



Poverty and psychological distress in Latin America

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this paper is three-fold: first, to study the psychological distress of the Latin American poor. Second, to study differences in psychological distress between the poor and the relatively wealthy in Latin America. Third, to study how economic growth impacts the psychological well-being of the poor.

This paper uses micro-level information from the Gallup 2007 Survey for 16 Latin American countries to study psychological distress of the poor in Latin America; the survey is representative at the country level. The investigation works with approximately 12,500 observations. Psychological distress is measured on the basis of a set of questions regarding a person's emotional situation the day before he/she answered the questionnaire.

The investigation finds out that the poor show greater psychological distress than the wealthy and that the gap is statistically significant. However, it would be inappropriate to attempt predicting a person's psychological well-being on the basis of his/her poverty condition alone, since many factors affect people's psychological well-being. The paper also shows that rapid economic growth seems to be detrimental to the psychological well-being of the poor, and that the impact of economic growth on psychological well-being differs between the poor and the relatively wealthy.

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1. Introduction

Poverty has acquired greater importance during the last decade as a result of the United Nations Millennium Declaration, which considers poverty abatement as its first Millennium Development Goal. As a consequence of the Declaration more countries have focused on measuring poverty and fostering its reduction over time. Poverty researchers have substantial experience on measuring poverty and on designing social programs to abate it; however, research on the relationship between poverty and psychological well-being is not so vast. Moreover, while the literature suggests that being in poverty may be psychologically distressful, some recent studies conclude that "The lack of any relationship between conventional economic welfare measures and mental health outcomes across a diverse sample of developing countries suggests that poverty, per se, is not a strong determinant of poor mental health" (Das, Do, Friedman, & McKenzie, 2008: 16).

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The paper takes advantage of the Gallup 2007 Survey, which provides micro-level information for more than 12,000 persons in 16 Latin American countries. The survey includes a well-being module which gathers information regarding the emotional situation of the person. There is also the standard socio-demographic and economic information in the survey. Hence, it is possible to study the psychological well-being of the poor and to compare it to that of the mid-income groups and the relatively wealthy. It is also possible to study the impact of country-level conditions, such as economic growth, on the psychological well-being of the poor.

In opposition to research findings by Das et al. (2008), this investigation finds out that being in income poverty has, on average, a large and statistically significant psychological well-being impact with respect to both the mid-income group and, specially, the wealthy group in society. In addition, there is a hint about rapid economic growth being distressful for the emotional well-being of those in poverty.

The paper is structured as follows: Section 2 reviews the relevant literature on the relationship between income poverty and psychological well-being. Section 3 presents the database and explains the construction of new variables; it also presents descriptive statistics about the psychological well-being of the poor and of the relatively wealthy. Section 4 uses regression analysis to test the hypothesis of the psychological well-being of the poor being lower than that of the rich. Section 5 explores the role of economic growth on the psychological distress of the poor. Section 6 makes some final considerations.

2. Literature review

2.1. Income and subjective well-being

Research on the relationship between economic variables, such as income and subjective well-being has substantially increased during the last decades. Economists have focused on the study of the relationship between income and variables such as life satisfaction and happiness (Easterlin, 1974; Ferrer-i-Carbonell, 2005; Frey & Stutzer, 2001; Stutzer, 2004), while psychologists have been more interested in studying other subjective well-being variables, such as moods and emotions (Diener & Lucas, 2000).

The relationship between income and life satisfaction/happiness has been found to be positive and statistically significant in cross-section studies, with some debate about its nature in time-series analyses. It is also widely accepted that, while statistically significant, the relationship between income and subjective well-being is weak in the sense that a person's income cannot be used as a sufficient predictor for her subjective well-being. The domains-of-life literature shows that there is more in life than the standard of living and that, in consequence, income plays a minor – but statistically significant – role in explaining subjective well-being (Rojas, 2007).

Similar results of a positive but weak relationship between economic variables and other psychological well-being variables, such as emotions, are found by psychologists and other researchers (Diener & Biswas-Diener, 2002; Kaplan, Shema, & Leite, 2008).

2.2. Poverty and psychological well-being

2.2.1. The conception of poverty

The using of income as the main criterion to classify people as poor has been dominant in the poverty literature and in policy-making. For example, the monitoring of advances in achieving the first goal of the Millennium Development Goals, which refers to poverty abatement, is based on an income-poverty conception. Although there has currently been a reconsideration of the criterion of classifying people as poor on the basis of their income,³ this paper will not deviate from this common practice so as to have results that are relevant and comparable within the current income-poverty literature.

2.2.2. Psychological well-being

The study of subjective well-being involves both cognitive and affective appraisals. This dualistic Cartesian view of mental processes has proven to be useful for understanding human well-being and behavior; although it is not beyond criticism (Damasio, 1994). Cognitive or evaluative processes are associated to assessments about life satisfaction and life appreciation, while affective assessments involve emotions and moods. Argyle (2001: 10) states that “happiness may have somewhat separate cognitive and emotional parts” and after reviewing some studies he affirms that “happiness can be said to have at least two components which are partly independent of each other”. Veenhoven (2001: 6) states that “When we appraise how much we appreciate the life we live, we seem to use two sources of information: Affectively, we estimate how well we feel generally, and at the cognitive level we compare ‘life as it is’ with standards of ‘how life should be’”.

While economists have been mostly concerned with cognitive-related measures of subjective well-being, psychologists have been more interested in affective-related aspects, using terms such as positive and negative emotions, emotional well-being, psychological distress, mental health, and emotional quality of life (Diener & Emmons, 1985; Diener & Lucas, 2000). The origin and purpose of emotions constitutes a central area of research and debate in psychology, and even in phi-

³ It is acknowledged that there is currently a broad debate on the conceptualization and measurement of poverty; see Rojas (2008) and UNDP International Poverty Centre (2006).

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