

**HAPPINESS BEYOND MATERIAL NEEDS:
THE CASE OF THE MAYAN PEOPLE**

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Happiness beyond Material Needs: The Case of the Mayan People ^Y

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Abstract:

This research analyses happiness and several domains of life of Mayan people in the poor rural areas of Yucatan, Mexico. Using a sample of 373 households, we obtain high results for happiness and the domains. We find that Mayans that experience hunger are unhappier than the rest and report lower satisfaction in the material domains, but their happiness and satisfaction on the domains is still quite high. Income influences the happiness of this group of people more than the other, but the influence is reduced. Relative income does not affect happiness of those who do not satisfy this need, in line with existing literature. However, contrary to the literature, there is no income comparison influencing the happiness of those that satisfy this basic need, although there is a weak comparison effect in the health and water domain. Other domains related to feelings or public goods do not experience variation between groups and are not influenced by income. Although happiness is high for Mayans, they nevertheless require political attention.

Keywords: Well-being; hunger; poverty; material needs; Mayan.

JEL Codes: D63, I30, I31.

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1. Introduction

The study of the happiness in the world has normally focused on rich societies, but research addressing happiness in developing countries, as well as the happiness of poor people and ethnic groups is blooming. One striking fact in this research is that in many cases the studied people experienced several types of material deprivation, but nevertheless record high levels of subjective well-being (Webb 2009; Biswas-Diener et al. 2005; Biswas-Diener and Diener 2001). Although there have been analysed cases where people are unhappy as well as deprived (Tiliouine et al. 2006; Biswas-Diener and Diener 2006; Palomar Lever 2004) the former studies invite the conclusion that a type of “happy poor” paradox exists on some occasions. In fact, Carol Graham named the “paradox of happy peasants and miserable millionaires” to refer to the unexpected high values of happiness for people whose basic needs are not met (Graham 2009; Graham et al. 2010).

In the same line as studies analysing happiness in deprived areas, this research analyses the happiness and several domains of life of Mayan people in the poor rural areas of Yucatan, Mexico¹. Using a sample of 373 households, we obtain high results for happiness and their domains, in line with the first group of literature. The area in which the field study was performed is quite poor, but there are people doing better than others. We separate the sample into two groups: those whose basic material needs are satisfied and those whose are not. In order to make this distinction, some thresholds have been proposed in the literature, normally based on income (Di Tella and MacCulloch 2010; Fuentes and Rojas 2001). Taking the social and economic situation of the Mayans into account, we propose a hunger threshold: those that reported in the interview that they had lacked enough food in the past month to satisfy their food needs are considered as not having their material basic needs satisfied, and those who obtained enough food are considered to have their needs satisfied. Almost 40 per cent of Mayan people feel that their household suffers from food insecurity.

As far as the authors are aware, this is the first study assessing the happiness of the Mayan people. Furthermore, we introduce income and the relative income variable in order to estimate its influence on happiness and its domains. In past research, much attention has been devoted to income, where great attention has been paid in research into happiness. On the other hand, the interest of the fulfilment of basic needs and happiness is reduced and, to the knowledge of the authors, papers which relate hunger and happiness empirically are nonexistent, which is another contribution of this research.

The present study is structured as follows: First, we deal with the existing literature referring to the effect of income on happiness, paying special attention to the above-mentioned paradox,

¹ In this research we interpret the term happiness as synonymous of subjective well-being and satisfaction with life.

the basic needs satisfaction, and the relationship with happiness. Second, we describe the Mayans, the field work, the variables used in the study and the methodology. Third, the analysis is implemented. We perform estimations and give some explanation of the results in the line with the situation of the Mayans, according to the knowledge of the authors about the region. Finally, we discuss the findings in light of the existing literature, trying to find feasible explanations as to why Mayans are so happy, and the nature of the influence of absolute and relative income on their happiness. We also address the limitations of the study, the policy implications and possible future trends of research.

2. What is the Relationship of Income with Happiness?

The Easterlin paradox says that in certain developed countries, the effect of income on happiness is significant and positive, whereas it remains positive over time in spite of large increases in income per capita (Easterlin 1974). There is, however, recent research that, using different datasets and methodologies, finds that this paradox does not exist (Stevenson and Wolfers 2008; Deaton 2008), creating some scientific debate on the influence of income on subjective well-being.

In spite of the discussion concerning the effect of income on happiness through time, most of the empirical studies find that the influence of people's income in happiness in a given moment of time is positive and non-linear. When income increases, happiness increases, but the variations are lower the higher the income level (Easterlin 1974; Diener et al. 2010a; Graham et al. 2010). In fact, macro data also shows this tendency (Di Tella and McCulloch 2010), which agrees with the standard economic theory of diminishing marginal utility.

As for the capacity of income in order to explain happiness, both with time series or cross-section data, it is necessary to highlight that income normally contributes positively, but fails to explain happiness on the whole. Economic research on happiness normally uses techniques such as ordinary least squares or probability models in order to determine the contribution of income to happiness. Both techniques are found to offer similar results (Ferrer-i-Carbonell and Frijters 2004), demonstrating that the capacity of the income variable in order to explain happiness is reduced. The value of R squares that indicates the capacity of the model to explain happiness is normally quite low, even when other objective variables such as age, sex or marital status are introduced. However, most of the research on the influence of income on happiness finds a positive and significant relationship with cross-section data, albeit quite weak in terms of its explanation power. Therefore, income does not explain happiness completely, but it is at least possible to determine that it influences happiness positively.

2.1. Happy Poor and Unhappy Rich

Considering what we have explained above, it could be expected that societies exposed to material hardship experience low levels of happiness. However, there are some cases in the economic literature where the subjects experienced several types of material deprivation, but nevertheless recorded high levels of happiness. Examples of studies that evaluate the satisfaction of life of ethnic groups are Webb (2009) for the Tibetans, and Biswas-Diener et al. (2005) for the Kenyan Maasai, the United States Amish and the Greenlandic Inughuit. In other words, they could be considered as poor in terms of income or basic needs, but they were not unhappy. In other research on the slums in Calcutta where poverty and deprivation are more severe, the authors conclude that the population experience a lower level of life satisfaction than richer comparison groups, but are more satisfied than one would expect (Biswas-Diener and Diener 2001).

On the other hand, some studies of the happiness of poor people, such as Tiliouine et al. (2006), reported low average scores in Algeria. Another study referring to homeless people in Calcutta, California and Portland corroborated that life on the street is quite undesirable with lower levels of subjective well-being as a result (Biswas-Diener and Diener 2006). Additionally, Palomar Lever (2004) concluded that the poorer groups of people in Mexico City were less happy than the richer ones.

How can we explain why some people suffering from material deprivation are happier regardless? This phenomena has been called the paradox of “happy peasants and miserable millionaires” by Carol Graham (Graham 2009; Graham et al. 2010). Poor respondents achieve higher levels of happiness while other more wealthier respondents reach much lower levels. Some feasible explanations of this paradox are the differences in cultures and ideas of happiness, low aspirations, wise time allocation, adaptation and lack of comparison. Let us review what the literature can teach us on these possible explanations of this paradox.

2.1.1. Different Ideas and Philosophies of Happiness

Different concepts of happiness exist through time and between cultures (McMahon 2006). Cross cultural differences influence the interpretation of happiness by different groups of people, and these differences in interpretation therefore condition comparisons. For example, Lu and Gilmour (2004) asked American and Chinese college students about their idea of happiness. Americans described happiness as “excitement”, whereas the Chinese interpreted happiness as a “calm and peaceful feeling”. The concept of happiness seems to be more linked to “enjoyment” in the United States, while “good fortune” is prevalent in East Asia and some European countries (see Oishi, 2010, for more detailed examples of the differences).

Differences in interpretation or “happiness philosophies” do not exist only across the borders of countries or between groups, but can also exist within a group of people with certain cultural homogeneity. People can have different ideas of happiness (Rojas 2005), that could condition the influence of income. For some people, income could be an important influence on happiness, while for others with a different personal philosophy in pursuing happiness, income could play no role (Rojas 2007). Therefore not only cultures, but also different interpretations of happiness could play an important role, in spite of other reasons such as material hardship.

2.1.2. Aspirations

Economic theory assumes that when income rises, a greater number of desires or needs are satisfied, but this seems not to be confirmed in research into happiness. Income could have no impact in happiness in a sample in Mexico, according to Fuentes and Rojas (2001), because as income rises, desires also increase, contradicting economic theory. Therefore the perception of unsatisfied material needs does not decrease and happiness remains constant. Those results coincide with those from Stutzer (2004), that demonstrate with data from Switzerland that the aspirations of people seem to grow according to income, and play a negative role on happiness.

Other research on happiness points in the same direction: as income increases, material aspirations increase too, and the negative influence of aspirations surpasses the positive effect of income on happiness (Easterlin 2001; Frey and Stutzer 2002a, Graham and Pettinato 2002). One plausible explanation for the paradox of “happy peasants and unhappy millionaires” is therefore that poor people adapt their expectations downwards, contrary to rich people (Graham 2009).

2.1.3. Time Investment

Most of the research has proved that time allocation plays an important role in happiness formation. People who devote more time to pleasant activities such as socialising are happier than those who devote time to unpleasant situations such as commuting (Layard 2005).

But, are people wise enough in their time investment decisions? A recent study (Kahneman et al. 2006) demonstrates that income could play a focusing illusion in terms of happiness. In fact, as the authors explain, people could earn more money, but nevertheless devote their time to unhappy activities such as commuting, instead of to happy ones such as visiting friends. The capability or possibilities of investing time in pleasant activities could therefore increase happiness in spite of lack of income or other material assets.

2.1.4. Adaptation

Happiness literature has proposed that any hedonic experience, positive or negative, caused by a specific event tends to vanish after a period of time. For example, Brickman et al. (1978) demonstrated the tendency of people to adapt to positive or negative situations. A country-level analysis performed by Di Tella and MacCulloch (2010) demonstrated that once basic needs are satisfied, there is adaptation for further economic growth.

In a perspective more locally related to developing countries, Amartya Sen theorised that people tend to adapt, even to the hardest of conditions. Therefore, they adapt to poverty and situations of deprivation in order to overlook the burden they carry (Sen 1985). This could be a possible explanation as to why some societies score highly on well-being while experiencing lack of rights or material shortages. Adaptation here would not create a false illusion produced by increasing income, rising aspirations, desires or misjudgement as explained above. It refers to people adapting themselves to the situation in which they live, that could be caused or have as a result lower aspirations and higher happiness than expected, which may be motivated by lack of possibilities of comparison. Let us have a closer look at comparison in the next lines.

2.1.5. Comparison

People tend to compare themselves to others and to the past, and this is reflected in their happiness responses and aspirations. The others to which they compare themselves could be real or an idealised image. In many areas of the world, exposure to advertisements invites people to compare their lives to those in the images, increasing expectations of how their lives should be in terms of material assets and decreasing happiness (Richins 1995).

Concerning income, it has been empirically demonstrated that people tend to compare their income with others in order to determine their happiness (Easterlin 1974; see Clark et al, 2008 for a review). Happiness generally decreases if the relative income diminishes with respect of the average income of the reference group.

Some papers, such as Clark and Oswald (1996) demonstrated that comparing income played an effect in determining happiness in a sample of British workers. Luttmer (2005) arrives to similar results using data from the U.S. On the other hand, relative income is estimated to play no influence in papers such as Deaton (2008) and Stevenson and Wolfers (2008). As a response, recent research (Layard et al. 2010) points out that this effect does exist in developed countries, but when developed and developing countries are taken together the influence of relative income is not found.

Considering this, we could question if comparative income is important in determining happiness of people with low income levels, or only for people whose basic needs are satisfied. In the same line as Layard et al. (2010), McBride (2001) also finds a relative income effect in the U.S., but estimates that this effect is lower for people with low income levels, as for them, absolute income becomes more important. If poor people are not affected by the comparison effect, they could be happier than expected. Taking this into consideration, is there an income threshold beyond which people satisfy their material basic needs and start to compare? We attempt to give a response to this question and others in the following lines. Let us first put things in perspective by studying what basic needs are and how this threshold can be established.

2.2. Basic Needs Satisfaction, Income and Happiness

2.2.1. *What are Basic Needs?*

Defining basic needs is not an easy task as it is not an easy concept. There is little consensus in social science about the meaning of basic needs, and disciplines, such as economics, psychology, philosophy and sociology, interpret them differently (Gasper 2007). It seems that the consensus on needs is greater in psychology than in economics in general and development economics in particular. The concept of material needs, which is the approach that we use in the empirical part of this research, is quite different to psychological needs and its empirical application. Psychological needs refer more to concepts such as autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Howell et al. 2011), while material needs refer more to education, health, shelter, water or food, to name a few.

The concept of material needs has the drawback of leaving some unanswered questions, which condition development and political intervention (Streeten 1984). What are the main needs and at what level are they achieved? Let us take the example of education: Is education a basic need? If so, at which level is this need satisfied? Is the ability to read and write enough or is a PhD degree necessary?

Being aware of those difficulties, some research has tried to estimate a threshold of basic needs satisfaction using the income variable (Fuentes and Rojas 2001; Frey and Stutzer 2002b; Layard 2005; Di Tella and MacCulloch 2010). Others have tried to interpret basic needs from a subjective point of view (Guardiola and García 2011). There is also the case of considering the consequences of lack of income as a proxy of basic needs, in terms of having enough money for food and shelter (Diener et al. 2010a). Other approaches aim to evaluate basic needs by asking individuals with the aim of proposing development policies (Max Neef 1993), following Streeten (1984)'s consideration that says: "the freedom to define one's needs should in itself be a basic need".

2.2.2. Is Higher Income equal to the Satisfaction of Higher Material Basic Needs and Human Development?

Considering material need satisfaction and happiness as essential tools for human development, we suggest that income alone has important drawbacks as a proxy for satisfaction and human development. First, as argued above, income always explains a low variability of happiness. It was even found that income does not influence happiness (Fuentes and Rojas 2001). Second, in the context of developing societies, some of these limitations mean that income should not be devoted to satisfy the basic needs of the household. Intra-household allocation of money influences the fact that income is devoted to education, health, housing or reinforcing the economic means of life. For example, buying a sewing machine in order to produce and sell clothes or buying a car to transport agricultural products to the market would be preferable in terms of the human development of the household members than devoting income to alcoholic beverages or gambling. A political illustration of this is the fact that most microcredit programmes in developing countries are offered to women, as they have been proved to be better at paying debts and investing money in basic needs or means that permit them to be pursued. Finally, and more generally, income is an enormous simplification of this complexity. It is necessary to identify human development in other dimensions of life to be able to understand their influence on specific cultures in their own assessment of well-being (Rojas 2008) and basic needs satisfaction (Alkire, 2002).

In spite of the limitations of income and the limitations of defining the satisfaction of basic needs, income could be a fair proxy in empirical research, in the absence of better data. The knowledge that income provides in explaining happiness could be complemented with the consequences of using it and, when available, other items that reinforce human development. This could permit a better understanding of happiness formation.

2.2.3. How Do Basic Material Needs Influence Happiness, and What Role Does Income Play?

Having made the distinction between income and basic needs, let us go back to the influence of basic needs fulfilment on happiness. As we have seen above, the effect of the satisfaction of basic needs on happiness is not clear, as there are both “happy” and “unhappy poor”. We have also proposed several explanations for this which are by no means related. For example, Graham et al. (2010) proposes that low aspirations could motivate people whose basic needs are not satisfied to report high happiness values, therefore adapting to the situation in which they live. Basic needs fulfilment seems to be a key element in the relationship of happiness to income.

The role of income in happiness is somewhat influenced by the satisfaction of material needs. When those needs are not satisfied, the absolute income-happiness relationship is strong, and

the relative income-happiness influence is weak or nonexistent. When there is need satisfaction, it is normally the contrary (Frey and Stutzer 2002b; Layard 2005; see Borghesi and Vercelli 2011 for review). When needs are satisfied, rising aspirations could make people compare themselves to others, and therefore relative income plays a major role.

Material needs satisfaction could also condition adaptation. As mentioned above, it has been demonstrated that countries where people's needs are satisfied adapt to economic growth after a period of time (which may be quite long), having no further influence on happiness. But this only holds with countries where people globally satisfy their needs (Di Tella and MacCulloch 2010).

Rising aspirations of material needs when most important basic needs are met does not mean, however, that absolute income is not important. People still need money to be satisfied, but the comparison effect could undermine the absolute income effect on happiness. For instance, in industrialised areas, Diener et al. (1993) proposes that it is necessary to have substantial absolute income in order to live well. In those areas, advertisement is also more intense, which favours comparison. Consumption paths are also more complex than in rural areas. This suggests an urban-rural difference in terms of happiness, income influence and material needs threshold.

2.2.4. Happiness and Hunger

Not being hungry is a basic requisite to the pursuance of happiness. Abraham Maslow placed nutrition at the basis of his famous pyramid of needs (Maslow 1943). Development researchers also explicitly consider being adequately nourished as a dimension of human development and food as a fundamental asset for the well-being of people.² Beyond any doubt, people find it difficult to work, be educated or relate to others when feeling hungry. Hunger is therefore an obstacle to the achievement of happiness and human development.

To the knowledge of the authors, there are no empirical studies directly relating food insecurity and happiness. In the illustration of the importance of hunger to the pursuance of happiness, in line with the review we have done so far, Veenhoven (1991) makes an interesting reflection that merits quotation:

Downward adjustment of needs brings inevitable discomfort. If we renounce food and company, the automatic alarms of hunger and loneliness start ringing. These alarms keep on ringing as long as the deprivation endures. Habituation can at best dim the discomfort somewhat.

² There are many theoretical frameworks that offer a list of items from different disciplines in order to achieve human development and quality of life. Alkire (2002) reviews and compare them. Subsistence, being adequately nourished and food are common denominators of those sets of items.

Favourable comparison does not turn off the alarm either: we are no less hungry if our neighbours are equally hungry or when we are not so hungry as we had expected to be. [...] In this light it is quite comprehensible that we found happiness to be lower in the poorest countries of the world. In these countries a large proportion of the population is undernourished (\pm 40% in Africa at that time) and hence one basic need clearly not gratified. No doubt improved nourishment will raise happiness lastingly in these countries.

Above, we have dealt with the existing literature referring to the effect of income on happiness, paying special attention to the existence of the “happy poor” people, the relationship of income with happiness and the satisfaction of basic needs. Let us see below, by means of an empirical analysis, the case of the Mayans and see how these results relate to the existing literature.

3. Field Work, Variables and Methodology

3.1. The Field Work

The Mayan people in Yucatan share a traditional culture that has undergone only minor changes. The Mayans are experts at growing maize and have their own clothes, language and view of the world.³ The state of Yucatan is located in the South of Mexico in the Yucatan peninsula and has a total population of 1,509,298 inhabitants, of which 309,650 (17.0%) dwell in rural areas. During the colonial period, a despotical system based on the principle of white superiority and indigenous inferiority was established. The invaders abused the Mayans, exploiting their labour force, forcing them to live in deprivation and deteriorating their most fundamental rights. The end of colonisation has not resulted, however, in the end of poverty in the area. In 2005, more than 60% of the rural population lived with a combination of low income, low education levels and inadequate housing conditions (SAGARPA 2011).

In order to assess subjective well-being, we use original data from fieldwork performed in the State of Yucatan at the end of 2008. We interviewed 373 Mayan households in the rural area of the state of Yucatan during the month of December. Most of the inhabitants in the rural area are Mayans. The person we interviewed within the household was the head of the household, normally a male for Mayans, or his wife. Sampling was random and distributed in towns in proportion to the size of their population⁴. The time when Mayans have greater scarcity of

³ More on the Mayan culture can be found in the online research platform <http://www.mayas.uady.mx/> elaborated by Hideyo Noguchi Research Centre of the Universidad Autónoma de Yucatán.

⁴ To determine the sample, one town was considered as all the areas in the State of Yucatan with 500 to 15,000 houses, according to the classification used by the National Institute of Statistics in Mexico (INEGI). The procedure was as follows: first a municipal sample was obtained considering the three jurisdictions of the State; a sample of towns and finally homes were selected. In the first stage, 51 municipalities were selected at random; in the second stage, 39 towns were selected at random from the total included within the range of 500 to 15,000 houses; and finally 373 houses were selected from these towns using their maps. The

resources is from January to July (Lendecky 2007), therefore the economic conditions of Mayans in the time when the survey was implemented were not as bad, as it was implemented during that period. The conditions are related with the months of drought and the period of rain. In that period, there is no harvest of maize and beans, as the agricultural cycle of maize and beans is performed in July and August (Arias et al. 2007), although climatic conditions could motivate variations in this cycle. Mayan households in the rural area base their diet mainly on maize and beans that they normally grow themselves.

3.2. The Variables and Methodology

The primary objective of the field work was to evaluate access to food and water. Additionally, the questionnaire included questions related to a subjective evaluation of life and several domains. For the former, interviewees were asked: "In general terms, how happy do you feel with your life?", and for the latter, they were asked: "how happy do you feel relating to..." and then the domain of life was named. These were related to feelings about the following aspects of life: health, work, love, money, house quality, nurture, water, leisure, community where they dwell and trust of others. They had to choose a score on a scale from 0 to 10, with 0 being the lowest level of happiness and 10 the highest level of happiness in the scale.

The fieldwork included interviewing people about the food deprivation they had suffered over the last few days. More specifically, they were asked: "Have you or any member of your household eaten less in the last 30 days than what you think you need to be satiated because there was not enough food?". Afterwards, a second question was asked: "How frequent was that?" The interviewer grouped the answers into three categories: needs not covered once or twice, between three to ten times and more than ten times. We used the former question to create two clusters in the assessment of happiness in order to proxy the lack of food: those who answer affirmatively and those who do not. The second question would have been more appropriate, as it would have given an idea of the degree of access to food, but the clusters would have had too few observations. The resulting variable, named *hunger*, is equal to one if the person interviewed answered yes to the former question, and zero if they answered no.

In the questionnaire we also asked people about their household income.⁵ We use the log of income in order to account for the diminishing marginal utility of money, and we name this variable *income*. In order to consider the effect of relative income, we assume that households

population in the towns was variable, therefore in some towns the number of households interviewed were high while it was low in others. The sample is representative of the selected universe, the rural people in Yucatan. The municipalities were located across the State of Yucatan. Sample sizes were calculated using the Epiinfo 6.01 program. The questionnaire was in Spanish. Most of the Mayan speak Spanish, and in the case they do not, the interviewer translated the questionnaire into Mayan.

⁵ The interviewers asked about the income of every of the household members. They also asked them about the household savings, consumption and debts. They intend that the total income were equal to consumptions, savings and debts.

compare their income with those from the community in which they live. Therefore, we calculated the deviation of the income of each household from the average income in each community. The correlation coefficient of this measure with absolute income was above 0.9, therefore, in order to avoid multicollinearity problems, we create a dummy variable named *relative income* that equals one when the deviation is positive. In other words, relative income equals one when the household earns more money than the average from the community and zero on the contrary.

As for the method of analysis, we apply ordinary least squares to account for the effect of income on happiness and its domains, and a t test of mean differences to find out the differences of happiness between the two groups.

4. Results

This section deals with the empirical results that relate happiness and the satisfaction of the domains to the variable income and variable hunger defined in the previous section. Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics of the variables. 38.1 per cent of the sample declared that some people in the household had eaten less in the last 30 days than what they considered necessary. With regard to frequency, from those answering yes, 13.9 per cent said that their food needs had not been met once or twice, 15.8 per cent between three and ten times and 8.3 per cent reported they did not have enough food on more than ten occasions in the last 30 days.

In spite of having not many material resources, Mayan people living in the rural area form a happy society. This is in line with some studies that evaluate happiness in groups of people that lack material means but nevertheless show high satisfaction levels, such as those mentioned above.

Table 1: descriptive statistics

Variable	Mean	St. Dev.	Min.	Max.
happiness	8.130027	1.641976	2	10
health	7.847185	1.809688	2	10
work	8.016086	1.963308	0	10
love	8.908847	1.615533	1	10
money	6.794355	2.033757	1	10
house	7.509434	1.906402	1	10
nurture	7.86828	1.57691	3	10
water	8.152815	2.125302	0	10
leisure	7.069892	2.406294	0	10
community	7.742627	2.141056	0	10
trust	7.959677	2.015035	0	10
hunger=1 (%)	38.06971	0.4862104	0	1
income	8.090281	0.984098	0	10.54537
relative income=1 (%)	51.74	0.5004	0	1

4.1. Happiness, Income and Relative Income

In table 2, we depict the results of relating happiness and its domains with income. We relate happiness as a function dependent on income and a constant term⁶. The significance of the income variable is of special interest, as it will give us an idea about the influence of this variable on the happiness formation of Mayan people. We find that income influences positively on the happiness of the Mayans, as well as several domains

⁶ We do not depict the value of the constant showing the results on the regressions.

Table 2: Effect of income on happiness and domains

Dependent variable	Coefficient	p-value	R squared
happiness	0.2385***	0.0057	0.0204
health	0.2806***	0.0031	0.0233
work	0.3919***	0.0001	0.0386
love	-0.0063	0.9411	0.0000
money	0.4567***	0.0000	0.0490
house	0.2415**	0.0167	0.0154
nurture	0.3367***	0.0000	0.0442
water	0.2193*	0.0501	0.0103
leisure	-0.0526	0.6789	0.0005
community	-0.1445	0.2006	0.0044
trust	0.0096	0.9282	0.0000

***Significant at 1%. **Significant at 5%. *Significant at 10%.

The domains in which the income variable is significant refer to material aspects of life such as work, money, quality of the house and nurture satisfaction. Medicines in rural Yucatan are not always available, and when they are, they can be acquired at a higher price for poor farmers. This would explain the significant influence of income on the health domain. In a community where there are water cuts and low water quality, Mayans could do little with money in order to improve their water access. Nevertheless, income could be used to improve the access to water by installing a tap inside the house instead of gathering water from a tap outside the house or from a well (Guardiola et al. 2010). Therefore, water access can be interpreted as a public-private good, as it has a part referred as a public good in terms of drinking quality and cuts and a part that concerns income investments performed by the individuals in terms of quality of access. This could explain the fact that income is significantly related to the water domain, but this significance is not high. Income could also do little in improving leisure when those opportunities are scarce, as happens in the Mayan communities. Community satisfaction is not related to income either. In rural Yucatan, it is common to find bad access to roads, with consequent difficulties to access markets, education for children and sanitation. Individual income alone could not change this situation as it is a direct responsibility of the local policies implemented in the areas. Additionally, it seems that, according to the results, money cannot “buy” love and trust between the Mayans.

Let us now consider the effect of comparison on our happiness estimations. We replicate the results above, but this time we include the relative income variable in addition to the income variable. The outcome is depicted in table 3. According to the results, income comparisons play no significant role either in happiness or in its domains. The only exception is found in the health domain, where there is an income comparison effect in terms of satisfaction that makes

absolute income effect disappear. When introducing income comparison, the absolute effect on water and house domains disappears.

Table 3: Effect of income and relative income on happiness and domains

Dependent variable	income		relative income		R squared
	Coefficient	p-value	Coefficient	p-value	
happiness	0.1989**	0.0483	0.1501	0.4475	0.0220
health	0.1805	0.1021	0.3792*	0.0808	0.0313
work	0.3236***	0.0068	0.2589	0.2687	0.0418
love	-0.0925	0.3532	0.3263	0.1003	0.0075
money	0.3778***	0.0022	0.2989	0.2158	0.0529
house	0.1577	0.1794	0.3173	0.1678	0.0205
nurture	0.2920***	0.0023	0.1693	0.3670	0.0463
water	0.1896	0.1477	0.1124	0.6621	0.0108
leisure	-0.0741	0.6189	0.0814	0.7814	0.0007
community	-0.1306	0.3234	-0.0526	0.8396	0.0045
trust	0.0919	0.4602	-0.3120	0.2032	0.0044

***Significant at 1%. **Significant at 5%. *Significant at 10%.

4.2. Happiness, basic needs, income and relative income

Now we assess the effect of income on those whose material basic needs are satisfied and those whose are not, using hunger as a proxy for need satisfaction. Before doing so, let us take a closer look to the distribution of happiness and domain satisfaction on the sample. Table 4 shows the average scores of the subjective well-being of Mayan people for the whole sample and the average scores after differentiating between those who lacked sufficient food to cover their needs and those who had enough food.

Table 4: Differences of happiness and domains of life between groups

domain	Mean all	Mean (hunger=No)	Mean (hunger=Yes)	Difference
happiness	8.130027	8.294372	7.862676	0.431696***
health	7.847185	7.969697	7.647887	0.32181**
work	8.016086	8.060606	7.943662	0.116944
love	8.908847	8.917749	8.894366	0.023383
money	6.794355	6.986957	6.482394	0.504563***
house	7.509434	7.619048	7.328571	0.290477*
nurture	7.86828	8.16087	7.394366	0.766504***
water	8.152815	8.367965	7.802817	0.565148***
leisure	7.069892	7.178261	6.894366	0.283895
community	7.742627	7.796537	7.65493	0.141607
trust	7.959677	7.986957	7.915493	0.071464

***Differences significant at 1%. **Differences significant at 5%. *Differences significant at 10%. Differences are tested using a t test (using Kolmogorov-Smirnov test for all the variables we cannot reject the null hypothesis that they follow a normal distribution).

The last column of table 4 reports the differences between the two groups. We perform a t test in order to contrast the null hypothesis of equality of means. For those who lack food, the average scores in life and all domains are lower than those who declared not to have this problem. Still, the average scores of people for whom this need is not satisfied remain high. It is worth highlighting the fact that in some domains of life, the differences between the two groups are quite low and non-significant, such as those related to time use: work and leisure, which could be explained by the homogeneity of leisure and work opportunities. This is in spite of income having a positive influence on work satisfaction according to the analysis performed above. Neither is there a significant difference between those variables related to reciprocity (love and trust) and public goods (community) that were not influenced by income in previous estimations. On the other hand, domains associated with material needs, such as nurture, access to water and money, as well as life as a whole, register greater and significant differences. However, the levels of happiness of both groups are still high.

In order to take a closer look at income and the satisfaction of basic needs, we split the sample into two groups and run the regressions again. The results of both regressions are depicted in table 5. We can see that there are differences between both groups. Those whose food needs are satisfied do not experience a significant influence on happiness by income, as opposed to those for whom this need is not satisfied. The same interpretation can be found for the health domain. There are no differences between the two groups in the influence of work and financial satisfaction; although in the case of people experiencing hunger the coefficient of the variable income is higher and more significant in both cases. Water satisfaction is only influenced by

income in the case of people for whom the hunger need is not satisfied. As for the domains related to feelings (love and trust), leisure and community, the effect of income remains insignificant in both cases.

Let us now turn our attention to a result that seems surprising: The nurture satisfaction is positively influenced by income for people who do not experience hunger, but it has no influence for the people who suffer from hunger. This may seem counterintuitive, but a feasible explanation is the fact that those Mayan people who do not have enough food depend more on the subsistence agriculture rather than the markets in order to obtain food. Little crop diversity, lack of knowledge to cultivate other crops and low productivity of land or lack of land are factors that result in lack of food. Others, with greater access to work, who have a small business or a relative working outside the community sending money to the household could depend more on income to obtain food and diversify their diet. This might reflect a greater influence of income on this domain for those who have enough to eat.

Table 5: Effect of income on happiness and domains between groups

	hunger=No			hunger=Yes		
	coefficient	p-value	R squared	coefficient	p-value	R squared
happiness	0.0985	0.2990	0.0047	0.4173**	0.0149	0.0416
health	0.1845	0.1040	0.0115	0.4060**	0.0199	0.0381
work	0.2056*	0.0925	0.0123	0.7376***	0.0001	0.1034
love	-0.0491	0.6474	0.0009	0.0671	0.6467	0.0015
money	0.3488*	0.0059	0.0328	0.5751***	0.0030	0.0614
house	0.3100***	0.0067	0.0317	0.0618	0.7555	0.0007
nurture	0.3122***	0.0009	0.0471	0.2329	0.1248	0.0168
water	0.0470	0.6894	0.0007	0.4265*	0.0652	0.0241
leisure	-0.1280	0.4306	0.0027	0.0194	0.9271	0.0001
community	-0.1085	0.4246	0.0028	-0.2529	0.2212	0.0107
trust	0.1186	0.3890	0.0033	-0.2070	0.2327	0.0102

Still, interesting questions remain unanswered: Is the income comparison unequal between those who experience hunger and those for whom this need is satisfied? Does income comparison condition the influence of absolute income on happiness? We attempt to answer this with new regressions that include the relative income variable. Table 6 depicts the results of running the same regressions as in the previous case, but introducing the relative income effect. Let us start by looking at the people for whom this need is not satisfied. There is no comparison effect whatsoever in terms of income, neither in happiness nor in the domain satisfaction, as by introducing the relative income variable, the results are the same as when we do not consider it. In the case of the group that for whom this need is satisfied, there is a significant effect of income comparison in the water and the health domain, but not in happiness. If we compare

those results with the previous analysis in both cases, absolute influence of income remains the same when introducing comparison, except for the case of work and house satisfaction, which small significance disappears in the case of people whose food needs are satisfied.

Table 6: Effect of income and relative income on happiness and domains between groups

	hunger=No			hunger=Yes		
	income	relative income	R	income	relative income	R
	p-	p-	squared	p-	p-value	squared
	coefficient	coefficient		coefficient	coefficient	
happiness	0.03110.7757	0.27200.2152	0.0114	0.4632**0.0220	-0.1635 0.6651	0.0429
health	0.07630.5572	0.4364*0.0954	0.0235	0.3455*0.0922	0.2155 0.5754	0.0403
work	0.11600.4084	0.36130.2004	0.0194	0.7280***0.0010	0.0343 0.9334	0.1034
love	-0.12270.3216	0.29690.2326	0.0072	-0.03510.8386	0.3639 0.2633	0.0105
money	0.2608*0.0726	0.35560.2232	0.0391	0.5456**0.0165	0.1050 0.8045	0.0618
house	0.2182*0.0955	0.37030.1586	0.0401	0.00290.9900	0.2097 0.6300	0.0024
nurture	0.2351**0.0288	0.31230.1477	0.0559	0.29050.1052	-0.2049 0.5424	0.0194
water	-0.09740.4690	0.5822**0.0318	0.0207	0.65920.0154	-0.8287 0.1040	0.0425
leisure	-0.17310.3565	0.18210.6297	0.0038	0.06680.7896	-0.1688 0.7203	0.0010
community	-0.14920.3418	0.16430.6019	0.0040	-0.12760.5997	-0.4462 0.3306	0.0174
trust	0.16520.2989	-0.18840.5556	0.0048	-0.06500.7492	-0.5055 0.1884	0.0224

5. Discussion

5.1. Why are Mayans so Happy, and What Role does Income Play?

In the last section we depicted the results of the analysis and interpreted them in the context of the Mayan region. Let us put these results in perspective with the existing literature, with the aim of finding out the reasons for the higher level of happiness of the Mayans and the nature of the influence of income and basic needs. The literature review above serves as a benchmark, and when it is necessary we bring new insights from other research. From the authors' knowledge of the Mayan people and from useful insights received from scholars and students at the Universidad Autónoma de Yucatán, the authors can venture a few reasons to justify these results.

Similar to what was found in some parts of the happiness research related above, levels of happiness are very high for Mayans. In our study, the happiness of Mayans whose food needs were not satisfied was higher than that in countries such as Argentina (6.62 in 2008), Colombia (6.96 in 2008), Costa Rica (7.43 in 2007), Chile (6.33 in 2008), Nicaragua (6,17 in 2008) and

even Mexico (7.1 in 2008)⁷. Is there a paradox of “happy peasants and miserable millionaires” as Carol Graham proposes? Let us explore the possible reasons of why Mayans are so happy.

One of the possible explanations is adaptation. As explained by Amartya Sen, this refers to the fact that people can adapt to the hardest conditions and still report high values of subjective well-being (Sen 1985). If the Mayan people consider a situation in which they lack food as normal, this reason should therefore not make them feel unhappy. If lack of food or lack of fulfilment of basic needs has been the norm for years rather than the exception, it would appear that Mayan people would not consider that to be important in terms of their happiness formation.

Much of the research indicates that people who compare themselves with those with higher incomes do worse in terms of happiness, and people who compare themselves with those with lower incomes are happier. The literature also suggests that relative income starts to influence happiness when basic needs are met, and absolute income becomes less important. However, it seems that relative income simply does not influence Mayan happiness, or has very little influence in some domains. We suggest that this is due to the lack of comparison habits. For example, they are not influenced by publicity and advertising as much as other cultures, therefore they do not compare themselves to idealised images of life to be achieved by increasing consumption. As McMahon (2006) proposes, one source of unhappiness is to not to feel as happy as you should feel in a particular situation. Not all Mayans have access to a TV set and, if they have, they cannot emulate standards by means of consumption because of their lack of money and lack of goods supply. Layard (2005) also proposes that comparison is an important source of unhappiness and recommends that in order to pursue happiness, one should not to compare oneself with others.

The philosopher Bertrand Russell describes in a classic essay (Russell 1930) the primitive joy of a London child experiencing nature for the first time:

“I have seen a boy of two years old, who had been kept in London, taken out for the first time to walk in green country. The season was winter, and everything was wet and muddy. To the adult eye there was nothing to cause delight, but in the boy there sprang up a strange ecstasy; he kneeled in the wet ground and put his face in the grass, and gave utterance to half-articulate cries of delight.”

In urban areas, there are not many opportunities for this kind of contact with nature. Mayan children, and adults when they were children, on the other hand, do have the chance to roll around in the grass, and they greatly enjoy it. In spite of hardship, climate disasters and bad harvests, which by no means are sources of unhappiness, contact with nature is something that

⁷ The values of happiness for these countries come from Ruut Veenhoven’s World Database of Happiness <http://worlddatabaseofhappiness.eur.nl>.

rural areas have, and might, in the case of Mayan culture, foster happiness upwards. In the Popol Vuh, the Mayan sacred book, men are made by maize, the product of the land. Contact with nature and its importance for Mayan culture might be a plausible reason for the increased happiness of the Mayans.

Independently of the level of income, factors such as past economic situation could influence the happiness of people (Fuentes and Rojas 2001; Diener and Biswas-Diener 2002; Frey and Stutzer 2002a). In fact, the lack of access to food is decreasing in Yucatan. Therefore, the Mayan may be comparing their current situation to that of the last few years, leading them to report higher values. These improvements reduce poverty levels. In fact, food poverty, measured as being unable to afford the basic shopping basket of food, even when assigning 100% of household income, decreased in the State of Yucatan from 35.1% in 2000 to 18.1% in 2005 (CONEVAL 2008; online data⁸). However, a necessary caveat must be made in this possible explanation. We compare the situation globally, but we cannot differentiate in the database between those who are doing better or those who are doing worse. Ideally, we would have had time series data or included a question asking if the interviewees feel they are better off with respect with the past to be sure about the possible positive influence of the past in happiness.

The results formed by the literature also invite the conclusion that once basic needs are met, desires, or aspirations, increase as fast as income, leaving income with a lower effect on happiness compared to people whose needs are not satisfied. Our results fit quite well in this pattern, and this seems a plausible interpretation. Once the food need is satisfied, the influence of absolute income disappears, not only on happiness, but also on other domains of life such as health.⁹ Some of the Mayan people's main aspirations are based on satisfying their material needs, and income could be an important source in some of them.

The last plausible explanation proposed for why Mayans are so happy refers to the Mayan idiosyncrasy that goes beyond material possession, such as family ties and support and their attachment to religion and God. Those feelings may contribute to increase their happiness in spite of hardship. With regard to others, the Mayans generally display great solidarity, enjoying social meetings and the presence of relatives. With regard to God, Mayan people are very religious and have great faith and spirituality, which may make them feel very satisfied with life. Therefore, the cultural aspects of Mayans might reflect on their concept of happiness, and could be another plausible explanation of why they rank so highly in the happiness question. If income has a focusing illusion because people focus on earning money while failing to allocate their

⁸ The dataset can be found in:
<http://medusa.coneval.gob.mx/cmsconeval/rw/pages/entidades/yucatan/index.en.do;jsessionid=798A821329D311046446D6BD0602359A>

⁹ It has been proposed that effect of absolute income on health is quite similar to the effect in income and happiness (Borghesi and Vercelli 2011).

time as proposed by Daniel Kahneman; the Mayans might not have this illusion and therefore use their time for activities which improve happiness. Additionally, we have to take into account that, when feeling hungry, the satisfaction of socializing with friends and family is surely lower than when this need is satisfied. This would aid to explain the lower happiness of the group that does not have access to enough food.

5.2. Policy Implications

The idea of happiness maximisation for public policy has been proposed as an alternative of income maximisation (Layard 2005). In the light of previous discussion, one is tempted to conclude that, if Mayans are so happy, then there is no need for policy intervention in order to assist them. However, this proposition is too adventurous.

Their high levels of happiness do not imply, however, that Mayans who lack access to food do not require political attention. In fact, as shown by this research, there is still hunger in the region. Happiness or income maximisation are single policies that would not solve the Mayan's problems. An array of indicators such as the ones proposed by Stiglitz et al. (2009), or an analysis model such as those reviewed by Alkire (2002) could be more suitable to make decisions about their needs and propose development policies. Mayans do need better access to water and sanitation, road improvements, better access to healthcare, education and housing, improved food security as well as assistance for hurricanes, to quote some of the possible policies that could be implemented.

5.3. Limitations

At this point it is important to keep in mind the difficulties encountered in affirming that someone's needs are satisfied or not. In light of the problems encountered by Paul Streeten mentioned above, it is difficult to obtain a line separating people whose basic needs are satisfied or not. We attempt to do this by means of a perceived variable related to hunger, but in using this variable some caveats should be made. This hunger measure is not ideal. Ideally, weight and height data from the household members in order to calculate the body mass index or calorie intake data would permit the identification of under-nutrition, and would be a more accurate definition of the consequences of the lack of food. These kinds of measures were unfortunately out of the scope of the field work. On the other hand, food deprivation as defined in this study could be a proxy for basic needs satisfaction in the line of other research that attempts to find this threshold.

Another peculiarity of the hunger variable is that we asked people about their own happiness and asked if any members of the household eaten less than what they needed in the past 30 days. As suggested by an anonymous referee, a male respondent can answer "yes" to this

question, not concerning him but his wife, for instance, and then report on his own happiness. There are some parts of the world where food is distributed unequally within the household. In some regions, within the household the father eats first, then the male children, and afterwards the wife/wives and the female children. Between Mayans, there are gender inequalities concerning, for instance, access to education for male and female children, work distribution and the forbiddance of participation of women in agricultural ceremonies. However, intrahousehold food distribution is not as unequal in terms of access as we have described above. Nevertheless, it could be that in some households with limited access to food more attention is paid to feeding the children, or that the male head of the household eats more as he needs more energy for the agricultural work, while others do not eat enough. Those inequalities could exist in some cases, and were difficult to capture in the field work, which makes our hunger measure less than ideal. Nevertheless, it serves as a proxy of food shortage inside of the household; and if any member of the household goes hungry, it gives information that there is not enough food to satisfy every member's needs, which should be important to the respondent's happiness.

Recent research in the field of psychology has analysed the effect of income on several types of happiness measures, such as positive emotions, negative emotions or life evaluation, finding different results (Biswas-Diener et al. 2010; Diener et al. 2010a; Diener et al. 2010b; Kahneman and Deaton 2010). Unfortunately, our dataset does not include these different aspects of happiness in order to implement such comparisons.

6. Conclusions and future research

This research focuses on a particular culture from a rural area. We have attempted to explore the influence in happiness of income and basic needs, interpreting not being hungry as a proxy of need satisfaction. Happiness is high among the Mayans, and for those whose food needs are satisfied, it is higher than for those for whom this need is not satisfied. However, those for whom this need is not satisfied still have a high level of happiness. As far as the authors are aware, this is the first study that assesses the happiness of the Mayan people, and its results in terms of income and basic needs fulfilment follow those of the existing literature that encounters high reported happiness in poor societies.

According to the results, income influences Mayan happiness, as well as the material domains (work, money, house, water and nurture) and health, but not domains related to intangible feelings (love and trust) and public goods (community). Relative income does not play a significant role in either happiness or in the domains. Health satisfaction appears to be weakly influenced by comparison, and the importance of absolute income to water and house satisfaction loses its significance when allowing for relative income comparison.

If we consider the fulfilment of basic needs in terms of access to enough food to satisfy personal needs, this pattern changes slightly. Income influences happiness for those whose food needs are not satisfied, but does not affect those for whom those needs are satisfied. This is in line with what is suggested in past literature - that income influences happiness until basic needs are met. We obtain similar results for the health domain of life. Relative income does not influence those whose needs are not satisfied, in line with the existing literature. However, contrary to the literature, there is no income comparison influencing the happiness of those whose needs are satisfied, but there is a weak comparison effect on the health and water domain.

We suggest that cultural and social characteristics in Mayan society might play a role in avoiding comparison. In addition, other reasons such as contact with nature, adaptation to deprivation, general material improvements with respect to the past, low aspirations and the Mayan culture devoted to solidarity and enjoyment of social relationships could explain that even deprived people report high levels of happiness.

High happiness scores do not mean that the Mayans do not need political attention; therefore happiness in this context cannot be a single indicator to monitor prosperity. Some other indicators such as inequality, access to healthcare and education, access to roads and job opportunities could complement happiness in order to understand economic and human development and prosperity.

The knowledge of happiness in developing countries or groups of people whose essential basic needs are not met still requires greater research efforts. As posited above, there are many cultural and geographical differences in well-being. A greater understanding of those differences would make it possible to differentiate between those characteristics of well-being that belong to human nature and those that belong to cultural and social conditions. This task would enrich the psychology and economics disciplines in terms of the relation of happiness to income and material needs.

Additionally, rural areas are greatly different environments to urban areas in terms of life habits, working and leisure opportunities, technology and education. Most of the happiness databases are based in urban areas, and their conclusions are urban-referred. Studies in rural areas, mainly if they are depressed areas, are more demanding of time and money than urban ones, as factors such as bad access to roads hinder analysis. In spite of the inconvenience of gathering data, happiness in rural areas and its comparison with urban areas would permit a better understanding of the differences in well-being.

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