

# Colombia: Unlivable but Happy. Fool's Paradise?

(No, a Real Paradise, Better than the US)

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## **abstract:**

There is a Latin American phenomenon: Latinos are highly satisfied with their lives despite poor livability of the environment. This mostly theory and review article studies apparently quite unlivable but very happy fool's paradise, Colombia, in contrast to apparently very livable but quite unhappy fool's hell, the US. We argue that Colombia is not a fool's paradise—genuine happiness is possible in an apparently unlivable environment, because livability tends to be measured mostly in terms of material comfort, and already very basic material comfort is good enough to satisfy human needs and produce happiness. On the contrary, it is the excessive pursuit of material comfort, such as that in the US, that arguably actually decreases happiness by: 1) having to focus on what's unimportant, overwork, and alienate oneself; and 2) making an environment and interaction inhuman, sanitized, hospital/airport-like, and alienating. The world has much to learn from Colombia. Yet we cannot fully rule out that Colombia is a fool's paradise, perhaps ignorance is a bliss. We discuss alternative explanations and provide directions for future research.

LIFE SATISFACTION, HAPPINESS, SUBJECTIVE WELL-BEING, QUALITY OF LIFE, LIVABILITY, BEST PLACES TO LIVE, COLOMBIA, ALIENATION, DEGROWTH

Economic measures poorly capture overall progress/development (Stiglitz et al. 2009, Lambert et al. 2020).

Traditional measures like income, production, and consumption cannot fully account for people's life experiences or emotions.

While acknowledged in theory that economic measures poorly capture overall progress/development, the predominant focus in world development is still on economy and material comfort. The economic and material comfort champion, the US, offers progress/development lessons to developing countries.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, it is typically overlooked that there are wellbeing lessons from the developing countries. Notably Latin American countries such as Colombia tend to be happier than many developed countries. What can we learn from Colombians?

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<sup>1</sup>With recent backlash from the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa, Iran, Egypt, Ethiopia, and the United Arab Emirates) and others, the de-dollarization, trade re-orientation away from the West, and so forth. Still, the West, and especially the US sees itself as the righteous world leader with the lessons to teach to others—the point well made by world development veteran Jeffrey Sachs, see for instance: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rgMPIhBLp1I>.

The article is structured as follows. We start by documenting the Latin American phenomenon (Rojas 2015, 2019) in Colombia: Colombians are satisfied with life (sec. 1) despite low livability (high poverty, insecurity, inequality, etc) (sec. 2). Having established an apparent paradox of high happiness despite low livability we move to the theoretical framework to understand it (sec. 3): Veenhoven's 4 qualities of life (2000) are used to map happiness to livability, and Michalos 2 variable theory to describe the apparent contradiction as "fool's paradise" (Michalos 2014), which is then explored with livability (sec. 3.1), folklore (sec. 3.2), and Marx's alienation (sec. 3.3) theories. As a complement to fool's paradise in Colombia we turn to fool's hell (very livable but only moderately happy) in Singapore (sec. 3.4) and the US (sec. 3.5). We finish with discussion and conclusion (sec. 4) , and takeaway for policy and practice and future research (sec. 4.1.)

Subjective Wellbeing (SWB)/happiness is defined in first paragraph of section "1 Happy Colombia."

Livability is defined in first paragraph of section "2 Unlivable Colombia."

## 1 Happy Colombia

Subjective Wellbeing (SWB), happiness, wellbeing, and life satisfaction are used interchangeably. Technically, we mean evaluative/cognitive life satisfaction as opposed to affective happiness, positive and negative affects/emotions, or Eudaimonia/flourishing/functioning. Evaluative/cognitive life satisfaction is used in measured in this section, the only section that uses happiness data. A World Values Survey (WVS) SWB item reads: "All things considered, how satisfied are you with your life as a whole these days?" on scale 1='dissatisfied' to 10='satisfied'. World Database of Happiness (WDH) is an aggregate of various surveys, but SWB items are very similar to that in WVS. For elaboration and auxiliary points see appendix.

A revered (or hated) US politician, Newt Gingrich (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PWA4EmeaLgc>), aptly observes that the US Declaration of Independence doesn't guarantee happiness, neither it binds the government to produce it for you, it merely guarantees its pursuit. Accordingly, some Americans succeed and some fail this pursuit, and the US as a country doesn't even make it to the top quartile of world happiness

rankings (46/160 in World Database of Happiness; table 1).

Colombia's constitution, on the other hand, proposes happiness as the government's business—government should work to increase it: "The general wellbeing and improvement of the population's quality of life are social purposes of the State." (art 366, [https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Colombia\\_2015](https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Colombia_2015)). And Colombians are indeed very happy, happier than Americans, but arguably not because of the Colombian government, rather despite it—in multiple ways Colombian government and outcomes it produces are a failure (next section: "Unlivable Colombia").

Like other Latinos, Colombians are very happy, about 8.5 on 0-10 evaluative/cognitive life satisfaction scale, a score much higher than expected given economic, social, and institutional indicators (PNUD 2023). Colombia is one of a handful of the happiest countries—both World Values Surveys and World Database of Happiness<sup>2</sup> rank it top 3 in table 1. Colombia is outstanding at achieving very high happiness at low economic development. Colombia is happier than all other Latin countries in table 1 and about as happy as Mexico, but Colombia is significantly poorer than Mexico, at least 25% poorer either in nominal or PPP terms.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>We do not use Gallup data because Gallup data are not meant for research but for commerce—Gallup charges \$30,000 (per year) for access (authors' inquiry). Clearly happiness industry (Davies 2015), not research. In general, private corporations are often making fortune from tax dollars and students tuition—scholars should resist corporatization of academia (Mills 2012a, Cox 2013, Mills 2012b, Catropa and Andrews 2020, Schmidlin 2015). We advocate use of free World Values Survey (WVS) at <https://www.worldvaluessurvey.org>.

<sup>3</sup>See <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.CD> and <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.PP.CD>.

**Table 1:** 10 happiest countries in the world. Data from World Database of Happiness (WDH) 2010-2019 out of 160 countries at [worlddatabaseofhappiness.eur.nl/rank-reports/satisfaction-with-life](http://worlddatabaseofhappiness.eur.nl/rank-reports/satisfaction-with-life); and World Values Surveys (WVS) 2005-2022 [waves 5-7] out of 88 countries at <https://www.worldvaluessurvey.org>. Technical information for WDH is at <https://worlddatabaseofhappiness.eur.nl/reports/finding-reports-on-happiness-in-nations/technical-details-to-rank-reports-of-happiness-in-nations/technical-details-to-rank-report-average-happiness> and WVS documentation is at <https://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSDocumentationWV7.jsp>.

WDH			WVS		
rank	country	happiness (1-10)	rank	country	happiness (1-10)
1	Denmark	8.2	1	Puerto Rico	8.4
2	Mexico	8.1	2	Mexico	8.3
3	Colombia	8.1	3	Colombia	8.3
4	Switzerland	8	4	Qatar	8.0
5	Finland	8	5	Norway	7.9
6	Iceland	8	6	Nicaragua	7.9
7	Costa Rica	7.9	7	Tajikistan	7.9
8	Norway	7.9	8	Switzerland	7.9
9	Canada	7.9	9	Uzbekistan	7.9
10	Qatar	7.8	10	Ecuador	7.8

## 2 Unlivable Colombia

Livability is defined as “the degree to which a living environment fits the adaptive repertoire of a species. Applied to human society, it denotes the fit of institutional arrangements with human needs and capacities. Livability theory explains observed differences in happiness in terms of need- environment fit.” Veenhoven (2014). Livability is measured in table 2 in this section with further discussion in section “3.1 Livability Theory: Human Needs”

In sharp contrast to superb Colombian happiness, Colombia is not livable or has low objective quality of life (QOL), as measured with objective indicators in table 2.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Colombia scores mediocre or low on all indicators in table 2. Still, there are many other ways to measure QOL. UsNews, for instance, ranks Colombia 68/78. World Economic Forum provides indicators, too—see appendix.

**Table 2:** Livability/Quality Of Life (QOL): objective indicators. For details on each indicator click the link under “Source” column.

Indicator	Value	Source
2019 poverty (national benchmark)	42%	<a href="https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SI.POV.NAHC?locations=CO">https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SI.POV.NAHC?locations=CO</a>
2011 median daily income/cap PPP USD	\$7	<a href="https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/09/23/seven-in-ten-people-globally-live-on-10-or-less-per-day/">https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/09/23/seven-in-ten-people-globally-live-on-10-or-less-per-day/</a>
2019 percent on <\$5.5/day	30%	<a href="https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SI.POV.UMIC?locations=CO">https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SI.POV.UMIC?locations=CO</a>
2017 R/P 10%	40	<a href="https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SI.DST.10TH.10">https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SI.DST.10TH.10</a>
2020 unemployment rate	15%	<a href="https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.UEM.TOTL.ZS?locations=CO">https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.UEM.TOTL.ZS?locations=CO</a>
2020 freedom rank	96/210	<a href="https://freedomhouse.org/countries/freedom-world/scores">https://freedomhouse.org/countries/freedom-world/scores</a>
2021 corruption rank	87/180	<a href="https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2021/index/color">https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2021/index/color</a>
2020 political stability, no violence/terrorism pctile	20th	<a href="https://info.worldbank.org/governance/wgi/Home/Reports">https://info.worldbank.org/governance/wgi/Home/Reports</a>
2020 rule of law pctile	34th	<a href="https://info.worldbank.org/governance/wgi/Home/Reports">https://info.worldbank.org/governance/wgi/Home/Reports</a>
2021 working conditions decile	bottom decile	<a href="https://www.globalrightsindex.org/en/2021/countries/color">https://www.globalrightsindex.org/en/2021/countries/color</a>
2018 quality of roads rank	110/137	<a href="https://reports.weforum.org/pdf/gci-2017-2018-scorecard/WEF_GCI_2017_2018_Scorecard_E0SQ057.pdf">https://reports.weforum.org/pdf/gci-2017-2018-scorecard/WEF_GCI_2017_2018_Scorecard_E0SQ057.pdf</a>
2021 victims of intentional homicide rank	top decile	<a href="https://dataunodc.un.org/dp-intentional-homicide-victims">https://dataunodc.un.org/dp-intentional-homicide-victims</a>
2023 criminality rank	2/193	<a href="https://ocindex.net/rankings?f=rankings&amp;view=List">https://ocindex.net/rankings?f=rankings&amp;view=List</a>

Some of the objective indicators of quality of life from table 2 are unthinkably grim: About a third of Colombians live on less than \$5.50 a day (2019). Poverty (national benchmark) is at 42%—the whole nation has a higher poverty rate than one of the poorest cities in the US, Camden NJ, at 36% (also national benchmark, [census.gov/quickfacts/camdenCityNewJersey](https://census.gov/quickfacts/camdenCityNewJersey)). Median daily PPP per capita income in 2011 was at \$7 (the US was at \$56). In terms of working conditions, Colombia is in the bottom decile: there are murders and impunity, union-busting and dismissals. R/P 10% is the ratio of the average income of the richest 10% to the poorest 10%—Colombia ranks 3rd out of 70 at a whooping 40—the top decile of Colombians makes on average 40x the average of the poorest decile—even greater disparity than in the unequal US at 30. Unemployment rate is at 15%, with informal labor at about 50% of the workforce (Hurtado 2016).

All of that—precarious labor, poverty, and inequality should lead to unhappiness. Inequality in Latin America was found to have negative effects on happiness as it signals persistent unfairness (Graham and Felton 2006)—unfairness seems to be more detrimental than inequality (Starmans et al. 2017). Inequality is a stark feature of Colombian life, and it is inequality that has sparked recent mass protests (International Crisis Group 2021).

Colombia is still being haunted by violence and conflict, much of which is rural (Turkewitz (2021), [hrw.org/world-report/2020/country-chapters/colombia](https://hrw.org/world-report/2020/country-chapters/colombia)). Colombia is less stable and more violent than 80 percent of the countries—in table 2 metric “political stability and absence of violence and terrorism” is only

at 20th percentile. Colombia is only partly free, ranked at 96/210, quite corrupt at 87/180, and Rule of Law is problematic—below about 2/3 of countries. Crime rates are high: in terms of homicides Colombia ranks in top decile, and by one “criminality” index it ranks as the 2nd most “criminal” country in the world (after Myanmar; out of 193 countries.)<sup>5</sup>

In terms of quality of roads Colombia ranks 110/137—part of the problem is mountains, yet, for example, equally mountainous Ecuador has relatively succeeded in road building. Transport is the blood of the society (e.g., De Vos et al. 2013)—roads are a basis for travel, commerce, and trade, especially that Colombia has no rail.

### 3 Unlivable but Happy—“Fool’s Paradise”?

In previous two sections we have established that Colombia is happy, but unlivable. Hence, it could be labelled a “Fool’s Paradise”, a happy paradise, yet a fool’s paradise, because it is unlivable and so there is no reason to be happy.

Now we will examine this apparent contradiction. The goal of this study is to try to explain this apparent massive mismatch or paradox, and spark the debate/future research.

It is instructive to start with Veenhoven’s 4 qualities of life (2000) in table 3. Life chances as an outer quality in first cell (livability of environment) should in theory correspond with life results as an inner quality in last cell (satisfaction of person). That is, a livable place should be happy.

	outer qualities	inner qualities
life-chances	livability of environment	life-ability of the person
life-results	utility of life	satisfaction

**Table 3:** Veenhoven’s 4 qualities of life (2000)

Colombia’s low livability/QOL should result in low satisfaction/happiness—it is unexpected for Colombia to be one of the very happiest countries in the world. Colombia scores mediocre or low on most livability/QOL

<sup>5</sup>Although it is probably an overstatement in terms of how crime affects an average person—this “criminality” index weighs heavily organized crime networks: <https://ocindex.net/report/2023/02-about-the-index.html>.

indicators, but tops rankings of satisfaction/happiness. In other words, it appears to be unlivable but happy, a so called “Fool’s Paradise,” a place where people are subjectively happy, despite objective misery (Michalos 2014). An intersection of QOL and SWB can be visualized in a 2x2 matrix in table 4—expected outcomes are lo-lo or hi-hi, but there can also be unexpected lo-hi “fool’s paradise” or hi-lo “fool’s hell.”

	lo livability	hi livability
lo SWB	real hell [deprivation, unhappy poor]	fool’s hell [dissonance, unhappy rich]
hi SWB	fool’s paradise [adaptation, happy poor]	real paradise [wellbeing, happy rich]

**Table 4:** Michalos 2 variable theory: fool’s paradise and fool’s hell (Michalos 2014). Cummins classification is shown in square brackets (Sirgy 2002, p.61). For other examples of fool’s paradise and fool’s hell see Okulicz-Kozaryn and Valente (2019).

There is a number of theories and explanations for high happiness despite low livability. The remainder of this paper is devoted to these: first two happiness theories (livability and folklore), second Marx theory of alienation, and finally a complementary look from the opposite side (very livable but only moderately happy): fool’s hell in Singapore and the US.

### 3.1 Livability Theory: Human Needs

A major and ideally fitting happiness theory, specifically about the link between livability and SWB, is Veenhoven’s livability/needs theory (Veenhoven and Ehrhardt 1995, Veenhoven 2014). Humans, like all animals, have needs, as those on the Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs (Maslow [1954] 1987)—the more the needs are satisfied, the more happiness—places or societies that satisfy human needs well are livable or have high QOL:

Societies are systems for meeting human needs, but not all societies do that job equally well.

Consequently, people are not equally happy in all societies.

Improvement of the fit between social institutions and human needs will result in greater happiness.  
 (p. 3645 Veenhoven 2014)

The apparent Colombian chasm between livability and happiness may point to the limitations of livability theory. But we argue that, counter-intuitively, the livability theory may mostly hold true because: 1) Mediocre

or even moderately poor development (physical and institutional infrastructure) is already good enough to satisfy most basic human needs and make a place livable; 2) Physical and institutional infrastructure mostly serves only first two steps of Maslow's pyramid (physiological and safety). Human physiological needs are simple and easily satisfied without much economic or institutional development. 3) Higher needs such as personal freedom and social connection that are critically important for livability are rarely properly captured by livability metrics. 4) Given always limited resources and attention, there is an opportunity cost. Excessive pursuit of money or consumption at person level, or economic growth at community or society level sacrifices non-commodities such as personal freedom and social connection notably through overwork and alienation as elaborated in later section "Theory of Alienation."

Next we provide examples of human needs that are overlooked by livability/QOL indices. These are human needs—they do count towards livability.

Biophilia (Fromm 1964, Wilson 2021), a need for contact with nature is a fundamental human need, yet usually forgotten. "Nature is not a place to visit. It is home" (Gary Snyder). There is a clear tradeoff between economic growth and nature preservation, for instance, the more urbanization, the less natural the human habitat. Or next door in Brazil—the more economic expansion and growth, the less Amazon rainforest. Climate change is a critical challenge for human needs as it endangers the very habitat of homo sapiens (Pachauri et al. 2014), and again, the more economic growth, the worse the environmental degradation (e.g., Klein 2014), indeed a reasonable course of action is to de-grow the economies (Hickel 2020, Kallis 2011), especially the rich and carbon intensive ones such as the US. Per Colombian natural resources use and economic growth see discussion in Rubiano (2022).

Related to biophilia and climate change is biodiversity. Biodiversity improves happiness (Adjei and Agyei 2015, Prescott and Logan 2017). Nature is extraordinary in Colombia. Colombia has 2nd largest biodiversity after Brazil, despite being 7x smaller in area. Colombia has just about any type of natural amenities. Exposure to nature (as opposed to cities) is the key ingredient for happiness (Pretty 2012, Tesson 2013, Thoreau 1995 [1854]).

Social connection is a human need, and a key to happiness (Tönnies [1887] 2002, Lane 2000, McMahon 2006, Putnam 2001), and there is plenty of social connection in Colombia. Colombians are extraordinarily social, friendly, outgoing and spontaneous—social gatherings, events and festivals are widespread, frequent and long-lasting. Again, there is a tradeoff, the more focus on money, the longer the work hours, the less social connection.

And it is not just wide spread but also deep social connection. The high level of SWB in Latin America, including Colombia, is supported by a key SWB predictor: strong affective relationships. In Latin America, the strength of the affective relationships of its people and the ties they build in the communities are one of the population's primary sources of happiness and wellbeing—SWB in this region has social and affective foundations (Yamamoto 2016, Rojas 2015). High SWB is also predicted by satisfaction with family relationships and a higher frequency of positive emotions. The quantity and quality of interpersonal relationships are pivotal for the region's high levels of SWB. *Relational wealth*, which encompasses the strength and abundance of close and warm interpersonal relations with family, friends, neighbors, or colleagues, is a strong cultural characteristic in the region. On average, 85% of Latinos report having someone to count on in times of trouble. In some countries like Venezuela, Panama, Argentina, and Costa Rica, more than 90% of people report having a good social support network (Rojas 2019). This is in contrast to developed countries where people report spending only six hours weekly with friends and family, almost half an hour less than in the previous decade (van Zanden et al. 2020).

Freedom is a great human need, perhaps worth dying for. As a movie character Scottish warrior William Wallace put it:

Fight and you may die. Run, and you'll live...at least a while. And dying in your beds, many years from now, would you be willing to trade all the days, from this day to that, for one chance—just one chance—to come back here and tell our enemies that they may take our lives but they'll never take our freedom! ([imdb.com/title/tt0112573](https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0112573))

Colombia scores average on freedom listed earlier as a QOL metric in table 2, but that is one kind of freedom: “freedom from” (negative, objective): be no slave, live in a free country, have no coercion, free from restrictions/impediments; lack of obstacles. But there is another kind of freedom: “freedom to” (positive, subjective): be able to choose, control and direct one’s own life; presence of control. On scale 1-10, world’s average is about 7; the legendary land of the free, the US, scores higher at 7.7, but Colombia scores higher yet at 8 (Okulicz-Kozaryn 2014, 2015). Surely, the US does have many freedoms, but Colombians (and Mexicans, too) actually do feel more free than people in the US. Again, arguably one reason for lower feeling of freedom in the US is too much focus on work, money, and consumption. The idea is further elaborated in “Theory of Alienation” section.

### 3.2 Folklore's Theory: Colombia's "Good Energy"

Folklore theory is an attractive explanation of fool's paradise. The folklore theory states that happiness is a product of culture—tradition, national character and widely held notions about life determine one's happiness (Veenhoven and Ehrhardt 1995). Happiness is the reflection of broadly held perceptions about life which are rooted in traditions and the culture of a society (Veenhoven and Ehrhardt 1995). If a culture has an optimistic outlook on life regardless of circumstances, future generations will remain positive. Thus, a society may be happy, regardless of the socioeconomic situation, because of cultural influences (Veenhoven and Ehrhardt 1995). In other words, one can wear pink glasses and be happy no matter the circumstances (or see through dark lenses or have bleak outlook and be unhappy no matter the circumstances). This is in sharp contrast to livability theory, where happiness is a result of person's experience, satisfaction of her needs.

A Peruvian social psychologist specializing in happiness argues that the origins of Latin happiness can be traced to:

the minimalist well-being lessons of Andean and Amazonian small traditional communities which constitute the grounds of Latin American happiness, a life style that mimics the ancestral environment, the deep nature where the happiness brain wiring occurred; a physical and social environment

that naturally activates the brain pleasure circuits. Culture resemble evolutionary needs; resources to achieve needs are available for everyone; positive, interdependent collectivistic interaction is ingrained in behaviour, supporting, working, competing, and sharing. (Yamamoto 2016, p.45)

Then Colombian happiness is due to tradition and culture (folklore theory), but notably at the same time happiness stems from satisfying one's needs as tradition and culture fit human needs (livability theory).

There is an indigenous concept of "Buen Vivir" (Good Living) (Hidalgo-Capitán and Cubillo-Guevara 2017), similar to Aristotelian "Eudamonia"—both emphasize harmony and community. Buen Vivir is also about environment and food sovereignty, and it arguably contributes to SWB in Colombia, as it does in Ecuador (Guardiola and García-Quero 2014). Notably, Buen Vivir helps to explain an apparent fool's paradise—economic poverty is relative—it depends on specific way of life. For instance, households that grow their own food and are in an indigenous community depend less on money to be happy (García-Quero and Guardiola 2018). Likewise, kibbutzniks (Morawetz et al. 1977) and Amish (Surowiecki 2005) are able to be happy despite being poor. Francia Marquez, an indigenous Colombian vice president, came up with a similar concept to Buen Vivir, "Vivir Sabroso," to live in harmony with nature, traditions, and community: "vivir sabroso no es vivir con plata, vivir sabroso es vivir sin miedos" ("living tasty is not living with money, living tasty is living without fear")

The folklore theory is about national disposition/trait/character. It does appear that Colombians have slow-paced familial/social cheerful/happy disposition, which arguably is conducive for happiness. Colombian happiness does appear very real, however, rather than just being due to cognitive cultural norms, wearing pink glasses. And again, it is not just due to culture in itself, rather due to culture that is aligned with human needs and satisfies them, so the environment is livable.

Colombians celebrate over 3,000 festivals or carnivals in small towns or large cities and have about 20 holidays per year. Folklore and carnivals are part of the festive character of the country. The government uses them as tools to promote reconciliation and build social fabric and identity (Gutiérrez and Cunin 2006). In Colombia, following a robust pattern in Latin America, collectivist values are ingrained in the culture (Mensing 2002). Family is at the center of collective values, close friends follow, and in the exterior layer are neighbors

and the community. This interdependent collectivism is at the core of Latin American happiness (Yamamoto 2016).

Proper treatment of the folklore theory is left for the future research as authors' anthropological and historical expertise is limited—but we discuss below popular explanations for Colombia's happiness—future research can test them properly and systematically. Two accounts are informative: Bargant (2016) and Wallace (2017a).

According to an Englishman living in Medellin these are the things that make it happy in Colombia (Bargant 2016): putting most importance on family, friends, and fun—bravado and blind optimism may help, too; having less entitlement and appreciating what one has, having joy in small things, e.g., cheap coffee/alcohol are just fine; not worrying and not expecting much ("tranquilo.")

Bargant (2016) observes: "Colombia violence and cruelty became frighteningly routine"—indeed people can get used to just about anything (Brickman et al. 1978), and again, even though the violence is frequent, it used to be even more prevalent in the 80s and 90s—and happiness can be produced through relative advantage or improvement (Michalos 1985).

Bargant (2016) wonders further that in Colombia emotions change seamlessly and effortlessly between shame and pride, despair and hope, sorrow and happiness—but shouldn't they? Isn't being natural, simple, and easy-going a good thing? As opposed to the US, where one is supposed to pretend to just be perfect, happy, and busy working as in "American Beauty" movie. "Surface acting" (faking emotions that are deemed appropriate) is emotionally draining (Brooks 2022).

Wallace (2017a) offers many illustrative quotes by Colombians and about Colombians:

Money is nice but it's not the most important thing. In general we are a culture that values what you have.[...] Colombians are innocent. They're curious.[...] Colombians have become indifferent to situations of war. In other words, if the problem does not touch me directly, I must feel grateful, satisfied, optimistic, lucky.[...] Colombians have always demonstrated incredible, Herculean and powerful resilience to war, death and to the harsh history of violence and diplomatic failures[...] Colombians feed this resilience through human connections and the communal experience.[...] We

live for parties, holidays, and fill the void with a fanaticism for sporting events and beauty pageants and entertainment [...] The dance frees you. It is a way of expression and feeling. Here the music is carried in the blood, in the veins, in our heart. It's a great passion we carry throughout our lives.

6

### 3.3 Theory of Alienation

"Alienation is the transformation of people's own labor into a power which rules them" ([marxists.org/subject/alienation](http://marxists.org/subject/alienation)).<sup>7</sup> Alienation means separation of a person from the conditions of meaningful agency—a typical situation is when a person does not own means of production—such a person is only an appendage of a machine (Horowitz 2022). The overall alienation consists of alienation from: the product of labour, the activity of labour, one's own specific humanity, and others/society. For elaboration see Horowitz (2022) and [marxists.org/subject/alienation](http://marxists.org/subject/alienation).

In Colombia there is human factor, good energy that we have lost in the West (Freud et al. 1930). It arguably does appear that the US (and the West) has given up some humanity to win the economic race. Colombia (and Latin America) gave up less humanity, remained happy, but lost the economic race (hasn't dominated the world economically). Fischer (1973, p.233) made an useful observation on large cities: urbanites pay "the emotional price for economic wellbeing"—likewise, we argue, so do Americans, Singaporeans, and other rich societies—as elaborated in "the US: Fool's Hell?" and "Singapore: Fool's Hell?" sections.

Colombians' attitude and approach to life is spontaneous unbridled joy—similar to what Marcuse and Fromm advocated (and what has been lost in the West) (Marcuse 2015, Fromm 2013, 2012, 1964, [1941] 1994), also reminiscent of Nietzsche's ideal of a child—curious, spontaneous, creative, and innocent (Nietzsche 1896).

It is present time orientation—not living in the past or worrying about future, happy-go-lucky free spirit

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<sup>6</sup>Wallace (2017a) further explains: "Colombian salsa, as opposed to other forms, is denoted by faster syncopations that match the people's natural energy[...] "Salsa is a refresher of human dignity. It overshadows inequity and discontent with sharp rhythms and the madness of love. It closes social distances because it requires people to embrace each other in a moment of eye contact, the feel of the skin, bringing them together with movement, helping them to know each other and see the best in each other. It has a long cultural heritage of peace."

<sup>7</sup>The Marx's concept seems close to a more modern psychological concept of dissociation—see appendix.

without shame or guilt—in sharp contrast to the West, where anxiety and calculating attitude prevail.

But on the other hand, Latin culture simply could be perhaps just culture of poverty (Banfield 1967, 1974) that leads to poor development. Yet, not caring too much can be actually what is needed for much of a society in the West—see wonderfully refreshing Manson (2015).

The US way of life is unnaturally fast and mostly about money (Easterlin 1973), aka “busyness” (being busy with work all the time is very desirable) (Gershuny 2005, Musk 2018). The US way of life is also full of stress, anxiety, and alienation even outside of work and money pursuit. Another source of stress and anxiety may be the constant drive to excel in everything, be perfect, and keep up with the Joneses (Frank 2012, Manson 2015)—so well portrayed in “American Beauty” and “Crash” movies. Excellence is pervasive, e.g., Plano TX, has on its official logo “City Of Excellence,” Rutgers University is a place “where excellence is earned” ([rutgers.edu/excellence](http://rutgers.edu/excellence))

But excellence or perfection is not human, on the contrary, to err is human. Pursuit of perfection/excellence generates arms race and constantly raises the bar, creating even more stress and anxiety in a vicious cycle, and there can only be one or a handful of winners in any race (Frank 2012, Manson 2015). In addition to stress and anxiety, shame and guilt are arguably created as well.

Yet another source of stress and anxiety is quantity and quality of social relationships—in the US, a highly capitalistic society, social relationships are about business, not about actual meaningful social contact (Horowitz 2022, Okulicz-Kozaryn 2020). As compared to calculating and fake Americans, Colombians are spontaneous, innocent, closer to human nature, and more real. Colombians do not pay much attention to economics and politics. Life is more about family, friends, and fun.

In Cali, the third largest city in the country, SWB has been measured annually since 2014. Through face-to-face surveys, over 1,200 residents are surveyed each year about what matters for their SWB (Martínez and Short 2020). Consistently, Caleños are very happy (on average 8.5 on 0-10 scale)—and what matters the most for their wellbeing are family and personal relations. Very few consider politics, corruption, or other adverse external circumstances in their inner wellbeing assessments (Martínez and Short 2020). Then while in some

ways livability is poor, it filters less into happiness.

Colombians appear to be full of agency in contrast to alienated Americans. For instance, in Colombia, pull over from the road and right there on a roadside you get a friendly personal cup of coffee. In the US, you can go to a Starbucks that feels like a hospital or an airport—robotic and inhuman.<sup>8</sup> Starbucks workers (not to mention McDonald's and other fast foods) do seem to be alienated both from the product and the activity—they have no freedom, autonomy or latitude over the product and almost none over labor (there are strict procedures that must be followed).

Same holds for other chains that dominate the US, and could be extended to other businesses, delivery for instance. US Amazon drivers have cameras and motion detectors in a truck, and to meet the quota sometimes have to pee in the bottle (Moyer 2022). Similarly in warehouses, workers are wearing a bracelet with GPS, and to meet the quota sometimes have to restore to painkillers that are freely available from dispensaries throughout the warehouse (Streitfeld and Kantor 2015, Guendelsberger 2019). What else could be a better example of a loss of humanity or de-humanization than a human wearing a bracelet with GPS eating painkillers and working alongside robots in a giant warehouse? Movie fiction is becoming reality—see "Elysium" ([imdb.com/title/tt1535108](http://imdb.com/title/tt1535108)). Of course, not all workers suffer in such dire conditions, but this is arguably the trend. If innovative and efficient Amazon does it, others are likely to follow, or be out of business. In Colombia, on the contrary, much of delivery is informal—often a guy on a motorcycle who has plenty of autonomy and freedom over execution of his job. In fact, about half of the Colombian economy is informal—informal labor is at about 50% or more of the workforce (cited in Hurtado 2016).<sup>9</sup>

And there are two other types of alienation: from oneself and society—if one performs highly specialized task in a repetitive fashion for long hours (most of the US workforce), one becomes alienated from herself and the society. This can be easily observed after working hours—the US workers are like ghosts without much life

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<sup>8</sup>If you are from a developed country, you probably protest the proposition and think that Starbucks is friendlier, warmer and cozier than a hospital. Then you should go to a developing country, non-tourist destination (no Cartagena, no Cancun, etc) and spend time with locals for at least few months.

<sup>9</sup>Workers in informal sector are less happy (Hurtado et al. 2017). This would contradict alienation hypothesis, but it doesn't take into account confounders such as lower pay, lack of benefits and instability.

in them and without much interaction (Putnam 2001, Duany et al. 2001). Colombians, on the other hand, are not alienated—their life is about family, friends, and fun, not about money—less money orientation, less alienation (Okulicz-Kozaryn 2020).

As per livability theory (Veenhoven 2014), society is a system to satisfy human needs, but there are multiple serious discontents of the Western society and many human needs are suppressed and not satisfied (Freud et al. 1930). Notably highly capitalistic societies, such as the US, serve to satisfy the capitalists, rather than the working people (Marx [1867] 2010).

Yet so far alternatives to capitalism such as communism did have failed spectacularly say as in Soviet Union and continue to fail in Venezuela and elsewhere. But what about fully automated luxury communism (Bastani 2019)?

There are many great things about the West and especially the US: vibrant international melting pot—Colombia may be a microcosm of Latin America, but the US may be a microcosm of the World; relative lack of (crude) corruption, working independent courts, un-corrupt law enforcement, abundance of goods and services (not that need that much for livability), and arguably the biggest advantage: some of the highest wages in the world.

Still, the bottomline is that alienation is not worth the money, unless perhaps it's millions of US dollars in annual salary. But even well paid jobs, so called “6 figure salary” (100k-1m USD) are arguably not worth it as argued by many who quit such a job and became much happier without the good paycheck but without alienation—for example see one such persuasive account: [youtube.com/watch?v=S\\_D4yJavp8M](https://youtube.com/watch?v=S_D4yJavp8M).

### 3.4 Singapore: Fool's Hell?

An useful counterexample to Colombia's “fool's paradise” is a “fool's hell”—a place that has high objective quality of life or livability, but low subjective wellbeing or life satisfaction.

Singapore, Switzerland of Asia, is impeccably clean, extremely stable/predictable/disciplined and safe (de Veyra 2022, Clydesdale 2022). Singapore, by many standards, is one of the best, if not the best place in the

world. It has world's 3rd highest (after Qatar and Luxembourg) Gross Domestic Product per Capita Purchasing Power Parity adjusted (IMF 2017). It has also 3rd highest (after Monaco and Japan) life expectancy (Central Intelligence Agency 2017), 2nd highest economic freedom (Heritage 2017). Singaporean children score highest on educational tests (Coughlan 2017), it is making greatest progress in health (Fullman et al. 2017), has the world's fastest internet (McSpadden 2015), and 2nd best roads (World Economic Forum 2017). It even has world's strongest passport (Chandran 2017). In short, one could say that Singapore is one of most livable places in the world, if not the very most livable in the world. Singapore's life satisfaction rank is 68/160 (WDH). Again, Colombia is 3/160.

Being impeccably clean, extremely disciplined and safe can hamper positive freedom (Singapore scores 7 v Colombia's 8 in WVS) and ultimately happiness. For instance, no smoking in Singapore—but cigars help a great deal in struggle of life (Freud).<sup>10</sup> No marijuana, no gum chewing, and a list of prohibitions continues (de Veyra 2022, Clydesdale 2022).

### 3.5 the US: Fool's Hell?

The US, the world-renowned “best country in the world,” home to the American dream, notably the very richest country in the world (excluding tiny oil producing countries such as Norway), ranks 46/160 in WDH—the “best country in the world” doesn’t even make it to the top happiness quartile. This sounds like fool’s hell, the opposite of Colombian mismatch of QOL and SWB. Except that, also as in Colombia’s case, there is arguably better match between QOL and SWB than expected, because there are non-commodity components such as personal freedom and social connection that need to be taken into account. Colombia is actually quite livable and so it is happy, and the US actually is not that livable, and hence not that happy.

One would imagine that the US must have top income mobility in the world or surely somewhere near the

<sup>10</sup> “Smoking is one of the greatest and cheapest enjoyments in life, and if you decide in advance not to smoke, I can only feel sorry for you,” “[Cigars have] served me for precisely fifty years as protection and a weapon in the combat of life ... I owe to the cigar a great intensification of my capacity to work and a facilitation of my self-control.” Per Freud see <https://www.freud.org.uk/2020/04/22/freud-and-his-cigars/> and Elkin (1994). Of course, as with everything, moderation should be exercised, for instance, smoking more than 2 cigars a day increases probability of health problems much more than smoking less than 2 cigars per day, and while some studies find no health effects of smoking less than 2 cigars per day, some studies do find negative effects (e.g., Chang et al. 2015).

top, it is after all the country of American Dream where hard work results in success better than elsewhere. But many other countries have actually “more realistic dreams” than the US—for instance, it is easier to make it in Norway, Denmark, or Finland (Corak 2004, 2011, 2013, Economist 2013, 2012b,a). In terms of mobility, the US is somewhat like a Fool’s Paradise—people and especially immigrants think it is a paradise—you work hard, and you go to the top, but it is actually easier in other countries.

In the US, pursuit of money and pursuit of happiness are about the same thing (Easterlin 1973). But we know that a lot of money does not buy much happiness, and if anything, excessive pursuit of it, such as that in the US, may actually decrease happiness (Kasser 2016, Dittmar et al. 2014, Brown and Kasser 2005, Kasser 2003, Schmuck et al. 2000, Kasser and Ryan 1993, Leonard 2010). Arguably the major culprit is consumerism—in the US one can make a good living, make good salary, the problem is people spend it on stuff they don’t need and end up on the hamster wheel.

## 4 Discussion and Conclusion

Colombia appears to be a striking paradox in the social indicators field. Colombia scores poor or mediocre on objective quality of life indicators, but is an extremely happy country. Is Colombia “unlivable” but “happy,” a so called “fool’s paradise”? Arguably not.

Colombia is a genuinely wonderful deeply familial/social place as many locals and travelers would attest (e.g., Roos 2019, Wallace 2017a, Davies 2022). Colombians don’t seem to be weighted down by civilization and its discontents (Freud et al. 1930), or ghosts of the past (Pile 2005b,a, Pile et al. 1999).

The conclusion is that Colombia is not only one of the happiest countries, but also arguably quite livable. Surely many QOL metrics point to Colombia’s real and serious problems, notably poverty and inequality, but at the same time Colombians enjoy great positive freedom and social connection.

In sharp contrast to Colombia—there is the great American alienation—a key point is that most Americans don’t even seem to realize at all, don’t give it the slightest thought and don’t question the status quo and

current way of life—until perhaps when it's too late and one is on a deathbed wishing to have been less alienated (Ware 2012)—indeed travel to a place like Colombia may be necessary to open one's eyes. For instance, it is clear from figure 1 that Philadelphia is built for big business and Cali is built for people. Figure 1 contrasts Cali main public transit station with Philadelphia main public transit station. In Cali it is much easier to sit, buy food or catch a local bus or taxi. It is getting worse in Colombia, however—notably the urban landscape is getting littered with commercial centers "centro comercial" (Western-like malls). Villages are still spared.

**Figure 1:** Getting out of the city's main transportation hub (Google Maps). (Zoom in to see the details.)

(a) Philadelphia 30th st station



(b) Cali's terminal de transporte



In the West, and especially in the US, materialism and consumerism are so extremely rampant and widespread that they are not even noticed (Okulicz-Kozaryn 2020, Ware 2012)—equating happiness with money is a norm (Easterlin 1973). So then it appears unthinkable to the Westerners that not a wealthy country such as Colombia can be very happy. For instance, Graham and Pettinato (2002) and Graham (2012) wonder about paradox of happy peasants v frustrated millionaires—but is it that unexpected? Graham argues adaptation—the poor have adapted to their miserable lot and are happy with little they have. But so do the rich adapt: “the more one has the more one wants, since satisfactions received only stimulate instead of filling needs” (Durkheim [1895] 1950), or “wealth is like sea-water; the more we drink, the thirstier we become; and the same is true of fame” (Schopenhauer).

There is plenty of theory why a peasant would be happy (notably contact with nature) and there is empirical

evidence, too (e.g., Miñarro et al. 2021). There is actually less theory arguing that a millionaire would be happy—only neoclassical economic theory would predict that only money matters and always the more the better (Rayo and Becker 2007, Autor 2010).

The reasoning is also, especially among the economists, that there must be something wrong with happiness measure (e.g., Deaton 2013, Stevenson and Wolfers 2013, 2009, Glaeser et al. 2014, 2016), or again, with Colombians (fool's paradise). It simply seems wrong that with little money there may be great happiness. But again, we actually do know that a lot of money is neither necessary nor sufficient for happiness, and indeed excessive pursuit of money, such as that prevalent in the US, may kill happiness.

Only apparently great happiness is somehow possible in unlivable conditions. We enumerated earlier Colombia's unlivable conditions (table 2), metrics that are mostly economic, some legal/institutional, and physical infrastructure. But these things are not the only things that matter—there are other things that matter for human flourishing or happiness. Despite all the problems with poverty, roads, corruption, etc, Colombia arguably is a quite livable place.<sup>11</sup> And, again, in fact the more focus on money, the less human friendly the place is. Colombians have a wonderful, joyful, stress-less, and spontaneous way of life, and they feel free and are socially connected.

Still, the proposition of “fool's paradise” in Colombia may have some merit. The survey data does show that Colombians living in Colombia and making Colombian salary are happy. But would they still be happy if they knew life, salary, and opportunities in the West, say in the US. Would they stay in Colombia if they could easily move? Is ignorance a bliss? Is it paradise only because people don't know any better?

The concept of “fool's paradise” is related to the concept of “ignorance is a bliss,” and there may be a grain of truth there.<sup>12</sup> Colombians, especially those in poor and isolated areas, may not know about good/comfortable life, may not realize the possibilities and opportunities in the West (or any rich area such

<sup>11</sup>As long as the problems are not extreme, and in Colombia they sometimes are. For instance, mediocre or relatively poor road condition does not hamper human flourishing much, but extremely bad condition such as falling bridge does create great unhappiness. Same with poverty—one can live happily on very little, indeed be poor by western standards, without hot water, without car, etc, but abject poverty such as malnutrition does create great unhappiness. There is considerable abject poverty in Colombia, and no amount of nature, festivals, or cheerfulness can help with it.

<sup>12</sup>Likewise, perhaps Colombia is more about hedonia than eudamonia—see appendix for discussion.

as Singapore). For instance, inhabitants of poor municipalities in the Choco are happy to know only that environment in which they were born and raised, but when they know and live in other municipalities with greater socio-economic development their demands and expectations increase (Muñoz-Cardona 2018). Many poor may be relatively segregated and isolated into their neighborhoods, not knowing better, and thus being satisfied with little what they have. Similarly, poor women in rural China were happy, and only became unhappy once they became exposed to higher standard of living (Rosenthal 1999).

Furthermore, resilience may be reinforcing fool's paradise. Curiously, Martínez and Short (2020) reports that in Cali residents in the poorest districts were satisfied with their lives, and speculates that it may be so due to the high resilience of this population being affected by crime, poor health, and insufficient provision of public goods. It may be similar at country level, Colombia was ravaged by largest civil conflict in Latin America and drug-trafficking related violence in 80s and 90s (Martínez and Short 2020), and now while still poor and unsafe as compared to the West, it is much better than 30-50 years ago, and the terror it went through might have made it resilient.

Adaptation (Brickman et al. 1978) can help explain at least a part of the Colombian paradox of high subjective wellbeing despite objective problems such as poverty and crime—humans are able to adapt to just about anything (Brickman et al. 1978). Perhaps, Colombians have adapted, at least to some degree, to poverty, inequality, and even violence having suffered through recent civil war and breakdown of the state—now that things are better than they used to be just few decades ago, Colombians are making best out of the conditions. In other words, the sources of Colombian happiness may be also resilience, positive outlook, ability to make out most of little.

#### 4.1 Takeaway for Policy and Practice and Future Research

The world has much to learn from Colombia how to be happy. This paper argues that Colombia is one of the very best countries to visit, and it may even be one of best places to live.

In a contrast to Colombia, we have set forth a number of criticisms about the West, and especially the

US, notably alienation. We think that this is a key lesson and area for improvement. The US and West needs to realize its alienation and learn from Colombia about what has been lost in the West (alienation is due to mass industrialization and rampant capitalism that are relatively recent, several generations).

Related, there is Western materialism, consumerism, and obsession with status, money, and stuff (Leonard 2010, Frank 2012). In theory we know that material comfort is not everything (Stiglitz et al. 2009), that spending on experience such as social connection contributes more to happiness than spending on stuff (Ware 2012, Van Boven 2005, Kumar et al. 2014, Bhattacharjee and Mogilner 2014), and indeed what may be needed in the West is economic degrowth, not growth (Kallis et al. 2012, Kallis 2011). Still, the mainstream Western ideal is Plano TX, Singapore, Dubai, etc: impeccably clean, organized, and excellent with perfect awe-inspiring physical infrastructure. This is in contrast to and arguably at the expense of social connection and positive freedom, unbridled spontaneous joy that characterize Colombia.

Note that the arguments and results presented here likely generalize to some degree to other Latin countries, perhaps especially the Caribbean—there may be “Caribbean energy.” Ecuador’s energy, for instance, seems more flat. So perhaps a big part of the Colombian happiness magic mixture is climate and topography.

This paper argues Colombian and possibly wider Latin American effect on happiness. Future research can disentangle what it actually is about Colombia that results in happiness. We have hypothesized a number of factors, notably social connection, positive freedom, contact with nature and traditional lifestyle. Moreno (2013) lists more hypotheses as to happiness predictors that could be used in the future research: biodiversity, climate diversity, plenty of festivals/holidays, healthy lifestyle and food, dancing.

A big question (and elephant in the room) remains. If Colombia (and Latin America) are so great, why Colombians and Latinos flock in the droves to the West, notably the US? And those who stay—is ignorance a bliss, are they wearing pink glasses?

A preliminary short answer we offer is that people simply don’t know any better, both Colombians and Latinos flocking to the West, and Westerners staying away from Colombia and Latin America.<sup>13</sup> The West is

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<sup>13</sup>We discuss a bit more in appendix. Also note that as we argue “people simply don’t know any better”—the goal of this paper is both to educate and to spark more research and debate.

overrated and Colombia and Latin America are underrated—people overvalue stuff and undervalue experience at a cost to their happiness. Be happy, come to Colombia.

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# 1 ONLINE APPENDIX

## 2 Subjective Wellbeing Defined; And Explored Across Countries

Again, the body of the paper have used evaluative/cognitive life satisfaction as opposed to affective happiness, positive and negative affects/emotions, or Eudaimonia/flourishing/functioning. But here we offer an extended discussion and auxiliary points.

The most general definition of wellbeing refers to people's feelings, experiences, and perceptions of their overall quality of life, including the positive and negative assessments people make of their lives and how they interpret their experiences (OECD 2013). Three measurements are widely accepted: evaluative, affective, and eudaimonic (OECD 2013). The evaluative measurement is commonly used in policy-making discussions and typically uses overall life satisfaction (or Cantril's ladder of life) on a Likert scale (Ferrer-i-Carbonell and Frijters

2004). Affect measures focus on measuring emotions (positive and negative) that people feel, like happiness or worry (Kahneman and Krueger 2006). Eudaimonic measures focus on the functioning and fulfillment of the person seeking to capture elements of wellbeing such as autonomy, learning, goal orientation, or purpose in life (Huppert et al. 2008). In this article, we use the concept of *subjective WellBeing (SWB)* to encapsulate the different accepted metrics in the field.

## 2.1 Affective v Cognitive; Hedonia v Eudamonia

"It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied. And if the fool, or the pig, are a different opinion, it is because they only know their own side of the question." John Stuart Mill, Utilitarianism (1863)

Overall Subjective WellBeing (SWB) can be broken down into components. Notably, there is affective happiness (feel happy) v cognitive life satisfaction (perceive/evaluate life as satisfying).

The two would overlap/correlate moderately but they are conceptually different—e.g., I am happy at the moment because I see blue sky and eat a tasty burger, but I am dissatisfied with my life because I have no friends, no money, and bad health. Or I can be satisfied with my life as a whole because I have many friends, excellent health, and great job, but I am unhappy now because the weather is bad and my lunch is not tasting good.

Likewise, a typical Scandinavian, say from Iceland, looks grumpy, cold, unfriendly, and rather sad, doesn't talk much, doesn't smile, yet Scandinavians consistently report very high life satisfaction. Latinos report quite high life satisfaction, and are extremely happy: warm, cheerful, friendly.

Another notable distinction is hedonia: more joy and fun than pain and misery (Bentham) v eudamonia: good life, realizing one's potential, becoming who you are (Aristotle, Nietzsche). Perhaps Colombia is more about hedonia than eudamonia. For discussion see Diener (2009), Weijers (2011), Weijers and Jarden (2013), McMahon (2006), Ryff (2014).

## 2.2 Happiness v Life Satisfaction

Colombia is one of the happiest countries in the world, or indeed the happiest (Roos 2019). Colombia scores in top decile in terms of life satisfaction (Scandinavia often (not always) tops the rankings). Yet in terms of emotions and daily life experience: smiling and laughter, respect, enjoyment, worry, sadness and anger: positive daily experiences and emotions, the top countries are: Colombia, El Salvador, and Guatemala. Of the 10 countries that rank highest on positive experiences, 7 are Latin American (Roos 2019). Colombians seem to have warm, welcoming, and unshakable spirit; and they appear resilient—grateful, satisfied, optimistic, lucky, and even innocent (Wallace 2017a).

## 2.3 High Cognitive/Evaluative Life Satisfaction in Scandinavia, and High Affective Happiness in Latin America

Countries where people have better individual and social conditions report greater subjective wellbeing—Scandinavians are closest to achieving the best possible life (Cantril's ladder) (e.g., Helliwell et al. 2020). In addition to the individual conditions of high salaries and basic needs covered, Scandinavia is characterized by the strength of its institutions, respect for civil rights, high interpersonal and institutional trust and social cohesion, low gender gaps and inequality (Martela et al. 2020). Likewise, other high income developed countries tend to be have high life satisfaction. People in developed countries have a greater chance of achieving the best possible life and be satisfied with their lives.

However, when SWB is measured through affective balance (positive and negative emotions), the correlation between GDP per capita and SWB is moderate only (Rojas 2015, 2019). The frequency of positive emotions experienced by people in the developed nations is not as high as one may expect. The positive emotions (such as positive affect and happiness) are often lower in developed countries than in developing countries, especially Latin America. SWB is not only about economic progress. Personal relationships and positive emotions play a significant role (Campbell et al. 1976). Scandinavian countries like Sweden and Denmark, well known for their high living standards and low inequality, increasingly report low happiness. In developed countries in

2020, people report spending only six hours weekly with friends and family, almost half an hour less than in the previous decade; and 1 in 11 people report not having close friends or relatives to count on for help (van Zanden et al. 2020).

### 3 Purchasing Power in Colombia Not That Different From The West

For all of the US economic might, Purchasing Power is not that different—on a minimum wage in Colombia of 1,300 pesos, can rent a studio for 400; and can have a very good meal: soup, meat with starch and salad and juice for 7.

In the US, minimum wage comes out to about the same number but in US dollars: \$1,300. But in the US probably cannot rent a studio for \$400, only a room; and definitely cannot have a good meal at a restaurant for \$7. Housing is the main expense for most people, and food is a critical commodity.

Still, many things are relatively cheaper in the US, for instance a gallon of gas is about \$3; in Colombia it is about 10 pesos. And while restaurant food in the US is expensive and unhealthy, it is possible to buy cheap basic and healthy food at a store.

But the difference in purchasing power is not very large for many commodities and services, which is surprising for all the rhetoric about the US as the best country in the world, and the richest country.

### 4 Existing Limited Research

There is economic research focusing on SWB and inequality in Latin America (Graham and Felton 2006) and Colombia specifically (Burger et al. 2021a), but it doesn't address livability-happiness paradox.

The top 1% of the income distribution accounts for over 20% of total income in 2010—the rich Colombians are mostly rentiers and capital owners. (Alvaredo and Londoño Vélez 2013) Yet, regardless of the income level, Colombians are optimistic about their mobility (Londoño Vélez 2011).

Adaptation is strong in Latin America, for instance poor people such as peasants can be happy because of

adaptation; crime and corruption decrease happiness, but less so when they are more prevalent—again people adapt (Graham 2009).

Then there is a useful volume on happiness in Latin America: “Handbook of Happiness Research in Latin America” making two relevant points about SWB in Colombia. In the poorest income quintile life satisfaction was above 8 on a 10-point scale (Hurtado 2016). Family is the most important relational good, main social support—family is the meaning of life—the end that justifies efforts (Velásquez 2016).

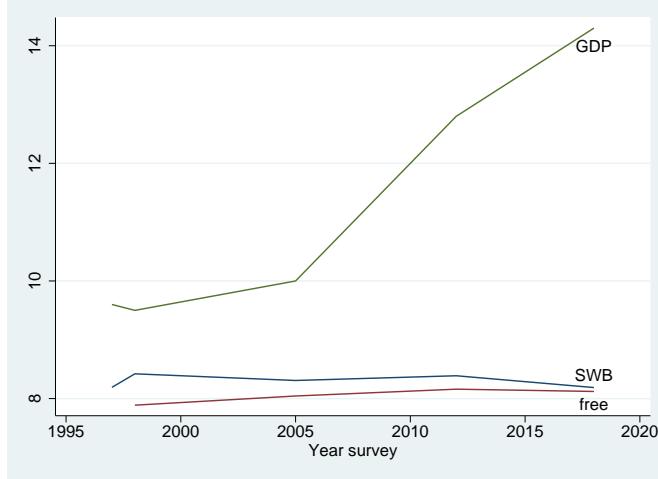
In conclusion—there is still very little research on happiness in Colombia, and the exiting research is rather indirect and tangential only to our topic, and hence, we also included some anecdotal evidence to explain high happiness amidst low livability.

## 5 A look over time

First we have observed a paradox across space (v other countries) of happiness amongst un-livability. Another paradox is within Colombia and over time. There is Easterlin’s Paradox—PCGDP went up 50% but SWB remained flat.

We use GDP per capita, PPP (constant 2017 international \$) in thousands <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.PP.KD?locations=CO>— Colombian GDP went up by 50% over 1997-2018. Colombians happiness and feeling of freedom are among the highest in the world, but they did not change over 1997-2018. In Colombia, GDP has no relationship with SWB, i.e., the Easterlin Paradox holds.

Other metrics improved, too—Gini dropped from 59 in 2000 to 51 in 2019 <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SI.POV.GINI/?locations=CO>. About a third of Colombians live on less than \$5.50 a day in 2019, but strikingly, that’s a progress, it is down from about 2/3 of Colombians in 2000.



**Figure 2:** Easterlin’s Paradox

## 6 The US v Colombia in Pictures: More and More Expensive Stuff, Less Happiness

It is recognized even by some economists that not only commodities matter for wellbeing (e.g., Stiglitz et al. 2009); yet few seem to notice that Latin America shines on non-commodity dimension and that the West should learn from Latin America. Notably social relations, quantity and quality, are arguably the best in the world in Latin America.

World development is typically about dollar amounts and physical stuff: more income, less poverty, more and better roads, more labor force participation and less unemployment and so on. But such focus produces an outcome of a “Lion in a Golden Cage.”<sup>14</sup> The idea is that we focus on the cage, making it expensive and pretty, but we forget about the lion—and no matter how fancy and expensive is the cage, lion won’t be happy in it.

The point is that the apparent economic or even livability superiority of the US over Colombia actually is mostly economic. And more expensive physical infrastructure doesn’t make it more livable and actually can make it less livable.

It is often overlooked point that something less developed economically and cheaper is actually better (happier).

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<sup>14</sup>I am grateful for this idea to Mariano Rojas at ISQOLS 2023. Any misinterpretation or misunderstanding is mine. Inspiration also comes from Quercia (2014)—the idea is that what matters when traveling is not only speed and distance.

The US infrastructure is great for business or making money, but it is bad for living there. It could be a difficult tradeoff to solve: economic growth v wellbeing, except that a very convincing argument has already been made that we do not need any more economic growth (Kallis et al. 2012, Kallis 2011, Van den Bergh 2011).

The US has this strange obsession with excellence/perfection and productivity, also in terms of built environment apparently thinking that the more ordered, organized, and man-made, the better. But the thinking was not always this way. Thoreau, for instance, was an American (Thoreau 1995 [1854], 1993).

The following are one of the authors own subjective/anecdotal opinions. Note: when picking images I dropped the Google's yellow man more or less randomly only given rural, urban, suburb, toll, etc and took first useful image. I tried to avoid to cherry pick positive and negative imaginary. Comments welcomed! Contact the corresponding author. For best results zoom as much as screen allows.

In fig 3 obvious difference is width, 6 v 2 lanes, and economically 6 beats 2—can move more stuff faster, but assuming the same traffic per lane, it is more interesting and fun or joy to ride on smaller roads.<sup>15</sup> The other less obvious difference is vegetation—around I-95 it is pedigreed nicely trimmed man made fake nature; around 25 it is real wild nature—more happiness there too. In figure 3 the US appears more boring, robotic, and fake (alien-like); all that matters is to get from A to B.<sup>16</sup>.

In fig 4 here we are passing through towns—on 295 through Cherry Hill, but who would have noticed looks the same as I-95 in previous picture, whether rural or urban, there's the same fake nature on the side.<sup>17</sup>

In fig 5 we are approaching toll (Del Mem Br)—looks unwelcoming, like an entrance to minimum security prison—can't pull over, rest, eat, or relax. Toll (peaje) on 25 looks better, again natural wild vegetation, can pull over and rest a bit, buy an organic orange.

In fig 6 even toll booth looks little more friendly and welcoming in Colombia.

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<sup>15</sup>And adding more lanes does not automatically mean less traffic, often on the contrary, people decide to drive more—adding more lanes for traffic is like loosing your belt for obesity (e.g., Duany et al. 2001).

<sup>16</sup>And why not more fun highway, say from rural mountainous Tennessee? Because the contrast is for the flat, dense, developed and wealthy North East—that's where economic productivity thrives. As a side note, keep in mind that 25 is not some small rural road—it's perhaps the most major road in the Americas, the Pan Americana. Picking less major road in the US and less major road in Colombia would not change the contrast much.

<sup>17</sup>295 not NJ Turnpike, to be conservative, NJ Turnpike is even more fake.

**Figure 3:** A major road/highway in the middle of nowhere.

(a) US I-95 rural MD, couple miles N of Susquehanna River      (b) Colombian 25 (Pan Americana), between Cali and Popayan



**Figure 4:** Passing through a town.

(a) Cherry Hill on 295

(b) El Bordo on 25



Last but not least let's hang out in a city in fig 7. Say you are a weary traveler arriving at 30th st station in Philly. You get out of the station, and it's a desert—nowhere to hangout, have to keep walking. You arrive to terminal de transporte in Cali, get out of the building and plenty of places to buy food, drinks, and sit down.

Below are links with geographic coordinates to all pictures so that the reader can locate each of the places discussed above and explore more.

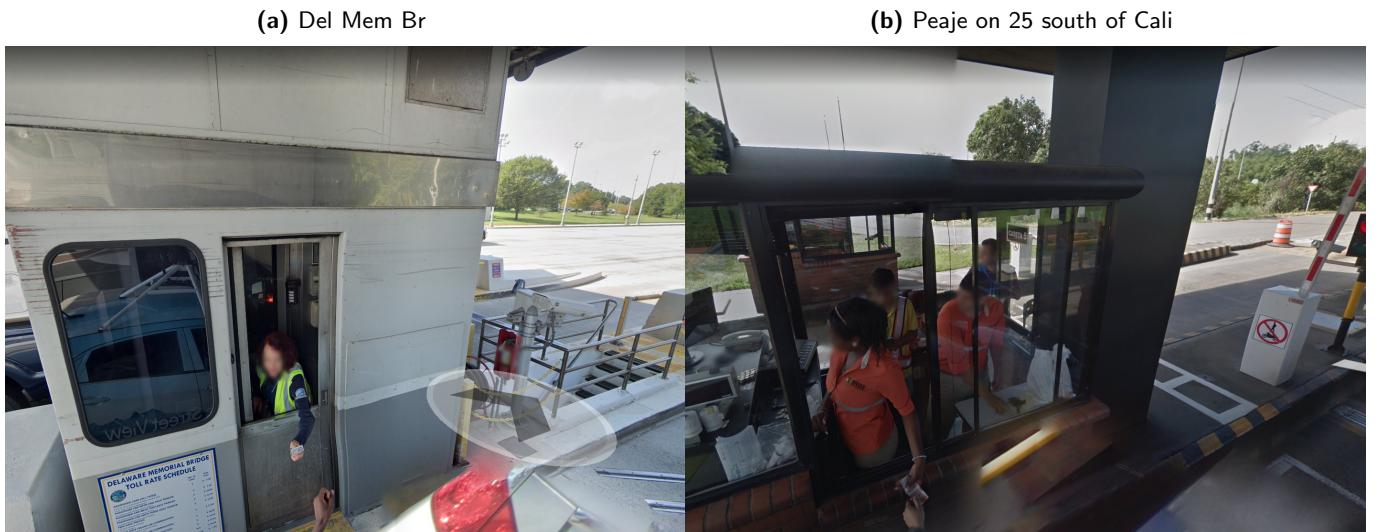
fig 3:

<https://www.google.com/maps/@39.6003437,-76.0444379,3a,75y,249.22h,83.1t/data=!3m7!1e1!>

**Figure 5:** Approaching toll.



**Figure 6:** Paying toll.



3m5!1s0wpnM0Yc9KK6YD6ZhdgiJQ!2e0!6shttps://2F%2Fstreetviewpixels-pa.googleapis.com%2Fv1%  
2Fthumbnail%3Fpanoid%3D0wpnM0Yc9KK6YD6ZhdgiJQ%26cb\_client%3Dmaps\_sv.tactile.gps%26w%3D203%  
26h%3D100%26yaw%3D150.322%26pitch%3D0%26thumbfov%3D100!7i16384!8i8192  
  
[https://www.google.com/maps/@2.7886904,-76.5521276,3a,75y,177.41h,100.48t/data=!3m7!1e1!3m5!1sDBBN1UaixNJL9uUrult5g!2e0!6shttps://2F%2Fstreetviewpixels-pa.googleapis.com%2Fv1%  
2Fthumbnail%3Fpanoid%3DDBBN1UaixNJL9uUrult5g%26cb\\_client%3Dmaps\\_sv.tactile.gps%26w%3D203%  
26h%3D100%26yaw%3D259.4146%26pitch%3D0%26thumbfov%3D100!7i13312!8i6656](https://www.google.com/maps/@2.7886904,-76.5521276,3a,75y,177.41h,100.48t/data=!3m7!1e1!3m5!1sDBBN1UaixNJL9uUrult5g!2e0!6shttps://2F%2Fstreetviewpixels-pa.googleapis.com%2Fv1%<br/>2Fthumbnail%3Fpanoid%3DDBBN1UaixNJL9uUrult5g%26cb_client%3Dmaps_sv.tactile.gps%26w%3D203%<br/>26h%3D100%26yaw%3D259.4146%26pitch%3D0%26thumbfov%3D100!7i13312!8i6656)

**Figure 7:** Getting out of the train station and bus terminal. (Note: no trains in Colombia.)

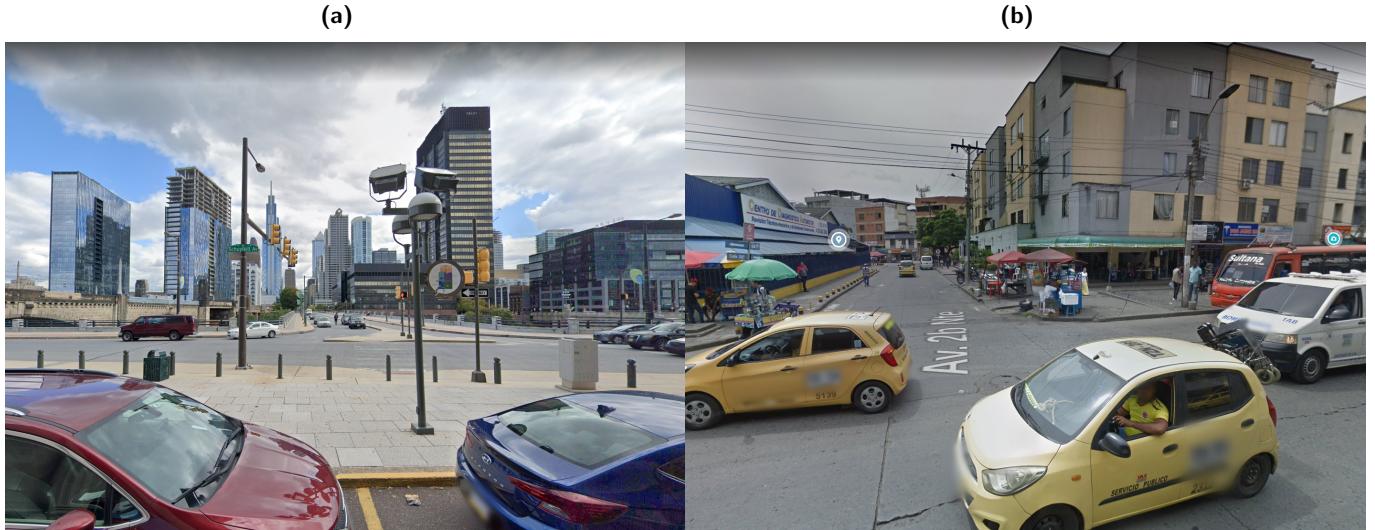


fig 4

[https://www.google.com/maps/@39.9151715,-74.9812986,3a,75y,355.06h,94.72t/data=!3m7!1e1!3m5!1svjTItcXHUAahWEkdG9iXbg!2e0!6shttps://2F%2Fstreetviewpixels-pa.googleapis.com%2Fv1%2Fthumbnail%3Fpanoid%3DvjTItcXHUAahWEkdG9iXbg%26cb\\_client%3Dmaps\\_sv.tactile.gps%26w%3D203%26h%3D100%26yaw%3D108.39489%26pitch%3D0%26thumbfov%3D100!7i16384!8i8192](https://www.google.com/maps/@39.9151715,-74.9812986,3a,75y,355.06h,94.72t/data=!3m7!1e1!3m5!1svjTItcXHUAahWEkdG9iXbg!2e0!6shttps://2F%2Fstreetviewpixels-pa.googleapis.com%2Fv1%2Fthumbnail%3Fpanoid%3DvjTItcXHUAahWEkdG9iXbg%26cb_client%3Dmaps_sv.tactile.gps%26w%3D203%26h%3D100%26yaw%3D108.39489%26pitch%3D0%26thumbfov%3D100!7i16384!8i8192)

[https://www.google.com/maps/@2.1191142,-76.9827811,3a,75y,29.76h,78.92t/data=!3m7!1e1!3m5!1sLImUajMcEKyf6eLxRirjGw!2e0!6shttps://2F%2Fstreetviewpixels-pa.googleapis.com%2Fv1%2Fthumbnail%3Fpanoid%3DLImUajMcEKyf6eLxRirjGw%26cb\\_client%3Dmaps\\_sv.tactile.gps%26w%3D203%26h%3D100%26yaw%3D155.053%26pitch%3D0%26thumbfov%3D100!7i13312!8i6656](https://www.google.com/maps/@2.1191142,-76.9827811,3a,75y,29.76h,78.92t/data=!3m7!1e1!3m5!1sLImUajMcEKyf6eLxRirjGw!2e0!6shttps://2F%2Fstreetviewpixels-pa.googleapis.com%2Fv1%2Fthumbnail%3Fpanoid%3DLImUajMcEKyf6eLxRirjGw%26cb_client%3Dmaps_sv.tactile.gps%26w%3D203%26h%3D100%26yaw%3D155.053%26pitch%3D0%26thumbfov%3D100!7i13312!8i6656)

fig 5

[https://www.google.com/maps/@3.1520675,-76.460229,3a,75y,181.56h,83.61t/data=!3m6!1e1!3m4!1s27q\\_DTIQZ3Tc67jRNy0XxQ!2e0!7i13312!8i6656](https://www.google.com/maps/@3.1520675,-76.460229,3a,75y,181.56h,83.61t/data=!3m6!1e1!3m4!1s27q_DTIQZ3Tc67jRNy0XxQ!2e0!7i13312!8i6656)

<https://www.google.com/maps/@39.6962957,-75.5445256,3a,75y,284.53h,94.14t/data=!3m6!1e1!3m4!1s6XzK4mx61AETyWhNf0IzMg!2e0!7i16384!8i8192>

fig 6

same as above just move ahead

fig 7

<https://www.google.com/maps/@39.9556825,-75.1809809,3a,75y,98.3h,91.96t/data=!3m6!1e1!3m4!1sx0T6m0Tfk7frupGVN0pczg!2e0!7i16384!8i18192>

<https://www.google.com/maps/@3.4656412,-76.5213045,3a,75y,89.77h,81.78t/data=!3m6!1e1!3m4!1sWYCkArtZNxDNuKTxgS8hQ!2e0!7i13312!8i6656>

## 7 Who Would Move Where?

Much further research needed, especially in terms of systematic and deeper approaches—here the goal was to paint a broad picture.

A big question remaining is who would move where, ie if a person had reasonable information and opportunity to chose a place to live—would a better choice be the West, e.g., the US, or Latin America, e.g., Colombia. Ideally actual moving should be measured, not self-reported plans or ideas as it is likely to be biased especially if a person haven't actually experienced life in both countries.

There is obviously large migration from Latin America to the US, and surely more people want to come to the US than leave it, but this doesn't mean that the US is the best place to live—people mostly come to the US for the money, not necessarily for quality of life.

Indeed recent media reports argue the opposite—people are leaving the US for Latin America for better quality of life there, eg Californians and others are moving to Mexico; and anecdotal evidence—many westerners fall in love with Colombia.

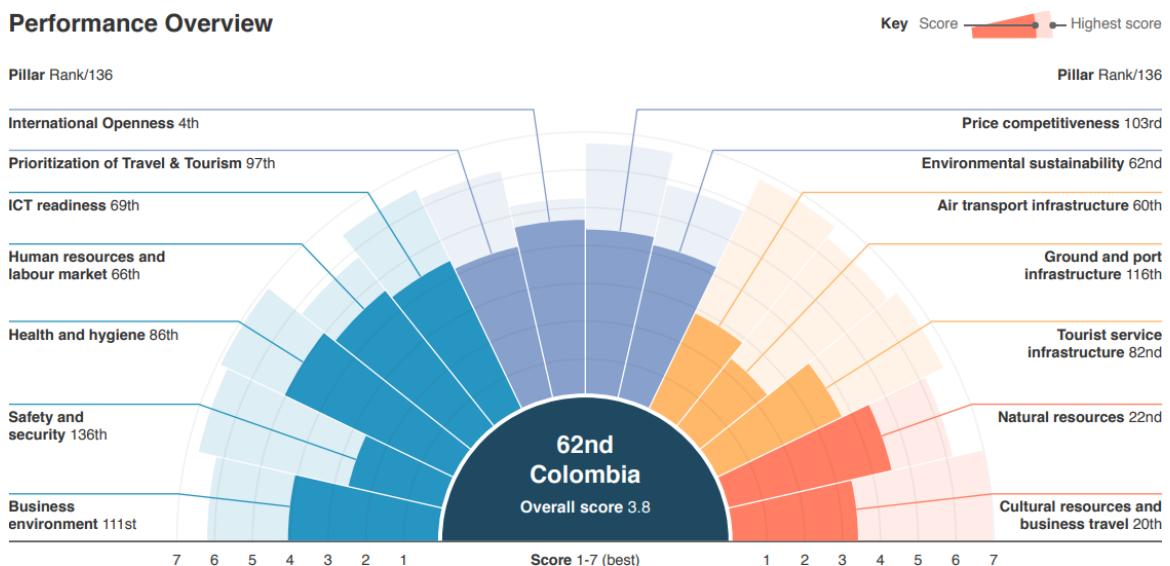
So while presumably many Colombians would like to move to the US, and not many Americans would like

to move to Colombia, it should be noted that indeed many Westerners, from better objective conditions, do move to Colombia.

To provoke discussion and spark research, these are only speculations so far.

## 8 World Economic Forum report 2017

World Economic Forum (WEF) indicators are in figure 8.



**Figure 8:** World Economic Forum report 2017 from [https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF\\_TTCR\\_2017\\_web\\_0401.pdf](https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_TTCR_2017_web_0401.pdf).

Colombia has everything: Pacific, Caribbean, jungle, desert, mountains, you name it, like Latin America in one country. So it is striking that according to WEF in terms of Prioritization of Travel & Tourism Colombia ranks 97th out of 136 countries (World Economic Forum 2017). Its air transport infrastructure is good, 60th, but Ground and Port Infrastructure is poor, 116th. But the worst is Safety and Security, 136th/136. Surely Colombia should work to improve safety, but much progress has already been done, and it is important to point out that much of the country is safe, and dangerous Colombia is more of a stigma of the past than present reality.

USNEWS measures QOL as: A good job market, Affordable, Economically stable, Family-friendly, Income equality, Politically stable, Safe, Well-developed public education system, Well-developed public health system—

see <https://www.usnews.com/news/best-countries/colombia>.

## 9 Freedom is Even The National Motto (Liberdad y Orden)



**Figure 9:** Liberdad y Orden.

In the US despite all the hype about freedom, the motto is “In God We Trust.” Or the older version, “E pluribus unum” refers to being united, not necessarily free.

## 10 Dissociation

The words in this section could be used as measures.

*Amnesia < -c("how did I get here", "brain is on autopilot", "when did I get changed", "where did this come from", "they say they know me", "they said they know me", "I don't recognize them", "stressful events causing memory loss", "I don't think I lied", "I know I didn't lie", "what did I do earlier", "gaps in my memory", "memory lapse", "lapse in memory", "who am I", "what were we talking about", "what are we talking about", "coming to", "I can't remember", "I cannot remember", "I don't remember", "I do not remember", "frustrated with my memory", "I wish I could remember", "I want to remember", "I look*

different", "I don't remember attempting suicide", "I don't remember hurting myself")

*Daydreaming* < – c("inner self dialogue", "inner dialogue", "unable to recall the conversation", "confusing dreams with reality", "did that really happen", "or was it a dream", "the world ceased to exist", "nothing around me matters", "my daydreams feel real", "my fantasies feel real", "confusing my imagination with reality", "staring off", "not knowing time had passed", "talking to myself aloud", "talking to myself out loud", "spaced out", "spacey", "floating off", "drifting off", "I'm scattered", "I am scattered", "my mind is scattered", "my brain is scattered", "scatterbrained", "I'm all over the place", "mentally all over the place", "mentally all over", "I'm not focused", "I am not focused", "I can't focus", "I cannot focus", "my mind wandering", "I forgot my plans", "I forgot to do chores", "I forgot", "I forget", "daydreaming", "daydreams", "blocking my memories", "blocked memories")

*Highway Hypnosis* i- ("zoning out while driving")

*Absorption* < – c("I lost all awareness", "stuck in a trance", "unaware of my surroundings")

*Derealization* < – c("nothing is real", "nobody is real", "no one is real", "I am not real", "I feel strange here", "everything seems unclear", "brain fog", "going within to protect myself", "going within", "retreat within to protect myself", "retreat within", "turning within to protect myself", "turning within", "ground falling beneath me", "ground falling out under me", "suddenly everything seems strange", "suddenly everything seemed strange", "suddenly everything was strange", "everything seems foreign", "everything seemed foreign", "everyone seems foreign", "everything seemed foreign", "I'm back at that place", "reliving that moment", "reliving what happened", "flashbacks are debilitating", "debilitating flashbacks")

*Depersonalization* < – c("debating myself", "their voice in my head", "familiar voice in my head", "their voices questioning me", "other's voices nagging me", "looking at myself as another", "disconnected from myself", "feeling outside of my body", "watching myself from the outside", "I don't recognize myself", "who is in the mirror", "this body isn't mine", "my body isn't mine", "body doesn't belong to me", "I couldn't feel the pain", "ignore the pain", "I don't feel like myself", "I don't act like myself", "it was unlike me", "I'm beside myself", "I am beside myself", "I'm not myself", "I am not myself", "I lost myself", "let go of myself",

"why did I do that", "what could've possessed me", "I wasn't myself", "I was not myself", "can't reveal my true self", "out of my mind", "out of my head", "out of my skull", "being with myself", "my body isn't real", "my body is not real", "I am speaking another's words", "why did I say that", "these thoughts aren't mine", "thoughts that aren't mine", "I'm not all there", "I am not all there", "feeling empty and painfully alone", "feeling empty", "feelings of emptiness", "felt empty", "painfully alone", "feeling alone", "felt alone", "I feel like a machine", "I feel like a robot", "I'm going through the motions", "going through the motions", "I feel detached", "I felt detached", "I'm feeling detached", "I am feeling detached", "I was feeling detached", "detached from myself", "why can't I move", "I feel paralyzed", "I felt paralyzed", "I watch myself", "I'm watching myself", "I am watching myself", "I watched myself", "I was watching myself", "going through the motions", "watch myself going through life", "watched myself going through life", "watching myself going through life", "watched myself complete daily tasks", "watch myself completing daily tasks", "watching myself complete daily tasks", "my mind is empty", "my mind was empty", "my mind is blank", "my mind was blank", "blank stare", "staing blankly", "stared blankly", "I seem gone")

*Identity\_Fragmentation < – c("mental conversations with myself", "conversations with myself", "inner back and fourth dialogue", "internal dialogue", "I am two different people", "I'm two different people", "I was two different people", "like I was someone else", "the voices in my head", "I'm at war with myself", "at war with myself", "fighting a war within", "I'm struggling with myself", "I am struggling with myself", "struggling with myself", "that wasn't me", "that was not me", "nobody knows the real me", "myself on the inside", "the real me", "know the real me", "talking things over with myself", "talking with myself", "this feeling isn't mine", "this feeling is not mine", "feeling doesn't belong to me", "child's voice in my head", "another personality taking over", "another personality controlling me", "why did I think that", "why would I think that", "random thoughts", "intrusive thoughts", "sadness out of nowhere", "strong feelings out of nowhere", "filled with pain", "resist the urge", "these urges aren't mine", "urges are not mine", "feeling split or divided", "feeling split inside", "felt split inside", "feeling divided inside", "feel divided inside", "felt divided inside", "is this really me", "is this who I am", "inability to keep friends", "I can't keep friends", "I cannot keep friends", "I*

feel different than normal", "I felt different", "I'm feeling different than normal", "was different than normal", "I feel weird", "I felt weird", "I'm feeling weird", "I was feeling weird", "I feel strange", "I felt strange", "I'm feeling strange", "I am feeling strange", "I was feeling strange", "I feel odd", "I felt odd", "I'm feeling odd", "I am feeling odd", "I was feeling odd", "voices saying to hurt myself", "the voices say hurt yourself", "my head is too loud", "my head is so loud", "my head was so loud", "inside my head is loud", "inside my head was loud", "screaming inside my head", "screams inside my head", "yelling inside my head", "noise inside my head", "angry out of nowhere", "why am I angry", "filled with anger", "I have multiple personalities", "I have many personalities", "I don't feel whole", "I do not feel whole", "I am not whole", "I'm not whole", "part of me is missing", "missing a part of myself", "racing thoughts", "my thoughts are racing", "my thoughts were racing", "racing mind", "my mind is racing", "my mind was racing", "can't stop racing thoughts", "cannot stop racing thoughts", "thoughts won't stop racing", "thoughts will not stop racing", "I can't stop thinking", "I cannot stop thinking", "I want to stop thinking", "struggling with my identity", "struggling to find my identity", "struggling with who I am", "figuring out who I am", "acting like another person", "I am not that person", "I'm not that person", "unlike myself", "protective voice in my head", "helpful voice in my head", "soothing voice in my head")