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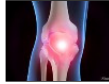
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Latin American nations among the most upbeat, poll finds

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Panamanian students commemorate the 109th anniversary of Panama's separation from Colombia, in Panama City. (Alejandro Bolivar / European Pressphoto Agency / November 3, 2012)

By Emily Alpert
December 20, 2012 14:00 a.m.

Latin American countries are among the most upbeat in the world, while Singapore, Armenia and Iraq fall at the bottom in "positive emotions," according to a Gallup poll released this week.

Researchers who surveyed people in 148 countries found that Panama, Paraguay, El Salvador and Venezuela landed at the top when people were asked whether they had smiled, laughed and felt respected, rested and other positive emotions the previous day. In Panama and Paraguay, 85% of those surveyed said they felt such emotions the day before; only 46% said the same in Singapore.

Though many wealthy countries ranked high in positive emotions, including Denmark and Norway, they lagged some poorer nations such as Guatemala and Ecuador. Affluent Singapore, meanwhile, ranks on the higher side in other happiness studies, yet Gallup found it to be the least upbeat. The jumbled results challenge simple maxims about what makes people feel good.

"This is so different from the way we usually explain the human condition" using unemployment and other economic measures, said Jon Clifton, a partner at Gallup who analyzed the data. "But who are the best experts on the condition of a country? It's the people themselves."

The Gallup rankings also differ strikingly from other studies on global happiness, which usually rank wealthy nations such as Denmark and Norway at the top.

Experts singled out several reasons that the "positive emotions" poll might differ from happiness studies. Gallup asked people what they felt yesterday; other happiness surveys ask them to look at their lives as a whole. People may delight in moments of joy, yet feel dissatisfied with their situation.

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"Your underlying sense of security, your ability to feed your family in a reliable way -- these are powerful forces that show up in life satisfaction," said Andrew J. Oswald, a University of Warwick economics professor. "The joys of life may be spread around.... That doesn't mean that people are equally happy."

People may also hit tremendous highs, only to later sink to depressing lows. Gallup found that people in the Philippines ranked high for positive emotions but also were likely to feel emotions such as anger, stress and sadness. Several experts said the scattered results pointed to cultural differences.

In Latin America, "the cultural values are consistent with a view that one ought to be optimistic, one should be upbeat and express positive views," said Mitchell Seligson, director of the Latin American Public Opinion Project at Vanderbilt University.

On top of that, growing economies and a shrinking gap between rich and poor are fueling even more optimism, despite the fact that Latin America is less affluent than many other parts of the world, Seligson said.

"When people in Honduras think about their happiness, they're not comparing themselves to someone in Paris or London. They're thinking about their fellow Hondurans," he said.

Not all Latin American countries surveyed were ranked high in the Gallup poll: Haiti landed near the bottom in positive emotions, as it has in studies done by the Latin American Public Opinion Project. The highest-ranked countries also included several outside Latin America, including Thailand and Canada.

Happiness studies have become a topic of study among economists seeking to improve life around the world, as well as governments hoping to boost their rankings on such charts.

In China, the quest for *xingfu* has become a government preoccupation, with cities competing to exceed one another in happiness. It fell on the upper end of the Gallup poll, tied with the United States, Sweden, Chile and Swaziland. The U.S. and Britain have also introduced measures to gauge quality of life, following in the footsteps of Bhutan, which pioneered the idea of "gross national happiness."

Stacking countries against one another is one way that researchers have sought to explore how wealth and happiness are connected. Yet trying to compare countries on the opposite ends of the world has raised questions: Even if Russians and Nigerians feel the same way, do they describe it the same way? Are some people less likely to call themselves happy -- even if they really are?

Simply describing emotions can become complicated from country to country. "Individualistic cultures like the U.S. really value feeling excited and energetic, whereas more collectivist states value calmness and serenity," said June Gruber, director of the Yale Positive Emotion and Psychopathology Lab. That means when Gallup asks people about enjoyment, for instance, "it's hard to know what it means."

Some cultural differences have already surfaced in studies. When asked to measure their lives on a scale of 1 to 10, Japanese people are less likely to choose 10 than Americans are, said John Helliwell, co-director of a program on social interactions, identity and well-being at the Canadian Institute of Advanced Research. Educated people also tend to be less likely to choose extremes, he said.

Gruber cautioned, however, that the growing obsession with global happiness could be misguided. Too much happiness can leave a person unable to empathize and put them at risk for mood disorders, Gruber said; the obsession with getting it can actually set people up to be unhappy.

"All the wonderful benefits we know about can unravel," Gruber said. "Is it really the best thing to be at the top?"

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