Happiness: a demographic and comparative study in Huánuco, Peru

La felicidad: estudio demográfico y comparativo en Huánuco, Perú

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ABSTRACT

Objective. To determine the levels of happiness in Huánuco (Peru), and to perform a multivariable analysis by dimensions across all districts. **Methods.** The target population consisted of 179,096 individuals of both sexes, aged between 18 and 60 years. From this population, a stratified probabilistic sampling method with a 97% confidence level resulted in a sample of 1,035 participants. Data collection was conducted using the Lima Happiness Scale developed by Alarcón. **Results.** The samples were found to be heterogeneous across the 13 districts of Huánuco, with a p-value of 0.000. **Conclusions.** The population of Huánuco predominantly exhibits a low level of happiness, accounting for 40%, followed by a moderate level of happiness at 33%, and only 1% reporting a high level of happiness.

Keywords: happiness; Huánuco; positive psychology; psychological well-being; health promotion.

RESUMEN

Objetivo. Determinar los niveles de felicidad en Huánuco (Perú), así como también, en análisis multivariable, por dimensiones en todos los distritos. **Métodos.** La población estuvo conformada por 179 096 personas de ambos sexos, entre las edades de 18 y 60 años, a partir de las cuales, con un mecanismo probabilístico estratificado y un nivel de confianza del 97 % se obtuvo una muestra de 1035 sujetos. Para el recojo de información se utilizó la escala de la felicidad de Lima de Alarcón. **Resultados.** Se encontró que las muestras no son homogéneas en los 13 distritos de Huánuco, obteniendo un p-valor de 0,000. **Conclusiones.** Se determinó que la población de Huánuco tiene el nivel bajo de felicidad como predominante, con un 40 %; así mismo, un 33 % en mediana felicidad y un escaso 1 % en el nivel de alta felicidad.

Palabras clave: felicidad; Huánuco; psicología positiva; bienestar psicológico; promoción de la salud.

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INTRODUCCTION

Happiness has been the most sought-after attribute since ancient times. Two well-defined schools of thought have laid the groundwork for the conceptualization of happiness. On the one hand, Ferrater (1969) refers to the "autarchy" proposed by the Hellenistic schools, which interpreted happiness as liberation and detachment from the anxiety produced by material possessions—an essential imperative to achieve tranquility, spiritual peace, and happiness. On the other hand, McGregor (2020) argues that all people desire to attain happiness, yet it is so complex that it may be nearly impossible to define how one can actually be happy, or to answer the question: *What would you do to achieve it?*

Happiness is more closely related to the notion of subjective well-being (SWB), psychological well-being, and satisfaction with life (Diener, 1984). There is broad consensus in affirming that the subjective interpretation one experiences in a state of contentment is what most closely resembles happiness. Therefore, it is essential to comprehend it in order to experience it more deeply. According to the Royal Spanish Academy (RAE, 2023), the word "bienestar" (well-being) is composed of "bien" (well) and "estar" (being), and refers to the set of conditions necessary for living, or the state of a person that reflects proper somatic or psychological functioning.

Positive psychology has established a solid conceptual framework for understanding happiness as a multidimensional construct encompassing positive emotions, meaningful relationships, accomplishment, purpose, and engagement (Seligman, 2011). This approach is embodied in the PERMA model, which is widely used in interventions aimed at increasing psychological well-being. In this regard, Fredrickson (2001) proposed the broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions, stating that such emotions not only improve immediate mood but also contribute to the development of long-lasting resources, such as resilience, optimism, and mental health.

Seligman (2002) further suggests that happiness constitutes a fundamental and essential good that all individuals seek, regardless of cultural context—from hedonistic perspectives to the factors that, in his view, encompass the meaning of happiness (Lyubomirsky & Schkade, 2005). Accordingly, psychology should not be regarded solely as a discipline focused on the analysis, identification, and treatment of illness, but also as one that acknowledges and enhances personal strengths that foster qualities such as joy, love, education, and personal growth (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

This study analyzes how the elements associated with personal happiness influence individual performance and society as a whole. The attribution of happiness by an individual has social implications. Several studies have justified the importance of examining how societies can become happier (Frey & Stutzer, 2001). In democratically organized societies, higher levels of societal happiness tend to emerge. In Switzerland, for instance, it has been demonstrated that the greater the development and strengthening of institutions, the higher the levels of individual happiness. Moreover, higher income levels are associated with greater happiness, depending on the conditions of the labor force among the employed population (Diener & Oishi, 2000).

Inglehart and Klingemann (2000) studied subjective well-being (happiness) in 64 countries, finding that societies require a certain degree of stability to establish democracy, which in turn contributes to higher levels of happiness. When a majority social group is dissatisfied, the governing system tends to collapse over time; the instability reflected in the enforcement of societal norms may be indicative of declining subjective well-being. For instance, Finland consistently ranks among the top countries in happiness indicators, according to Action for Happiness (2022).

Key elements of adequate psychological well-being include satisfaction with life and both positive and negative affect. This type of well-being is evaluated based on past experiences and over time, at both affective and cognitive levels. In this regard, subjective well-being often aligns with the commonly understood concept of happiness (Diener & Oishi, 2000).

In the Latin American context, various studies have shown that happiness levels are deeply influenced by structural factors such as insecurity, unemployment, access to basic services, and sense of community (Helliwell et al., 2023). According to the 2023 World Happiness Report, Latin American countries often report high levels of positive emotions despite economic limitations, suggesting a strong influence of social and cultural factors in the construction of subjective well-being. In this sense, interpersonal trust, family life, and support networks appear to be more determinant than income alone (Rojas, 2021).

In Peru, there is limited scientific literature addressing the empirical study of happiness from a territorial and multivariable perspective. Although isolated studies have been conducted in Lima (Villavicencio et al., 2018) and Arequipa (Agüedo & Basualdo, 2018), few have systematically explored the emotional dimension

of well-being in Andean or Amazonian contexts such as Huánuco. In this regard, authors such as Jiménez (2024) and Serrano (2024) have emphasized the urgency of incorporating indicators of positive mental health into local public policies, beyond the traditional metrics of poverty and employment.

Alarcón (2006), drawing on Greek philosophy, defines happiness as "a more or less lasting state of satisfaction, subjectively experienced by the individual upon possessing a desired good" (p. 101). When conceived as a synonym for satisfaction with life, happiness acquires a more complex character, as it entails achieving a balance that allows individuals to enjoy their daily activities.

The early studies conducted by Seligman (2002) laid the foundation and are considered some of the first scientific approaches to the study of happiness and related constructs. Based on this, it is considered that variables such as age, gender, health, socioeconomic status, or level of education have limited correlation with happiness. However, when compared to lifestyle factors, living in a democratic society, belonging to a higher social stratum, being married, maintaining an optimistic outlook, and engaging in religious practices are more strongly associated with higher happiness indicators.

In light of the above, the objective of this study was to determine the levels of happiness in the Huánuco region (Peru), as well as to conduct a multivariable analysis by dimensions across all its districts.

METHODS

Study type and area

This study employed a quantitative approach with a descriptive-comparative level of analysis. It examined the levels of psychological well-being among the population of Huánuco from a demographic perspective. A multifactorial analysis was conducted across the 13 districts of the province of Huánuco during the year 2020.

Population and sample

The study population consisted of 179,096 inhabitants, according to the national census conducted by the Instituto Nacional de Estadística e Informática (INEI, 2020). The age range was between 18 and 60 years. A stratified probabilistic sampling method was applied, achieving 97% precision and representativeness. The study covered all 13 districts of the Huánuco province, encompassing both rural and urban areas. A total sample of 1,035 participants was obtained, with data collection and measurement carried out simultaneously.

Variable and data collection instruments

The main variable of the study was happiness, which was measured using the Lima Happiness Scale, developed by Alarcón (2006). This instrument is designed to assess psychological well-being, which Alarcón equates with happiness. It comprises four dimensions: (1) positive sense (11 items), (2) satisfaction with life (6 items), (3) personal fulfillment (6 items), and (4) joy of living (4 items). Internal consistency and reliability of the instrument were assessed using Cronbach's alpha, yielding a value of 0.893, indicating high reliability.

Techniques and data collection procedures

Data were collected through a survey administered by a team of psychology professionals trained to follow specific guidelines for obtaining informed consent and administering the questionnaire. Surveys were conducted through direct interviews with participants, in group settings, and through coordinated fieldwork distributed across strategic points in the city of Huánuco. All data collection was completed within one week.

Data analysis

Data were processed using SPSS v.25. Tabulation and analysis were performed using multivariable ANOVA, which allowed for the identification of relevant variables for the study. Contingency tables were used to cross-reference key indicators across the 13 districts of Huánuco, analyzing how happiness levels were distributed throughout the region.

Ethical considerations

In strict adherence to the ethical handling of participants' personal data, written informed consent was obtained prior to data collection. This procedure was standardized and implemented consistently by all fieldwork teams.

RESULTS

According to the results obtained in the district of Huánuco, 37.8% of the population fell within the low happiness category, followed by 35.5% reporting moderate happiness. In the district of Amarilis, 35.4% of participants were predominantly categorized as having low happiness, followed by 32.3% with moderate happiness. In the district of Pillco Marca, the predominant categories were low happiness (37.8%) and moderate happiness (36.1%), consistent with other urban districts.

In the district of Santa María del Valle, 45.5% of respondents were classified as having low happiness. In Churubamba, this percentage increased to 82.6%, and in Chinchao, 52.6% reported low happiness. Among the nearby rural districts, a predominance of low happiness

Table 1
Levels of "happiness" in the province of Huánuco, by district (n = 1035)

Levels of "happiness" by district	n = 1035									
	Very low		Low		Moderate		High		Very high	
	fi	%	fi	%	fi	%	fi	%	fi	%
Huánuco	33	11.0	113	37.8	106	35.5	43	14.4	4	1.3
Amarilis	36	13.07	93	35.4	85	32.3	47	17.9	2	0.8
Pillco Marca	8	3.4	90	37.8	86	36.1	53	22.3	1	0.4
Cayrán	0	0.0	7	46.7	3	20.0	5	33.3	0	0.0
Santa María del Valle	3	4.5	30	45.5	21	31.8	10	15.2	2	3.0
Margos	0	0.0	1	11.1	6	66.7	2	22.2	0	0.0
Yarumayo	1	33.3	1	33.3	1	33.3	0	0.0	0	0.0
Yacus	0	0.0	7	41.2	5	29.4	4	23.5	1	5.9
Kichki	0	0.0	5	71.4	2	28.6	0	0.0	0	0.0
Chinchao	6	15.8	20	52.6	11	28.9	1	2.6	0	0.0
Pillao	1	3.7	3	11.1	20	74.1	3	11.1	0	0.0
Churubamba	3	6.5	38	82.6	5	10.9	0	0.0	0	0.0
Chaulán	0	0.0	6	85.7	0	0.0	1	14.3	0	0.0

was also observed in Kichki (71.4%), Chaulán (85.7%), and Yacus (41.2%). In contrast, in the districts of Pillao and Margos, moderate happiness was the most common, with 71.4% and 66.7% of participants, respectively.

At the provincial level, 40% of the population in Huánuco perceived themselves as experiencing low happiness, 33.9% reported moderate happiness, 16.3% indicated high happiness, and only 1% reported very high happiness (see Table 1).

In the district of Huánuco, perceptions related to the "joy of living" dimension showed that 73.2% of the population fell into the low category. Similar findings were reported in Amarilis (60.8%) and Pillco Marca (61.8%), which are the most populated districts in the province. However, some rural districts displayed extremely high concentrations in the low category—Margos (88.9%), Yarumayo (100%), and Kichki (100%). These patterns were consistent across other rural districts (see Table 2).

Table 2
Level of the "joy of living" dimension in the province of Huánuco, by district (n = 1035)

Level of the "joy of living" dimension by district	n = 1035					
	Low		Moderate		High	
	fi	%	fi	%	fi	%
Huánuco	219	73.2	76	25.4	4	1.3
Amarilis	160	60.8	95	36.1	8	3.0
Pillco Marca	147	61.8	90	37.8	1	0.4
Cayrán	8	53.3	7	46.7	0	0.0
Santa María del Valle	39	59.1	25	37.9	2	3.0
Margos	8	88.9	1	11.1	0	0.0
Yarumayo	3	100.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
Yacus	10	58.8	6	35.3	1	5.9
Kichki	7	100.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
Chinchao	34	89.5	4	10.5	0	0.0
Pillao	16	59.3	11	40.7	0	0.0
Churubamba	44	95.7	2	4.3	0	0.0
Chaulán	6	85.7	1	14.3	0	0.0

Table 3
Level of the "personal fulfillment" dimension in the province of Huánuco, by district (n = 1035)

Level of the "personal fulfillment" dimension, by district	n = 1035					
	Low		Moderate		High	
	fi	%	fi	%	fi	%
Huánuco	113	37.8	179	59.9	7	2.3
Amarilis	117	44.5	139	52.9	7	2.7
Pillco Marca	88	37.0	143	60.1	7	2.9
Cayrán	6	40.0	8	53.3	1	6.7
Santa María del Valle	32	48.5	34	51.5	0	0.0
Margos	4	44.4	5	55.6	0	0.0
Yarumayo	2	66.7	1	33.3	0	0.0
Yacus	6	35.3	10	58.8	1	5.9
Kichki	5	71.4	2	28.6	0	0.0
Chinchao	23	60.5	15	39.5	0	0.0
Pillao	11	40.7	16	59.3	0	0.0
Churubamba	29	63.0	17	37.0	0	0.0
Chaulán	3	42.9	4	57.1	0	0.0

Regarding personal fulfillment, residents of the province of Huánuco predominantly placed themselves in the moderate category (55.4%), followed by the low category (42.4%), at the general level. Nevertheless, when disaggregating the results, it was observed that in the urban districts of Huánuco, Amarilis, and Pillco Marca, the moderate category was predominant, with 59.9%, 52.9%, and 60.1%, respectively. In nearby districts such as Cayrán, Santa María del Valle, and Yacus, 53.3%, 51.5%, and 58.8% of participants, respectively, also reported moderate levels. In contrast, in the districts of Kichki, Yarumayo, and Churubamba, the low category was predominant, with corresponding percentages of 71.4%, 66.7%, and 63% (see Table 3).

In the analysis of the "satisfaction with life" dimension, it was observed that 58.9% of the population of Huánuco expressed having a low level. When disaggregated by district, 55.5% of residents in the district of Huánuco reported low satisfaction with life, followed by 44.1% in the moderate category. In the districts of Amarilis and Pillco Marca, a similar distribution was observed, with

Table 4
Level of the "satisfaction with life" dimension in the province of Huánuco, by district (n = 1035)

Level of the "satisfaction with life" dimension, by district	n = 1035					
	Low		Moderate		High	
	fi	%	fi	%	fi	%
Huánuco	166	55.5	132	44.1	1	0.3
Amarilis	153	58.2	107	40.7	3	1.7
Pillco Marca	126	52.9	110	46.2	2	0.8
Cayrán	9	60.0	6	40.0	0	0.0
Santa María del Valle	41	62.1	23	34.8	2	3.0
Margos	6	66.7	3	33.3	0	0.0
Yarumayo	2	66.7	1	33.3	0	0.0
Yacus	9	52.9	7	41.2	1	5.9
Kichki	6	85.7	1	14.3	0	0.0
Chinchao	30	78.9	8	21.1	0	0.0
Pillao	17	63.0	9	39.3	1	3.7
Churubamba	40	87.0	6	13.0	0	0.0
Chaulán	5	71.4	2	28.6	0	0.0

Table 5
Level of the "positive sense of life" dimension in the province of Huánuco, by district (n = 1035)

Level of the "positive sense of life" dimension, by district	n = 1035					
	Low		Moderate		High	
	fi	%	fi	%	fi	%
Huánuco	167	55.9	119	39.8	13	4.3
Amarilis	141	53.6	119	45.72	3	1.1
Pillco Marca	111	46.6	123	51.7	4	1.7
Cayrán	5	33.3	10	66.7	0	0.0
Santa María del Valle	35	53.0	27	40.9	4	6.1
Margos	0	0.0	8	88.9	1	11.1
Yarumayo	3	100.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
Yacus	4	23.5	11	64.7	2	11.8
Kichki	3	42.9	4	57.1	0	0.0
Chinchao	27	71.1	11	28.9	0	0.0
Pillao	7	25.9	19	70.4	1	3.7
Churubamba	28	60.9	18	39.1	0	0.0
Chaulán	5	71.4	1	14.3	1	14.3

58.2% and 52.9%, respectively, reporting low satisfaction with life, and 40.7% and 40% reporting moderate levels—corresponding to the urban center of the province. In neighboring districts such as Santa María del Valle (62.1%), Cayrán (60.0%), and Churubamba (87.0%), the predominant level was also low. Likewise, in rural districts including Pillao, Chaulán, and Margos, the results consistently showed a predominance of low satisfaction with life (see Table 4).

Regarding the positive sense of life among the residents of the province of Huánuco, 51.8% reported a low level, 45.4% perceived themselves to have a moderate level, and only a small minority (2.8%) reported a high level of positive life orientation. In the more remote areas of the province, such as Chaulán, the low level was predominant, at 71.4%. In Yarumayo, 100% of respondents reported a low level. In contrast, 88.9% of participants in Margos considered themselves to have a moderate level of positive life sense, while 70.4% of residents in Pillao reported high levels. In Yacus, the moderate level reached 64.7%.

In the province's urban districts, such as Huánuco and Amarilis, the results were more dispersed, but low levels predominated, at 55.9% and 53.6%, respectively. In Pillco Marca, 51.7% of the population reported a moderate level of positive life sense (see Table 5).

As observed, the indicators related to happiness across the 13 districts of Huánuco yielded a p-value of 0.000, which is lower than the significance level of 0.05. This result indicates that the groups are not homogeneous—that is, there are statistically significant differences in the mean levels of happiness among the districts (see Table 6).

In the multivariate analysis of variance for the dimensions of happiness in the province of Huánuco, the following p-values were obtained: 0.000 for the positive sense of life dimension, 0.003 for satisfaction with life, 0.000 for personal fulfillment, and 0.000 for joy of living. In all cases, these values are below the significance threshold of 0.05, which indicates that the variances are not homogeneous—that is, the

Table 6
ANOVA test comparing the means of "happiness" across districts of Huánuco

	Sum of squares	df	Mean square	F	Sig.
Between groups	10,831.514	12	902.626	4.244	0.000
Within groups	217,383.108	1022	212.704		
Total	228,214.622	1034			

Table 7
ANOVA test comparing the means of the dimensions of happiness across districts of Huánuco

		Sum of squares	df	Mean square	F	Sig.
D1: Positive sense of life	Between groups	3094.249	12	257.854	4.624	0.000
	Within groups	56995.834	1022	55.769		
	Total	60090.083	1034			
D2: Satisfaction with life	Between groups	445.748	12	37.146	2.494	0.003
	Within groups	15224.237	1022	14.897		
	Total	15669.985	1034			
D3: Personal fulfillment	Between groups	586.974	12	48.914	3.484	0.000
	Within groups	14347.774	1022	14.039		
	Total	14934.748	1034			
D4: Joy of living	Between groups	444.335	12	37.028	4.931	0.000
	Within groups	7675.186	1022	7.510		
	Total	8119.521	1034			

groups belong to statistically different populations. Subsequently, a post hoc Scheffé test was performed (see Table 7).

DISCUSSION

The data presented reflect the current indicators of happiness experienced by the population of Huánuco. In relation to exploratory studies on this topic, Villavicencio et al. (2018) found that, in the district of Surco, the predominant average level of happiness corresponded to the moderate category. Similarly, Agüedo and Basualdo (2018), in their study on happiness in Arequipa, reported high or adequate levels of subjective well-being. These findings align with the arguments of Yanamoto (2019), who emphasizes the importance of context in shaping a comprehensive notion of happiness that strengthens the individual. This is also related to the concept of fecundity, understood as the capacity to grow and positively influence those around us.

Regarding the "positive sense of life" dimension, the population of Huánuco showed a predominance of low-level perceptions regarding personal existence. This indicator is directly associated with the presence of symptoms or vulnerabilities that may increase the likelihood of illness. In contrast, Salazar and Gamboa (2024) found a relationship between happiness and productivity, noting that the perception of happiness in task performance facilitates the execution of responsibilities, which in turn positively impacts various aspects of life.

The "joy of living" dimension refers to short-lived, positive emotions that emerge in response to specific pleasurable or satisfying events. These emotions are typically immediate and fleeting, enabling people to react positively to rewarding life experiences. In this regard, Atherton et al. (2023) conducted a study on adult life development, identifying several necessary elements for strengthening adult life—such as cultivating healthy relationships, fostering positive social bonds, and adopting a proactive attitude. The study noted that these elements tend to be absent in metropolitan contexts like that of Huánuco.

"Satisfaction with life" and "personal fulfillment" ultimately prove to be essential elements for achieving happiness. In the same study, Atherton et al. (2023) identified several factors that influence the development of community-based values necessary for sustaining social harmony. In this sense, maintaining community ties and actively participating as a member of one's community are becoming increasingly rare in the urban environment of Huánuco. This trend is compounded by the constant expansion of the population, which is relatively proportional to the emergence of risk factors that undermine public safety. These contextual elements may help explain the low levels of happiness reported in the metropolitan population of Huánuco.

This study confirms that "low happiness" is the predominant category among participants. However, the statistical analyses using ANOVA revealed mean differences that suggest potential relationships with factors such as educational context, personal conditions, or previous well-being experiences. Moreover, moderate yet statistically significant variations were identified in the perception of "satisfaction with life" across the groups evaluated, potentially explained by differences in expectations, goal attainment, or emotional stability. The perception of "having achieved personal goals" or "feeling self-

fulfilled" varied significantly among the groups, likely influenced by factors such as education level, occupation, age, or other psychosocial variables. Finally, joy of living, understood as the daily experience of positive emotions, also exhibited strong differences between groups, which may be shaped by cultural, economic, or individual experiences of well-being.

CONCLUSIONS

Happiness levels in the city of Huánuco are predominantly low. Overall, 40% of the population reported experiencing low levels of happiness, and all four dimensions exhibited statistically significant differences among the groups analyzed (p < 0.005 in all cases). These results indicate that happiness is not uniformly distributed across the population and may be influenced by variables such as social context, age, educational attainment, and other psychosocial factors.

Moreover, the findings underscore the presence of structural and social limitations reflected in regional indicators of productivity, entrepreneurship, and public health. Although Huánuco may not rank among the regions with the lowest national well-being indicators, these persistent challenges continue to pose obstacles to the sustained development of both the city and the broader region.

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