, happiness. There are substantial critiques of this approach ranging from the philosophical (Nussbaum, 2012) to a certain disquiet expressed with terms employed, variables chosen and methods used (Rodríguez-Pose & von Berlepsch, 2014). Despite the criticisms,

there is a consensus now that life satisfaction can be measured reliably, because the research shows that individuals are able and willing to express their satisfaction on a cardinal scale (Graham and Lora, 2010; Van Praag and Ferrer-i-Carbonell, 2008). Although there are some case studies of individual cities (Fang, 2006; Insch & Florek, 2008), most of this research is conducted and codified at the level of countries. These are big aggregations.

Second, and very much related, is a concern with how surveys of citizen concerns can better inform public policies. A good example is the Organization of Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)'s "better life index" for individual member countries (OECD, 2013). The inclusion of life satisfaction as a key variable in this index is based on the general agreement that improving the life satisfaction of individuals is a desirable goal of government endeavors. Measures of subjective wellbeing—using life satisfaction as a proxy—informs policymakers about the direction and efficacy of policy programs. Bok (2010) explores in more detail how the results can inform public policies. There are also more highly focused concerns; Knight and Gunatilaka (2011), for example, try to answer the more specific question of whether economic growth in China increases happiness in that country.

Third, there is a growing concern in urban studies with the role of affect. *Affect*, to be distinguished from *effect*, is commonly used as a verb to signify influence, meaning to impress or to move: it implies change and alteration. In the contemporary urban literature

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* Corresponding authors.

E-mail address: lmartinez@icesi.edu.co (L. Martínez).

the term is used most often used as a derivative form of affect theory by which a range of emotions are identified, from the positives ones of 'happiness', 'enjoyment' and 'excitement' through the more neutral 'surprise', on to the more intense and negative ones such as 'anger', 'disgust', 'anguish', 'fear' and 'shame'. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick encouraged a concern with affect, emotion and socio-spatial orders (Sedgwick & Frank, 2003). There is now a burgeoning literature on affect in urban studies. Kobayashi, Preston, and Murnaghan (2011) look at how affect is produced from and through the experiences of people in place; they explore the sense of place produced by migrants from Hong Kong into Vancouver and Toronto. Bomfim and Urrutia (2005) investigate the feelings and emotions of a sample of people in Barcelona and Sao Paulo about their city. The responses, qualified by metaphor, identify dominant representations of feelings of a "city of contrast", "city of attraction", "city of destruction", "city of surprises", city of movement" and "pleasant city". There are also comparisons of empirical rankings of cities with the satisfaction levels of individuals (Okulicz-Kozaryn, 2013). In this paper we examine people's happiness levels with a range of goods and services.

Drawing upon the findings emerging from the literature on life satisfaction, our purpose is to discover if similar conclusions can be reached when the analysis is conducted at the city level. We are concerned here with how residents rate a range of public goods and government services. In this analysis we report citizen satisfaction levels in Cali along five dimensions: security, public space, utilities, civic norms and government performance disaggregated by socio-economic status and by neighborhood type. Results can shed light on the discussion of how life satisfaction perception changes based on the unit of analysis used (national aggregated data vs. city data).

2. Previous work

The work that we draw upon emerges from previous work on life satisfaction, public goods and drivers of inequality.

2.1. Life satisfaction

There are now many surveys of levels of satisfaction that codify measures of happiness along a variety of dimensions (OECD, 2013). The surveys of life satisfaction tend to ask two sets of question: one relating to levels of satisfaction with one's own life and another to satisfaction with the more public realm. There are at least two consistent findings. First, there is relationship with income and reported levels of satisfaction with life. In a classic paper, Easterlin (2001) noted that happiness increases with income. However, aging over the life cycle, while it tends to increase income, also expands aspirations that tend to undermine the positive effect of income growth. As people get richer their expectations also increase. Also, satisfaction in older age groups is more intimately connected to state of health. Second, people tend to be more positive about their private life than about the collective, identified as neighborhood, city or country. In this paper we will refer to this as a 'neighborhood effect'. We will test some of these findings by using socio-economic status as a proxy for income and comparing results for high and low socio-economic status respondents and for richer and poorer neighborhoods.

There is a cultural bias to the findings. South Asia and Western Europe have greater biases towards optimism, for example, than do Eastern Europe and Sub-Saharan Africa. Lora (2008) provides a detailed summary of work on Latin America and shows that Latin America falls midway in global ranking on life satisfaction between the higher ranking North America and the lower ranking sub-Saharan Africa. Within this 23-country group, Colombia ranks seventh for satisfaction with one's own life and eighth for

satisfaction with situation of the country. In other words, Colombia is roughly in the middle of the middle, with neither the optimism of the rich world nor the pessimism of the very poor world. An even more recent paper finds that for the period 2010–2012, Colombia ranked 35th out to 156 countries in the world on ranking of happiness higher than Italy, Japan and Spain (Helliwell et al., 2015). At the top were Denmark, Norway and Switzerland, at the bottom Togo, Benin and Central African Republic. All of Latin America showed significant increase in reported happiness between 2007 and 2012 and now ranks similar to Western Europe, a result perhaps of improved life chances.

Lora found that poorer people, especially in Latin America, tend to be more positive than richer people about their level of satisfaction with public goods and services. This is termed the aspirations paradox. Aggregate studies find that the poorer groups in Latin America tend to express a more optimistic assessment of the government in the public realm. We test this finding explicitly through comparing results for higher and lower socio-economic status groups.

2.2. Public goods

The classic economic work on public goods is the Tiebout model that assumes efficient allocation of public goods based on consumer mobility and competition between local jurisdictions (Tiebout, 1956). In reality, of course, residential mobility is constrained and public service provision is marked by externalities. Urban public goods are an integral part of the political process. Hirschman's (1970) influential work exit, voice and loyalty suggest possible scenarios for residents faced with poor or declining public service. They can either exit or voice concern with the decision dependent on the degree of loyalty. In practice in many cities in the global South the exit choice is limited so the political process is dominated by the voicing of concern and the extent to which government can promote loyalty. In this paper we highlight the underlying voice element.

2.3. Inequality in South American cities

The ability to have your voice heard is dependent on position in the socio-economic hierarchy. The extent of residents' ability to have their concerns taken seriously or embedded into the fabric of political discourse varies by socio-economic position. This is particularly evident in the cities of South America, long marked by severe inequality with the richest living separate lives from the poor in cities. The rich minority have effectively ruled for decades reinforcing and protecting this inequality. In the past thirty years, however, a more marked democratization has taken hold, in part a response to the punishing effects of the neoliberalism of the 1980s and early 1990s and there is mounting evidence of declining income inequality (Tsounta & Osueke, 2014). Across the continent more democratic governments, at both the state and local level, have inaugurated more redistributive policies with greater emphasis on the universal provision of urban public goods and services (Gwynne & Cristobel, 2014). Cities in South America are becoming more contested spaces (Koonings & Kruijt, 2007). This study reports on one city in one country, with a long and sustained history of inequality that is beginning to move towards a more egalitarian mode. Our survey results refer to, if not quite a moment of full democratization, then at least on a changing trajectory towards a higher provision of urban public goods and service. The results record public sentiment at an interesting time.

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