Visibility, loss of status and life satisfaction in three groups of recent refugee settlers

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Abstract:
This paper explores the life satisfaction of refugees resettled in Western Australia during the 1990s-2000s, in connection with their racial and cultural visibility in the host milieu and an endemic loss of occupational and social status. Refugees from ex-Yugoslavia, Africa and the Middle East are explored comparatively and cross-culturally. This paper extends the concept of domains of life satisfaction by adding immigrant-specific domains such as acculturation, adaptation, extra-ethnic social networks and discrimination. The main body of data was collected through a survey of 150 refugees and the interpretation of statistical outputs was complemented by interview data collected through follow-up, in-depth interviews. The refugee respondents were less satisfied with their lives than the general population. The strongest predictors of life satisfaction were job satisfaction, financial satisfaction and social support, but their power varied between groups and was determined by cultural profiles and differences in their Australian experience. Ex-Yugoslavs were somewhat more satisfied than the two other groups (but not to the point of statistical significance), which is at least partly attributable to their ‘whiteness’. The ‘street discrimination’ did not impact on the overall life satisfaction of refugees, while discrimination in the job market did.
Introduction

This paper explores life satisfaction of refugees resettled in Australia during the 1990s-early 2000s. As shown in previous research, refugees resettled in Western countries have much higher rates of unemployment than the resident population, and when employed they are likely to experience underemployment, massive loss of occupational status, and isolation from the mainstream community through working in immigrant employment niches. Valtonen (1999; 2001; 2004) analyzed this situation in Finland and the Netherlands; Lamba (2003) in Canada, Rydgren (2004) in Sweden and Colic-Peisker and Tilbury (2006) in Australia. The US Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR 2002) presented a positive picture of refugees’ labour force participation and unemployment rates, but the American policy of employing refugees as soon as possible after arrival results in a significant loss of occupational status. Unemployment and downward mobility adversely affect other aspects of settlement: family life (through disturbing the gender and inter-generational family relations), the creation of social networks and acculturation (through a lack of opportunity to mix and network with mainstream society), the feeling of belonging (through the feeling of exclusion and social isolation) and, consequently, people’s general wellbeing and life satisfaction.

A considerable proportion of recent refugee arrivals in Western countries are skilled people and many professionals among them experience downwards mobility (Valtonen 2001; Lamba 2003; Rydgren 2004; Colic-Peisker and Tilbury 2006). This process is associated with their racial and/or cultural visibility, as post-Cold War refugees usually come from non-white and culturally distant backgrounds (DIMA 2006). The partial exceptions are ex-Yugoslavs and it is therefore interesting to compare their experience with that of non-European refugees. Given the problems refugees face in the course of their Australian settlement, it is interesting to see how satisfied with their lives they are overall.

Exploring life satisfaction (or quality of life; well-being; happiness) is a burgeoning area of Western social science, mainly researched by psychologists and sociologists, but also economists, and usually dealing with large population samples. Cross-cultural life satisfaction has been explored mainly through cross-national comparisons, while ethnic minorities attracted less attention. Refugees only appeared as a target population in this type
of research in the 1990s (Tran and Nguyen 1994; Werkuyten and Nekuee1999). In this paper life satisfaction is understood as a subjective aspect of the quality of life; the main body of data consists of people’s self-assessments of their situation, without trying to find a way to ‘objectively’ measure their quality of life. Cummins (1996) showed that objective indicators of the quality of life (where available, e.g. in health status or income level) are sometimes only remotely related to subjective indicators, that is, how people perceive and describe their health or financial circumstances.

The sample of respondents are three broadly conceived refugee groups: ex-Yugoslavs (mainly Bosnians), black Africans (mainly Somalis and Ethiopians) and Middle Easterners (mainly Iraqis). These clusters make sense in terms of their different racial and cultural visibility in the Australian social context and they also reflect the composition of the Australian humanitarian intake over the past fifteen years: Iraqis and Bosnians predominated in the 1990s, while black Africans comprise 70-80 per cent of the humanitarian intake in the 2000s (DIMIA 2005).

The refugee experience is a dramatic life event, bound to affect people’s life satisfaction through upsetting what psychologists call ‘well-being homeostasis’ — a set point of subjective well-being that, it is argued, may be more significantly determined by personality and genes than by later life events and social context (Cummins 2000; Bradley and Corwyn 2004). Because of this, we chose to survey people who had been in Australia for at least two years when their life at least started to settle ‘back to normal’ and acquire a degree of stability.

The idea of successful settlement, which represents the basis for this paper’s exploration of refugee life satisfaction, has been variously defined by host governments and scholars of immigration. Governments look at settlement success through a lens of economic independence: once immigrants have jobs and are no longer welfare dependent they are included in government statistics of success (cf. Richardson 2004). Governments are usually less interested in the social indicators of settlement success and the life satisfaction of migrants. Employment is an easily measurable indicator of settlement success and its importance for social inclusion is generally accepted among scholars of immigration (UNHCR 2004; Valtonen 2001; 2004). Most of them agree, however, that employment is a
necessary, but not a sufficient condition for full social inclusion, as it may entail downwards mobility for the racially and culturally visible.

**Methodology**

Data were collected in 2004 in a survey of 150 refugees permanently resettled in Perth, through questionnaire-based, face-to-face interviews with 50 respondents from each of the three groups. Skilled people of working age with at least working knowledge of English, who were either employed or looking for work, were targeted. Thus, the sample was snowballed to be purposive rather than representative of the communities involved. Table 1 shows relevant characteristics of the sample.

**Table 1. Sample characteristics (N=150)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Range</th>
<th>Ex-Yugoslavs</th>
<th>Africans</th>
<th>Middle East</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Mean (SD)</td>
<td>Mean (SD)</td>
<td>Mean (SD)</td>
<td>Mean (SD)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-5</td>
<td>3.10 (.64)</td>
<td>2.64 (.76)</td>
<td>2.70 (.58)</td>
<td>2.99 (.77)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>F = 58 %</td>
<td>F = 28 %</td>
<td>F = 38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>Mean (SD)</td>
<td>Mean (SD)</td>
<td>Mean (SD)</td>
<td>Mean (SD)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-4</td>
<td>2.80 (.57)</td>
<td>3.16 (.58)</td>
<td>3.18 (.44)</td>
<td>3.05 (.56)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Length of</td>
<td>years</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>resdence</td>
<td>Mean (SD)</td>
<td>Mean (SD)</td>
<td>Mean (SD)</td>
<td>Mean (SD)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.78 (2.10)</td>
<td>7.24 (3.04)</td>
<td>6.54 (4.30)</td>
<td>7.19 (3.15)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note:

A The age scale: 1= under 20; 2 = 21-35; 3 = 36-50; 4 = 51-65; 5= over 66

B The education level scale: 1≤ 10 years; 2 = trade or 12 years; 3 = diploma or degree; 4 = postgraduate qualification

C Medians (years): ex-Yugoslavs $Mdn = 8.00$, Africans $Mdn = 7.00$, Middle Easterners $Mdn = 5.00$

The ex-Yugoslav sub-sample was somewhat older (on average ≈ 44 yo) than African and Middle-Eastern sub-samples (≈ 37 and ≈ 38 yo respectively) and predominately female. The African and Middle-Eastern sub-samples were almost identical in terms of age and gender composition and very similar in terms of education and length of residence. A large majority of Africans and Middle-Easterners had university or even postgraduate degrees (68 and 66 per cent respectively), while ex-Yugoslavs were somewhat less well-educated (32 per cent university-educated) and with lower self-reported English proficiency. Virtually all respondents had skills required for white-collor work.
The refugee questionnaire consisted of three sections: demographic information, labor market experience and satisfaction with aspects of settlement and life in general. After the initial data analysis, in-depth follow-up interviews with bi-lingual settlement workers of both genders, themselves refugees from the three groups, were conducted in order to further clarify the cross-cultural issues involved. The compounded, as well as highly subjective nature of the issues does not warrant exclusive reliance on impersonal and highly abstract quantitative analysis so qualitative data (from follow-up interviews as well as written comments on questionnaires) were valuable in the interpretation of survey data.

The quantitative data are first presented in the form of descriptive statistics and later in this paper the findings of correlation and regression analyses, performed in order to explore the relationship between general life satisfaction and its components, are briefly discussed.1

Refugee life satisfaction and its components: a three-group comparison

Table 2 below shows how the three refugee groups self-assessed the specific domains of life satisfaction: health status, employment status, job satisfaction, financial satisfaction, social support, Australian networks, acculturation and adaptation in the new environment, and the perception of everyday or ‘street discrimination’ (we asked separately about discrimination in the labour market).

Table 2. Descriptive statistics for life satisfaction domains in three refugee groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Domains of settlement success/life satisfaction</th>
<th>Range*</th>
<th>Ex-Yugoslavs</th>
<th>Africans</th>
<th>Middle East</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Mean (SD)</td>
<td>Mean (SD)</td>
<td>Mean (SD)</td>
<td>Mean (SD)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health</td>
<td>1-4</td>
<td>3.36 (.72)</td>
<td>3.80 (.41)</td>
<td>3.59 (.64)</td>
<td>3.58 (.63)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employment status</td>
<td>1-4</td>
<td>3.18 (1.15)</td>
<td>2.66 (1.29)</td>
<td>2.59 (1.37)</td>
<td>2.81 (1.27)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job satisfaction</td>
<td>1-4</td>
<td>2.79 (1.07)</td>
<td>2.55 (.94)</td>
<td>2.79 (1.02)</td>
<td>2.72 (1.02)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial satisfaction</td>
<td>1-4</td>
<td>2.36 (1.02)</td>
<td>2.06 (.99)</td>
<td>1.88 (1.01)</td>
<td>2.10 (1.02)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social support</td>
<td>1-4</td>
<td>3.02 (.94)</td>
<td>3.14 (.61)</td>
<td>2.90 (.68)</td>
<td>3.02 (.76)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australian networks</td>
<td>1-4</td>
<td>2.52 (.95)</td>
<td>2.67 (.72)</td>
<td>3.00 (.61)</td>
<td>2.73 (.79)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acculturation</td>
<td>1-4</td>
<td>2.98 (1.11)</td>
<td>3.44 (79)</td>
<td>3.27 (.93)</td>
<td>3.23 (.97)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adaptation</td>
<td>1-4</td>
<td>3.18 (1.10)</td>
<td>3.35 (86)</td>
<td>3.59 (.61)</td>
<td>3.37 (.89)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Street’ discrimination (lack of)</td>
<td>1-4</td>
<td>3.02 (1.00)</td>
<td>2.55 (84)</td>
<td>2.63 (.91)</td>
<td>2.74 (.94)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Questions on domains of life satisfaction were answered on a four-point scale, where 1 was ‘not at all happy’), and 4 was ‘entirely happy’.

The choice of life satisfaction domains is always to a degree arbitrary; Cummins (1996) reviewed the literature and argued in favor of seven domains. In this paper four immigrant-specific domains are added to the usual life satisfaction domains: acculturation (a cognitive aspect of adaptation, ‘understanding Australian way of life’), adaptation (a practical aspect of acculturation, copying with ‘Australian way of life’), Australian networks and ‘street discrimination’.

As shown in Table 2, the respondents from each of the three groups were overall the most satisfied with their health, and the least satisfied with their financial situation. All groups scored relatively high on acculturation and adaptation. This may be due to the high education and good English proficiency of the respondents, especially those from Africa and the Middle East. This acculturation advantage may also be partly due to the younger age of the two groups (Table 1) as compared to ex-Yugoslavs.

The overall life satisfaction was measured by two items (also on a four-point scale). We included to two questions ‘Are you generally satisfied with your life at the moment?’ and ‘Do you feel your life is “back to normal”? ’ in the questionnaire in order to directly measure subjective perception of settlement success and life satisfaction. Table 3 below shows descriptive statistics for the two items, which were highly correlated (r=.681***). The reliability analysis found that the two variables formed a reliable scale (Cronbach alpha = .81), so they were combined into a single ‘refugee life satisfaction score’ (RLS score) for the purpose of further statistical analysis.

Table 3. Overall life satisfaction in three refugee groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Range</th>
<th>Ex-Yugoslavs</th>
<th>Africans</th>
<th>Middle East</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Mean (SD)</td>
<td>Mean (SD)</td>
<td>Mean (SD)</td>
<td>Mean (SD)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General satisfaction</td>
<td>1-4</td>
<td>3.12 (.98)</td>
<td>2.92 (.73)</td>
<td>2.93 (.52)</td>
<td>2.99 (.77)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life back to normal</td>
<td>1-4</td>
<td>3.06 (1.07)</td>
<td>2.80 (.68)</td>
<td>2.80 (.68)</td>
<td>2.89 (.87)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RLS score</td>
<td>1-4</td>
<td>3.09 (.97)</td>
<td>2.86 (.67)</td>
<td>2.87 (.53)</td>
<td>2.94 (.75)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Ex-Yugoslavs expressed the highest life satisfaction in both items and consequently had the highest RLS score among the three groups. The other two groups had almost identical means. Although the difference in RLS score means among the three groups is not statistically significant, Bosnians had noticeably different pattern of responses to the two original questions: 46 per cent said they were ‘entirely satisfied with their life at the moment’ and 48 per cent felt their life was ‘entirely back to normal’, while only 10-12 per cent of other two groups felt that way.2

Gender and age differences may partly account for a higher satisfaction of Bosnians, because large surveys show that women and older people tend to have higher life satisfaction (Cummins et al. 2005). Ex-Yugoslavs also had somewhat longer Australian residence than the other two groups and among them there were no very recent arrivals (Table 1), although the length of residence was only weakly correlated with the RLS score. Cross-cultural issues need to be kept in mind: culturally determined priorities, such as stable housing for ex-Yugoslavs (the condition fulfilled for a large majority, see Colic-Peisker and Waxman 2005), and the presence of extended family for Africans (fulfilled for 32 per cent of our African respondents), can significantly determine how successful people feel their settlement has been and how satisfied they feel overall (Matsuoka and Sorenson 2001).

There are other issues that need to be kept in mind when interpreting these data. Our relatively small and purposively chosen sample included many highly skilled people with functional English, who may have had high expectations of their Australian life, especially in terms of employment outcomes, and consequently rated their general satisfaction lower when these expectations were not fulfilled. For example, 44 per cent of our African respondents expected to ‘quickly find a job in their area of expertise’, but ended up having the worst employment outcomes among the three groups. As to our Middle-Eastern sub-sample, our male key informant told us Iraqis did not want to express dissatisfaction and be seen to criticize the host country and government-provided settlement services.

Iraqis do not want to criticize anyone. They think if you’re seen as positive, it keeps the relation alright. Negative means [having] a critical position […]. I’m trying to convince them [Iraqi clients] that I’m working for the community organization, but they think I’m a government agent. […] they apply the experience from their country.
Further statistical analysis (correlation and regression) explored what components of settlement success were the most significant for the overall life satisfaction in three refugee groups. Multiple regression analysis was first carried out for the whole refugee sample and it turned out that three components were statistically significant: job satisfaction, financial satisfaction and social support. Job satisfaction had the strongest effect on overall life satisfaction. The regression analysis for separate refugee groups showed that job satisfaction was by far the strongest predictor for Bosnians (it has to be taken into account that job satisfaction was highly correlated with financial satisfaction). For Africans, social support turned out to be the main predictor of general satisfaction, while financial satisfaction was also significant. The chosen model has less explanatory power in the case of Middle Easterners, with only financial satisfaction being a significant predictor (at a lower level of significance).

**Conclusion**

The three groups’ different hierarchies of life satisfaction domains can be partly attributed to their pre-Australian experiences and cultural differences, which created certain expectations, and partly to the differential social inclusion of these minority groups in Australian society. The latter is affected by their length of residence, but even more by their demographic and human capital characteristics (age, education, English proficiency) and their racial and cultural visibility in the Australian milieu. As our respondents often commented, racial and cultural visibility seemed to have made them vulnerable to everyday and labor-market discrimination.

Although ‘street discrimination’ did not seem to have significantly affected general life satisfaction, discrimination in the labor market did. As to the first, the mainly verbal street incidents people experienced because of their visibility were treated pragmatically: our respondents found it unpleasant but largely inconsequential for their lives and moved on quickly. A large majority considered Australians to be generally ‘friendly and accepting’. The reason why the experience of discrimination in the job market did affect life satisfaction may again be the reflection of the refugees’ pragmatic focus: unemployment, loss of occupational status or harassment in the workplace have much more potential to affect one’s life on an ongoing basis than isolated street incidents. They affect one’s financial outcomes,
family relations, status in the ethnic community and wider society, and finally one’s self-esteem and self-respect. Labour market location is the main element of one’s class location: if a previous professional is reduced to menial work this inevitably affects his or her life.

On average, the socio-economic status of our highly educated respondents was considerably lower than that of the general population. Unemployment was much higher (28 versus 5 per cent) and their life satisfaction was lower than the general Australian population: using Cummins’ (1996; 2000) methodology it translates into 64.6 SM (scale maximum), about 10 per cent SM lower than the life satisfaction of the general Australian population. When the life satisfaction score of 64.6 SM is broken down by group, Bosnians were the most satisfied, with a score of 69.6 SM, while Africans and Iraqis were very close to each other with 62 and 62.3 SM respectively.

This difference seems at least partly due to objective factors: ex-Yugoslavs’ unemployment of ‘only’ 14 per cent compared to 32 and 38 per cent of the other two groups, and their considerably higher self-reported income combined with lower levels of experience of discrimination (as ‘whites’, they may have found their path to social inclusion less overgrown with mainstream prejudices, see Colic-Peisker 2005) in creating higher life satisfaction.

Recently arrived refugees’ satisfaction with life and its separate domains is influenced by the fact that their social comparison largely stays within their ethnic communities, and their (public) relationship to the host population is generally one of gratitude, as often reported in the media and by the respondents in this study. In the later stages of settlement, refugee settlers may start comparing their circumstances with members of the mainstream society, and consequently see themselves as more relatively deprived than before, even if their objective circumstances change for the better.

It is important to note that the idea of measuring life satisfaction has been dominated by Western thinking and middle-class standards, and the ways success is conceived and measured is Western in its essence. Therefore, measuring life satisfaction in a cross-cultural situation should be exercised and interpreted with caution. However, refugees and other culturally different and ‘visible’ minorities are increasingly present in all Western societies and their perceptions and experiences need to be explored, heard and translated into a
commonly accepted and understood discourse, in order for policymakers to gain an insight into their settlement and the problems involved in it, as well as increase mutual understanding between minority and majority populations.

References


Footnotes

1 It was impossible to present details on statistical procedures in this short paper. The longer paper dealing with these issues is under review by American Sociological Review.

2 Chi-square test showed that the distribution of responses was significantly different in Bosnians as compared to the other two groups (p=.000).

3 Discrimination in the labor market was not included in the correlation/regression model because it was measured differently in the survey, by offering ‘yes’ and ‘no’ answers and then offering a range or reasons for perceived discrimination to those who answered ‘yes’.

4 The RLS score of those who had ‘experienced discrimination in the job market’ was significantly lower as compared to those who did not have such experiences (p=.006). Difficulties in finding a job (where discrimination was not perceived as a reason) did not significantly affect life satisfaction.