

# Quality of Life And Subjective Wellbeing In Colombia

April 28, 2023

## 1 Rationale / Intellectual merit / Broader impact

Happiness is not only a fleeting emotion, but also a goal of human development as recognized by the United Nations, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), and others (Stiglitz et al. 2009, Diener 2019, 2009, Fleche et al. 2011).

I, Adam Okulicz-Kozaryn (PI), have a long standing interest in Subjective Wellbeing (SWB) and Quality of Life (QOL) since around 2006, when I started working on my dissertation on the topic. Since then almost all of my publications are on the topic.

But it was not until several years ago, when in one paper I have noticed Colombian exceptionally high subjective wellbeing despite low (objective) Quality Of Life (Okulicz-Kozaryn and Altman 2019, p. 1059):

But there are also outliers. For instance, Colombia (CO) is happy and energy efficient, but poor. In general, Latin America poses a puzzle for SWB researchers. Latin Americans are relatively poor but happy.

Latin America is one of the greatest puzzles of the broadly understood social indicators field, and one of the key areas for current and future research. Colombia is often overlooked despite being the 3rd largest country at about 52m, after Brazil (214m) and Mexico (127m); and slightly larger than Argentina (46m). Colombia is also the 4th largest country on the continent in terms of area, the only, and the 2nd most bio-diverse country in the World (after Brazil). Likewise, Colombia presents additional complexities worth exploring in Latin America, like the conflict, the recent peace agreement, and other social complexities interrelated with subjective well-being and policy making.

In addition, it is commonly lamented that much of social scientific research is done on WEIRD people, i.e., Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich and Democratic. If not entirely WEIRD, the bias is commonly in favor of the Global North. SWB research is not an exception—the vast majority of SWB research has been done in Global North.

Another limitation/gap of SWB research is that almost all the research is done at one of the following levels: person, society/nation, or region/province level. Virtually all SWB research analyzes person level data that are representative of (or nested within) society/nation level, and/or sometimes at region/province level. Research at neighborhood/community level is remarkably rare.<sup>1</sup> The present research aims to fill both of these gaps. To our best knowledge the only SWB dataset representative of neighborhoods/communities in Global

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<sup>1</sup>Nationally representative datasets sometimes ask about certain community/neighborhood characteristics (e.g., US GSS or German SOEP), including in Latin America, e.g., ISSP (Gandelman et al. 2012), but the data are typically not identifying actual communities/neighborhoods, and if they do (e.g., restricted version of US GSS), the data are not representative of communities/neighborhoods. There are only a handful of exceptions, and all of them in Global North (and China): Ma et al. (2017), Helliwell et al. (2018), Ziogas et al. (2020), Mouratidis (2017, 2020b,a), Mouratidis and Yiannakou (2022), Weckroth et al. (2022), Anon (2021), Pfeiffer et al. (2020), Ciorici and Dantzler (2019), Du et al. (2017), Ala-Mantila et al. (2017), Wang et al. (2019).

South (except China) is CaliBRANDO that has been produced by Lina Martinez (co-PI) (Martínez and Short 2020, Martínez 2017).

The proposed research is interdisciplinary: Lina Martinez (co-PI) is at a business school; Adam Okulicz-Kozaryn (PI) is at a department of public policy. PI is located in Camden, and co-PI in Colombia—we have different (but arguably complementary) perspectives on the topic with much potential for synergistic collaboration. And notably there is interdependence: it is difficult and sub-optimal to conduct research on a place without the collaborator from that place.

## 2 Project goals and objectives / Methods; and Background work already accomplished

The main project goal and objective is to contribute to the solution of the Latin happiness paradox of high happiness despite little economic resources.

The plan is to utilize 2 datasets: World Values Survey (WVS) and caliBRANDO. WVS is useful as it is representative of Colombia, and caliBRANDO is representative of neighborhoods of a major Colombian city. We already have papers using these data at draft stage:

- A New Stop for Unhappiness. Bus Stop Proximity is Related to Lower Life Satisfaction in Cali, Colombia
- Happy Colombia, Unhappy Bogota

Method is the usual Ordinary Least Square regression of happiness on key variable of interest and known predictors of happiness as in the above drafts.

While we have already been drafting the above 2 papers,<sup>2</sup> however, to really get our research going, this grant would be instrumental.

## 3 Student engagement in the project / Teaching happiness

Adam Okulicz-Kozaryn (PI) is also teaching a happiness class at Rutgers Camden (<https://theaok.github.io/swb>) and was able to generate substantial interest among the students in the topic. And hence, about half of the grant will be spent on hiring a student to assist with the research.

Last but not least, there could be another synergistic activity—I have applied for a teaching abroad program to provide an experiential learning component to my happiness class in Colombia. Colombia offers lessons for happiness. Despite poverty, corruption, and poor infrastructure, Colombia is one of the happiest countries in the world, happier than the US, and especially happier than Philadelphia and New York City, some of the least happy places in the US.

Integrating travel experience with the course material is easy in case of happiness. Happiness is readily felt and experienced as one changes the environment. Indeed, happiness is "in the air", and so is unhappiness—one can readily experience doom and gloom.

Finally, the project will arguably result in the improvement of happiness of some members of Camden community who learn from our findings.

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<sup>2</sup>And a third one: Colombia: Unlivable but Happy. Fool's Paradise?

## 4 Plans for disseminating the outcomes of the project

This is precisely where the grant will help—it will allow Adam Okulicz-Kozaryn (PI) travel to Colombia and conduct research there including presenting the results, and it will allow Lina Martinez (co-PI) to help disseminate the results in the US, including in Camden.

Otherwise, the research will be presented at the conferences such as International Society for Quality-of-Life Studies (ISQOLS) and European Regional Science Association (ERSA), and finally published in academic journals such as *Cities* or *Journal of Happiness Studies*.

## 5 Potential for extramural funding, including identification of a target funder/program

There is potential at least from two main sources: foundations, including non-governmental ones such as Templeton or Gates foundation—foundations typically want to 'save the world' or at least improve it, and happiness is one of the outcomes to maximize. Second, there is interest in the topic by governments and global organizations such as the UN and OECD, and these organizations may be potential funding sources. Finally, Colombian government (as many governments around the World) does have interest in happiness, and there are already existing policy initiatives<sup>3</sup>—yet there are few resources in Colombia.

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<sup>3</sup>For instance [https://sitios.dane.gov.co/revista\\_ib/html\\_r5/articulo6\\_r5.html](https://sitios.dane.gov.co/revista_ib/html_r5/articulo6_r5.html), including at local level, for instance mayor of Bogota: [https://sitios.dane.gov.co/revista\\_ib/html\\_r5/articulo6\\_r5.html](https://sitios.dane.gov.co/revista_ib/html_r5/articulo6_r5.html)

## Budget

Total: \$14,900

- \$7,000 Camden graduate student compensation at lowest possible HR acceptable rate and maximum hours; graduate student is needed to assist with literature review, data analysis, drafting and editing/reviewing of the manuscripts
- \$3,400 PI Adam Okulicz-Kozaryn travel (2 trips) to Cali Colombia to work on research and present the results:
  - \$2,000: 2 \* \$1000 Return Flight
  - \$1,400: 2 \* \$700 (14 days hotel at \$50 per night)
- \$4,500 Co-PI Lina Martinez travel to 2024 International Society for Quality-of-Life Studies (ISQOLS) conference in Borneo, Malaysia
  - \$4,000 Return Flight Cali, Colombia- Borneo, Malaysia
  - \$500 5 days hotel at \$100 per night

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