




Self-esteem and happiness in university students in internal migration condition in Cuenca - Ecuador, 2023

Autoestima y felicidad en estudiantes universitarios en condición de migración interna en Cuenca - Ecuador, 2023

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ABSTRACT

Self-esteem and happiness are fundamental constructs in positive psychology, particularly in vulnerable populations such as migrants. The primary objective of this study was to examine the relationship between self-esteem and happiness among migrant university students studying psychology at the University of Cuenca. The research followed a positivist paradigm, utilizing a non-experimental design, with a quantitative, correlational, and cross-sectional approach. The sample comprised 115 students who were assessed using the Alarcón Happiness Scale and the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale. The findings demonstrated a significant positive correlation between the two variables, indicating that higher levels of self-esteem are linked to greater happiness in the participants.

Keywords: Self-esteem, happiness, university students, internal migration.

RESUMEN

La autoestima y la felicidad son constructos fundamentales en el campo de la psicología positiva, especialmente en poblaciones vulnerables como los migrantes. Este estudio tuvo como objetivo general determinar la relación entre la autoestima y la felicidad en estudiantes universitarios migrantes de la carrera de Psicología de la Universidad de Cuenca. La investigación se basó en un paradigma positivista, con un diseño no experimental, de enfoque cuantitativo, alcance correlacional y de corte transversal. La muestra estuvo conformada por 115 estudiantes, a quienes se les aplicaron la Escala de Felicidad de Alarcón y la Escala de Autoestima de Rosenberg. Los resultados mostraron una correlación significativa y positiva entre las variables, lo que indica que niveles más altos de

autoestima están asociados con mayores niveles de felicidad en los participantes.

Palabras clave: autoestima, felicidad, estudiantes universitarios, migración interna.

INTRODUCTION

Self-esteem and happiness have been relevant topics throughout history, but in recent decades, these concepts have gained greater prominence due to their role as indicators of psychological well-being. Their importance has motivated a growing interest in the field of positive psychology, which focuses on studying positive variables to offer new responses to contemporary problems (Garassini, 2022).

According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2019), migration is closely related to education. In this context, several authors note that migrants are often more vulnerable to mental and psychosocial disorders, such as anxiety, depression, stress, and other pathologies (Suárez and Vásquez, 2021; Cabrera et al., 2023).

A study conducted in Ecuador revealed that at least 24% of university students show signs of anxiety, depression, social dysfunction, and somatization (Moreta et al., 2021). A similar phenomenon occurs with migration, which involves a process of grieving and adapting to a new environment (Cabrera et al., 2023). In response to this issue, efforts have been made to boost self-esteem and happiness to improve mental health (Bastos, 2023).

Studies have shown that adequate self-esteem fosters greater security, assertiveness, optimism, and independence (Rosenberg, 1965; Dyer, 2019). Similarly, it has been demonstrated that people with high levels of happiness tend to manage their thoughts, motivation, attitude, and will optimistically, which facilitates goal achievement and the creation of coping strategies in crisis situations (Alarcón, 2015; Sánchez, 2023).

The migration phenomenon among students often originates from the transition to higher-level studies, and many times, the institutions where they wish to study are not geographically close, leading to mobilization between regions (Cabrera et al., 2023). Within human mobility, there are different types of migration, and UNESCO (2019) has defined internal migration as the movement of people to a new area within the same country.

The impact of migration has been the subject of numerous studies, where the examination of positive aspects has become relevant. In this context, positive psychology has positioned itself as a balanced discipline that studies positive human strengths and characteristics to guide people toward happiness, a meaningful life, and the realization of their human potential (Bastos, 2023). Among these strengths, variables such as self-esteem and happiness stand out.

Rosenberg (1965) defines self-esteem as a positive or negative evaluation of oneself, which arises after evaluating one's own characteristics. This concept of self-esteem is fundamental to the present study. According to Rosenberg (1965), self-esteem can be classified into two types: positive and negative, although he also contemplates an intermediate level, which does not present major difficulties but requires adequate development. Positive self-esteem is associated with an objective perception, as well as personal acceptance and evaluation, regardless of failures. In contrast, negative self-esteem involves difficulties characterized by a distorted perception of oneself, with a tendency toward self-criticism and constant self-rejection.

Although self-esteem has received considerable attention, it is currently not the only variable of interest. In positive psychology and globally, happiness has emerged as another essential construct that aspires to become one of society's priority goals. Alarcón (2006) conceives happiness as "an affective state of full satisfaction that the individual subjectively experiences when possessing a desired good" (p. 101). For Alarcón (2015), happiness is present in people's interests and is identified as a subjective, stable, and temporary feeling.

Alarcón (2006) proposes a four-dimensional structure to measure happiness. The first dimension, the positive sense of life, refers to happiness as the absence of depressive states and the presence of positive attitudes. The second dimension, satisfaction with life, interprets happiness as the possession of a good, whether it be an achievement, an ideal, or a sense of belonging. The third dimension, personal fulfillment, refers to full happiness and the conditions necessary to achieve it, such as emotional stability, a sense of peace, self-sufficiency, and personal control. Finally, the fourth dimension is the joy of living, which involves experiencing well-being most of the time and valuing the wonderful things in life and good experiences.

The general objective of this study was to determine the relationship between self-esteem and happiness in students of the Bachelor's Degree in Psychology in a situation of internal migration at the University of Cuenca during the 2022-2023 academic period. The specific objectives were to identify the levels of self-esteem and happiness in these students and to describe the dimensions of happiness that predominate in them.

The study raised the following hypotheses:

- Ho: There is no significant correlation between self-esteem and happiness in students in a situation of internal migration.
- Ha: There is a significant correlation between self-esteem and happiness in students in a situation of internal migration.

METHODOLOGY

In this research, a quantitative approach methodology was used, as data analysis and numerical measurement were the primary tools for testing the hypotheses. A non-experimental and cross-sectional design was employed, with data collected during a specific period. The scope was correlational, as the research aimed to investigate the relationship between self-esteem and happiness in students experiencing internal migration (Hernández et al., 2014).

For the sample selection, simple random non-probabilistic sampling was applied using inclusion criteria from a population universe of 202 migrant students from the Faculty of Psychology at the University of Cuenca, Ecuador. The sample consisted of 115 participants: 85 women and 30 men, aged between 18 and 33 years, with a mean age of 21 years and a standard deviation of 2.4.

The inclusion criteria were:

- Students in a situation of internal migration.
- Enrollment in the Bachelor's Degree in Psychology during the 2022-2023 academic period at the University of Cuenca.
- Age over 18 years.
- Voluntary agreement to participate in the study.

The exclusion criteria were:

- Being native students from the province of Azuay, Ecuador.

The study was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles proposed by the American Psychological Association (2002), which include the principles of beneficence and non-maleficence, fidelity and responsibility, integrity, and justice, rights, and dignity. To ensure compliance with these principles, participants were provided with informed consent, which guaranteed that the data collected would be used solely for scientific purposes. Furthermore, participants were informed about the objectives of the study.

The instrument used for data collection was a sociodemographic form, prepared by the authors of this research, to collect information on the age, sex, and province of origin of the participants.

To evaluate the self-esteem variable, the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale was used, validated in the Ecuadorian context, with a Cronbach's Alpha of .83 (Bueno et al., 2020). This scale consists of ten items, five of which are worded in positive terms and five in negative terms. It is a Likert-type scale, with response options ranging from 1 (strongly agree) to 4 (strongly disagree). According to the sum of the scores, levels of self-esteem are classified as follows: 30-40 points correspond to positive or normal self-esteem, 26-29 to average self-esteem, and less than 25 points to negative self-esteem (Bueno et al., 2020). The Cronbach's Alpha found in this study was .83.

Furthermore, to evaluate the happiness variable, the Alarcón Happiness Scale was applied, validated in Mexico, with a Cronbach's Alpha of .91 (Toribio et al., 2012). This instrument consists of 27 items, 17 worded positively and 10 negatively, based on a Likert-type scale with response options from 1 (totally disagree) to 5 (totally agree). The scale classifies levels of happiness into five categories: very low (27-87), low (88-95), medium (96-110), high (111-118), and very high (119-135). Additionally, the happiness scale measures four dimensions: positive meaning of life, satisfaction with life, personal fulfillment, emotional stability, and joy of living. The Cronbach's Alpha coefficients in this study ranged between 0.74 and 0.91. Following the analysis of the state of the art and the study approach, the following procedure was followed: first, approval was obtained from the Ethics Committee on Research in Human Beings and the Board of Directors of the Faculty of Psychology at the University of Cuenca; second, the instruments were administered between May and June 2023; third, the statistical processing of the results was performed using RStudio software. Finally, the results were compiled.

RStudio version 4.3.1 was used for data processing. The statistical packages used include PerformanceAnalytics, summarytools, psych, dplyr, ggplot2, ggstatsplot, tidyverse, nortest, and the base package functions. Descriptive statistics techniques were applied to analyze percentages, arithmetic mean, and relative and absolute frequencies. Additionally, the Lilliefors normality test was used, obtaining a p-value of 0.1147 for the self-esteem variable and a p-value of 0.88 for the happiness variable, indicating that the data followed a normal distribution. Consequently, the Pearson correlation coefficient was used to analyze the relationship between the self-esteem and happiness variables (Hernández et al., 2014).

RESULTS

Sociodemographic data are presented in Table 1. The study included 115 internally migratory students from the Bachelor's Degree in Psychology at the University of Cuenca during the

2022-2023 period. Of these, 85 (73.9%) were women, and 30 (26.1%) were men, with ages ranging between 18 and 33 years, and an average age of 21 years (SD = 2.4). Additionally, the province of origin of the participants was considered and grouped by regions. The largest number of students came from the Sierra region, with 72 participants (62.6%), followed by the Costa region, with 25 (21.74%), and the Amazon region, with 18 (15.65%). None of the participants came from the Insular region (0%).

Table 1. Population characterization

Variables	Indicators	Frequency	Percentage
Sex	Female	85	73.9%
	Male	30	26.1%
Age	18-33	115	100%
	Coastal or Litoral	25	21.74%
Region	Inter-Andean or Sierra	72	62.61%
	Amazon or Oriente	18	15.65%
	Insular Region	0	0%

Figure 1 presents the results obtained after applying the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale. It can be observed that 47 students (40.9%) have positive self-esteem, 42 (36.5%) have average self-esteem, and 26 (22.6%) have negative self-esteem. These results indicate that the majority of participants have adequate self-esteem.

Figure 1. Levels of self-esteem

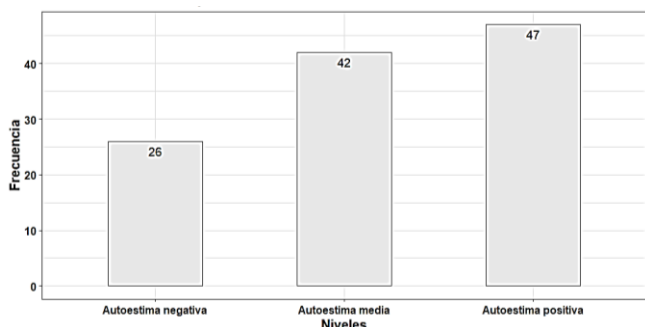


Figure 2 shows the results obtained after applying the Alarcón Happiness Scale. Among the students, 42 (36.5%) have a very low level of happiness, 20 (17.4%) have a low level, 33 (28.7%) have a medium level, while 10 (8.7%) reach a high level, and the remaining 10 (8.7%) achieve a very high level. These results indicate that at least 53.9% of the students do not perceive themselves as happy.

Figure 2. Levels of happiness

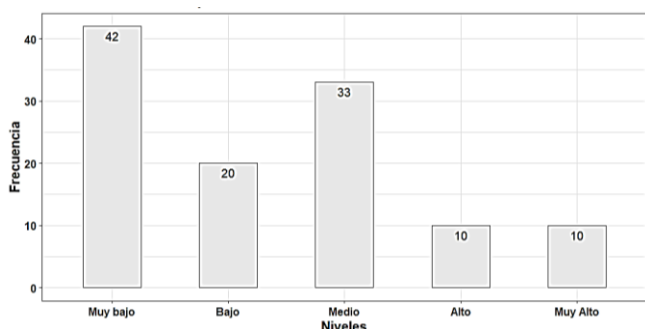
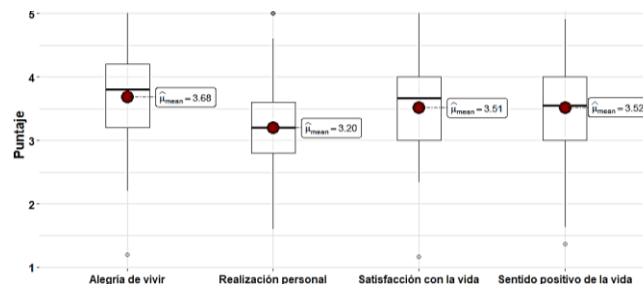


Figure 3 shows the means for each dimension of the Alarcón Happiness Scale. The predominant dimension was joy of living, with a mean of 3.68 (SD = 0.71), followed by positive meaning of life, with a mean of 3.52 (SD = 0.77). Life satisfaction had a mean of 3.51 (SD = 0.64), while the personal achievement dimension had the lowest score, with a mean of 3.20 (SD = 0.64).

Figure 3. Happiness dimension scores



Finally, after applying the t-test between the self-esteem and happiness scales, a p-value of < .001 was obtained, indicating a statistically significant difference between both variables.

Additionally, the results showed a Pearson correlation of .77, with a p-value < 0.001, which implies a positive and significant relationship between the self-esteem and happiness variables. Therefore, the alternative hypothesis is accepted, and the null hypothesis is rejected. Table 2 shows the correlations found between self-esteem and happiness.

Table 2. Relationship between self-esteem and happiness

Happiness	Self-esteem	Significance
Alarcón Happiness Scale	.77	***
Positive sense of life	.76	***
Satisfaction with life	.61	***
Personal fulfillment	.52	***
Joy of living	.67	***

Note. The table expresses the correlations obtained between the happiness scale, its dimensions and the self-esteem scale. The asterisks (***) represent that the correlations are statistically significant at a confidence level of 99% (**p < .001).

It is observed that the majority of participants have positive self-esteem, followed by those with medium-level self-esteem, and finally, those with negative self-esteem. These results are consistent with previous research conducted in Chile (Vega, 2018) and in Tungurahua, Ecuador (Bustos and Vásquez, 2022), which confirm that the highest level corresponds to positive self-esteem and the lowest to negative self-esteem. However, these findings contrast with a study conducted in China, which concludes that migration has a negative impact on mental health, and therefore, most participants report medium-level self-esteem (Shen et al., 2019). Thus, the results reflect the cultural and contextual variability that can influence behavior and perceptions of self-esteem.

Regarding positive self-esteem, it is associated with self-acceptance, self-worth, and the desire to overcome shortcomings. This suggests that most students in a situation of internal migration perceive themselves as capable of facing the challenges of daily life and succeeding in achieving their goals from a realistic and optimistic perspective (Dyer, 2019). On the other hand, a minority of participants have negative

self-esteem, which implies feelings of rejection, dissatisfaction, and self-contempt. Additionally, there is a considerable number of students with average self-esteem who, although they do not represent major difficulties, require encouragement to improve. To achieve this, it is essential to work on the way in which life events and experiences are interpreted and processed, promoting a re-evaluation and replacement of negative statements with more objective and positive ones (Rosenberg, 1965; Leyba, 2019). In this way, it will contribute to the comprehensive development and strengthening of the psychological well-being of students. The significant number of students with average and negative self-esteem could be attributed both to the role of the student and to the migration phenomenon, which entails challenges for mental health (UNESCO, 2019; Moreta et al., 2021). This may represent an alert to the presence of mental conditions such as anxiety, depression, and stress (Suárez and Vásquez, 2021). Given this situation, it is crucial to strengthen the self-esteem of university students in internal migration conditions as part of comprehensive emotional education (Arguedas, 2021).

Likewise, it was observed that students in a situation of internal migration presented mainly medium or very low levels of happiness. These findings differ from a study carried out in Peru, which highlighted that psychology students are highly happy (Eugenio et al., 2016). However, the results coincide with other research in migration contexts, which states that migrants tend to have a lower prevalence of happiness compared to natives (Hendriks, 2015). Consequently, these results underline the need to implement strategies that promote the emotional well-being and resilience of students in a situation of internal migration.

According to Gardiner et al. (2022), a high level of happiness is associated with the tendency to experience positive affect, playfulness, joy, and optimism, while unhappy people tend to be critical, irritable, and feel guilty. Like self-esteem, academic demands and the migration phenomenon may make it difficult for students to achieve optimal levels of happiness (UNESCO, 2019; Moreta et al., 2021).

Regarding the dimensions of happiness, the most predominant was the joy of living, while the lowest scored was personal fulfillment. This coincides with research carried out on nursing students in Mexico, where the highest score also corresponded to the dimension of joy of living (Núñez et al., 2015). Another study carried out in Ecuador states that joy of living was the predominant dimension (Silva and Quezada, 2022).

According to Alarcón (2006), joy of living is related to the appreciation of life, a general state of well-being, and positive experiences. The fact that this dimension has the highest average suggests that migrant students have an optimistic perspective of both themselves and their environment, reflecting a general perception of comfort. The triggers for these positive states include migrants' adaptability to their new environments and their positive evaluation of their experiences (Alarcón, 2015; Hendriks, 2015).

In contrast, the least predominant dimension was personal fulfillment, which is consistent with the findings of Silva and Quezada (2022), who also found that this was the least highly rated dimension. Personal fulfillment encompasses autonomy, complete happiness, a sense of

peace, and goal achievement (Alarcón, 2006). Its low score indicates that students may display emotional unrest and a lack of autonomy (Alarcón, 2015).

On the other hand, the results of the positive and significant correlation between self-esteem and happiness coincide with research carried out on intercultural nursing students in Mexico, which also found a significant and positive correlation between both variables, although the same relationship was not observed in the dimensions of positive meaning of life and personal fulfillment (Núñez et al., 2015). However, these findings differ from other studies where self-esteem showed a significant correlation only with life satisfaction but not with happiness and optimism (Vera et al., 2009). A study carried out in Ecuador concluded that, although they were not directly correlated, self-esteem and happiness are positively affected by factors such as age, a good socioeconomic status, and the practice of hobbies (Paz et al., 2022).

Self-esteem and happiness are pillars of positive psychology since they share common elements that cause a positive relationship between them, as several studies have shown (Núñez et al., 2015; Méndez et al., 2021). However, multiple factors can modify this relationship, showing that some variables influence each construct more than others (Vera et al., 2009). Research suggests that high levels of happiness are more associated with extroversion and sociability, while self-esteem depends more on the assessment of abilities in relation to the achievements achieved.

According to the scores of these two variables, it is inferred that migrant students show a greater attachment to achievement and a positive assessment of their abilities, although this is reflected to a lesser extent in the subjective satisfaction of their lives (Lyubomirsky et al., 2005; Alarcón, 2006; Çiçek, 2021).

Table 3 shows the correlations between self-esteem and happiness according to the participants' region of origin. All correlations were statistically significant with a p-value < .001. The highest Pearson correlation was observed in the Litoral region ($r = .83$), followed by the Sierra ($r = .77$), while the Amazon showed a slightly lower coefficient ($r = .74$).

Table 3. Relationship between self-esteem and happiness with respect to the regions of Ecuador

Relationship between self-esteem and happiness d	Significance	Litoral	Sierra	Amazonia
.83	***	1	0	0
.77	***	0	1	0
.74	***	0	0	1

In the analysis of the relationship between self-esteem and happiness among Ecuadorian university students, significant correlations were observed across all the regions studied, with variations that could be attributed to geographical, cultural, and social factors. The Litoral region presented the highest correlation, suggesting that self-esteem has a particularly strong impact on happiness in this area, possibly due to a more inclusive social environment and greater access to resources that favor self-acceptance among students (Moreta et al., 2017).

In the Sierra, although the correlation is strong, it is slightly lower, indicating that self-esteem remains a crucial factor for happiness in this region. However, other factors, such as the family environment or the educational context, could also influence the subjective well-being of students in the Sierra (Abril et al., 2022).

On the other hand, the Amazon showed the lowest correlation coefficient among the regions studied, although it remains considerable. This finding could reflect the particularities of a less urbanized region, with less access to resources that could strengthen self-esteem, such as educational or employment opportunities. Nevertheless, the positive relationship between self-esteem and happiness is maintained, indicating that even in contexts with socioeconomic challenges, the perception of personal value remains a critical factor in the experience of happiness (Castro et al., 2023).

Therefore, these differences could be linked to the geographical and climatic characteristics of each region, which can influence the psychological well-being of students. Research by Ramírez et al. (2020) suggests that the perception and reaction to the same phenomena vary significantly depending on the cultural vision, which could partly explain the differences observed in the correlations between the different Ecuadorian regions.

In addition, studies such as that by Zander et al. (2019) have shown that meteorological factors can have a considerable impact on subjective well-being, reinforcing the importance of considering the geographical environment in the analysis of happiness and self-esteem.

CONCLUSION

Most participants have moderate to high levels of self-esteem, while others exhibit medium to very low levels of happiness. Although participants have positive self-esteem, it is observed that they may face difficulties in reaching a state of full satisfaction. Similarly, it was identified that the predominant dimension of happiness among students is the joy of living, which indicates that they tend to perceive their life experiences from a favorable perspective.

Finally, a positive and significant correlation was observed between self-esteem and happiness in university students experiencing internal migration. Therefore, it is confirmed that higher levels of self-esteem correspond to higher levels of happiness, and vice versa.

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