Visibility, settlement success and life satisfaction in three refugee communities in Australia

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ABSTRACT This article explores settlement experiences of three refugee populations – ex-Yugoslavs, black Africans and people from the Middle East – who recently (1990s–2000s) arrived in Western Australia. Settlement success and life satisfaction are investigated in connection with the three groups’ racial and cultural visibility in the host milieu and an endemic loss of occupational and social status. Data were collected through a survey of 150 refugees and the interpretation of statistical outputs was aided by follow-up in-depth interviews. The strongest predictors of life satisfaction were job satisfaction, financial satisfaction and social support, but their power varied between groups. Ex-Yugoslavs were more satisfied with their life in Australia than the other two groups, which is at least partly attributable to their whiteness and therefore reduced visibility in the general population. It is remarkable that ‘street discrimination’ did not impact on the overall life satisfaction of refugees, while discrimination in the job market did. Refugee life satisfaction is compared to that of the general Australian population.

KEYWORDS Australia ● life satisfaction ● refugees ● settlement success ● visibility

INTRODUCTION

This article is a sociological investigation into life satisfaction and its components in the context of settlement of refugees who arrived in Australia during the 1990s and early 2000s. As shown in extensive sociological and psychological literature on refugee integration in western countries, the process is fraught with difficulties (Colic-Peisker and Tilbury, 2003, 2006, 2007; McSpadden, 1987; Valtonen, 2001, 2004; Vinokurov et al.,...
2000; Werkuyten and Nekuee, 1999). Over the past 15 years, Australia’s humanitarian programme has admitted approximately 13,000 people annually. People who enter Australia on permanent humanitarian visas through an ‘off-shore’ programme (refugees nominated by UNHCR and ‘special humanitarian’ entrants who have sponsors in Australia) are eligible to receive intensive short- and long-term settlement support (unlike other immigration categories: ‘family’ and ‘skilled’) through the Integrated Humanitarian Settlement Scheme (IHSS) introduced in 1997 (DIMIA, 2005a: 1, 6, 8–9). This extra support results from past experience revealing that the integration of humanitarian entrants into structures of Australian society is more problematic in virtually every aspect, due partly to their often traumatic pre-arrival experiences and partly to the considerable cultural distance between Australia and their countries of origin.

Since the end of the Cold War, refugees have been predominantly coming from culturally distant African and Asian countries and are therefore ethnically and culturally distinct in the western context. In this article, the concept of ‘visibility’ is used to refer to the ethnic characteristics that make immigrants distinct in the Australian (western, English-speaking) social context and among a predominantly white population. This can be based on race (skin colour, physical and facial features), or accent and publicly observable cultural differences, such as attire (often to do with religion, e.g. Muslim *hijab*). The proposed concept of visibility is broader, less ambiguous and less value-laden than the scientifically discredited notion of race. The relevance of visibility for settlement is that it often marks out refugees (as well as other visible immigrants) for differential, and sometimes discriminatory, treatment in the workforce and other societal domains of their host countries (Colic-Peisker and Tilbury, 2003, 2006, 2007, 2008; Valtonen, 1999, 2001, 2004).

Employment is universally considered – among scholars, settlement service providers and policy-makers – to be the single most important aspect of migrant integration (Bloch, 2002; Colic-Peisker, 2005; UNHCR, 2004; Valtonen, 2001, 2004). Refugees score poorly on this important indicator: they have much a higher unemployment rate than either the resident population or other migrant categories. When employed they are likely to suffer forms of disadvantage such as underemployment, massive loss of their pre-flight occupational status and isolation from the mainstream community through working in immigrant ‘employment niches’ (Castles and Miller, 2003: Ch. 8; Colic-Peisker and Tilbury, 2006). It is important to note that, contrary to common perception, a considerable proportion of recent refugee intakes in western countries are people with skills and professional qualifications. The fact that well-educated refugees are more likely to be admitted to Australia and other refugee-receiving western countries makes the process of downward mobility more pronounced. Instances of doctors driving taxis, engineers and lawyers cleaning offices,
airline pilots becoming couriers and chefs from five-star hotels working in abattoirs are widely known in Australia (Constable et al., 2004; Horsburgh, 2005). Host country governments usually see settlement success through a lens of economic rationality, and employment therefore remains the main measurable indicator (see Richardson et al., 2004b). Western governments seem less interested in social indicators of settlement success (e.g. formation of social networks in the mainstream community) and the life satisfaction of immigrants and refugees.

On the other hand, in recent decades measuring life satisfaction (quality of life, well-being, happiness) has become a burgeoning area of western social science scholarship. This type of research, mainly conducted by social psychologists and sociologists, but also economists, often takes a comparative perspective along the axes of gender, age, race and disability. Cross-cultural life satisfaction has also been explored, mainly through cross-national comparisons (e.g. Leelakulthanit and Day, 1993; Schumaker et al., 1993), while ethnic minorities within western nations have attracted less attention (for exceptions, see Bradley and Corwyn, 2004; Enchaustegui-de-Jesús et al., 2006; Ying, 1992). Refugees only appeared as a target population of life satisfaction research in the 1990s (Tran and Nguyen, 1994; Werkuyten and Nekuee, 1999).

This article explores how employment and other settlement domains (listed in Table 2) impact on refugee life satisfaction in Australia and attempts to measure their relative predictive power. The article offers an emic view of settlement success: the notion is strongly associated with refugees’ subjective perceptions of their settlement success and consequent life satisfaction. In other words, life satisfaction is understood as a subjective aspect of the quality of life (QoL): the main body of data consists of people’s self-assessment of their overall life satisfaction as well as its distinct domains, without trying to find a way to ‘objectively’ measure their QoL (see Cummins, 2000). Cummins (1996) showed that objective indicators of QoL (where it is possible to measure them, as in health status or income level, for example) are sometimes only remotely related to subjective satisfaction, that is, how people perceive their health or financial circumstances. Clearly, life satisfaction is a ratio of individuals’ ‘objective’ circumstances and their (adjustable) expectations, rather than a direct function of ‘objective’ QoL, which this research seems to confirm for the three refugee groups involved. Similarly, psychologists Werkuyten and Nekuee (1999: 281) define life satisfaction as a ‘cognitive judgmental component of subjective well-being’. This is not to argue that people’s objective circumstances are irrelevant to their life satisfaction, or somehow disconnected from it – which would imply it is not worth trying to improve them. This article sees the ‘objective’ social aspects of refugee settlement, such as employment and building of social networks, as inextricably linked with the ‘subjective’ psychological aspects or life satisfaction, and seeks to connect them through linking the
notions of refugees’ settlement success with life satisfaction and exploring their relationship.

This article therefore juxtaposes two broad sets of literature on refugee settlement in the West: one that looks at ‘objective’ indicators, and specifically at central components of settlement success such as employment and social networks building, often with regard to the issue of discrimination (apart from works cited earlier, see also Korac, 2003, 2005; Torezani et al., 2008), and the other that looks at refugees’ psychological well-being, focusing mainly on trauma and mental health, and recently also on life satisfaction. Refugee employment and downward mobility, the central interest of the research project from which this article stems, have the potential to adversely affect other aspects of settlement: family life, the creation of social networks, the feeling of belonging and, consequently, people’s overall emotional well-being and life satisfaction.

**METHODOLOGY**

The sample of respondents in this study comes from three broadly conceived refugee groups to Australia: ex-Yugoslavs (mainly Bosnians), black Africans (mainly Somalis and Ethiopians) and Middle Easterners (mainly Iraqis). These clusters make sense in terms of their differential visibility in the Australian social context and also reflect the composition of the Australian humanitarian intake during the 1990s and early 2000s: Bosnians and Iraqis predominated in the 1990s, while black Africans have comprised 73 percent of the planned humanitarian intake in the financial year 2004–5 (DIMIA, 2005a).

The central body of data was collected through a survey of 150 refugees permanently resettled in Perth, Western Australia. Questionnaire-based face-to-face interviews were conducted with 50 respondents from each of the three groups. Because of the project’s central emphasis on visibility and employment, the interviewers (bilingual assistants) were instructed to target skilled people of working age (18–65) with at least a working knowledge of English, who were either employed or looking for work, and who had arrived on humanitarian visas (which is almost exclusively the case in certain communities). The sample was therefore snowballed to be purposive rather than representative of the refugee groups involved and consequently consisted of respondents with, on average, high human capital (skills and English proficiency, see Table 1). Such a non-random sample means that the results of statistical procedures are indicative for the (previously) middle-class people among refugees rather than generalizable to the refugee populations from the three source areas, which are extremely heterogeneous in terms of socioeconomic background (DIAC, 2006). Such
selection of the sample excludes those refugees who may be the most traumatised and disadvantaged due to protracted refugee situations – the health data from our survey confirm this assumption (see Table 2). The main methodological merit of this approach is that it compares settlement success and life satisfaction in three refugee groups with different degrees of visibility, and at the same time looks at the impact of visibility-based discrimination on life satisfaction among people who actively seek integration into the labour market and mainstream society in general.

In this article, two types of discrimination are analysed: discrimination in the labour market (for recent immigrants the focus is primarily on securing a job) and ‘street discrimination’, to which visible people are exposed in informal situations in public places by strangers (e.g. Muslim women being harassed because of their hijab or black teenagers being closely observed by security personnel in shopping areas). Of course, discrimination is notoriously hard to measure and our data pertain to refugees’ perception of being discriminated against – the perception that was assumed to influence life satisfaction.

Exploring refugee life satisfaction has its specifics and has to depart, to a degree, from mainstream research of life satisfaction. 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 genes, personality and early life experiences than by later life events and social context (Bradley and Corwyn, 2004; Cummins, 2000). Dramatic life events tend to temporarily upset well-being homeostasis and life satisfaction, but they tend to stabilize back to a set point after some time. Because of this, our respondents were people who had been in Australia for at least two years, when the acute refugee trauma, as well as the ‘honeymoon period’, created by a sharp contrast between the refugee flight and the peaceful resettlement environment, were likely to be over and when their life started to settle ‘back to normal’ and acquire a degree of stability.

Table 1 shows the relevant characteristics of our sample.

The ex-Yugoslav subsample was somewhat older (on average ≈ 44 years) than the African and Middle Eastern subsamples (≈ 37 and ≈ 38 years respectively) and, in contrast with the other two subsamples, predominantly female. The African and Middle Eastern subsamples were almost identical in terms of age and gender profile and very similar in terms of education and length of residence. A large majority of Africans and Middle Easterners had university (bachelor or higher) degrees (68 and 66 percent respectively), while ex-Yugoslavs were less well-educated (32 percent university-educated). All respondents had skills required for white-collar work (among ex-Yugoslavs, 28 percent had a vocational high school diploma to this effect). Therefore the ex-Yugoslav respondents, in comparison to the other two subsamples, were on average older, predominantly
### Table 1  Sample characteristics (N = 150)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Ex-Yugoslavs</th>
<th>Africans</th>
<th>Middle East</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Range</strong></td>
<td>Mean (SD)</td>
<td>Mean (SD)</td>
<td>Mean (SD)</td>
<td>Mean (SD)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>1–5</td>
<td>3.10 (0.64)</td>
<td>2.64 (0.76)</td>
<td>2.70 (0.58)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>F = 58 %</td>
<td>F = 28 %</td>
<td>F = 28 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>1–4</td>
<td>2.80 (0.57)</td>
<td>3.16 (0.58)</td>
<td>3.18 (0.44)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Length of residence&lt;sup&gt;c&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Years</td>
<td>7.78 (2.10)</td>
<td>7.24 (3.04)</td>
<td>6.54 (4.30)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<sup>a</sup> The age scale: 1 = under 20; 2 = 21–35; 3 = 36–50; 4 = 51–65; 5 = >66.

<sup>b</sup> The education level scale: 1 ≤ 10 years; 2 = trade or 12 years; 3 = diploma or degree; 4 = postgraduate qualification.

<sup>c</sup> Medians (years): ex-Yugoslavs median = 8.00, Africans median = 7.00, Middle Easters median = 5.00.
women, less educated and with lower self-reported English proficiency – all of which is unfavourable in the job market.

The questionnaire consisted of 63 multiple-choice questions divided into three sections: demographic information, labour market experience and satisfaction with settlement. Where appropriate, a space was provided for narrative comments, which were recorded by interviewers as qualitative written entries. More than half of the respondents’ offered such comments. The last part of the questionnaire (questions 48–63) focused on general satisfaction with their experience of life in Australia, as well as its separate domains, shown in Table 2. Correlation and regression analyses were conducted to determine the relationships among variables, primarily between components of successful settlement (Table 2) and overall life satisfaction (Table 3). However, the complex and compounded, as well as highly subjective nature of the issues under investigation did not warrant exclusive reliance on impersonal and ostensibly objective quantitative analysis. This general starting point about the advantages of mixed-methods research (qualitative and quantitative combined) was reinforced by the fact that the initial analysis of survey data showed some counterintuitive results. In order to clarify these, six in-depth follow-up interviews were conducted with ‘key informants’: bilingual settlement workers of both genders who themselves had arrived in Australia as refugees from Bosnia, Iraq and sub-Saharan Africa. Additionally, three in-depth interviews were conducted with Australian professionals who had extensive experience in settlement support work with the three refugee groups.

Attention to cross-cultural issues was a major factor in the decision to complement the quantitative analysis with qualitative data. In our diverse sample, cross-cultural issues were expected to influence people’s perceptions as well as reporting of (dis)satisfaction with various aspects of life. Undoubtedly, many individual-level factors, cognitive and emotional, also played a role. In this context, the author fully agrees with Cummins (2000: 57), who argues that subjective satisfaction responses can be used as ‘reliable and valid data’ while ‘the nature of underlying construct of subjective experience can only ever be inferred’. Some inferences relevant for the understanding of the nexus of refugees’ visibility, settlement success and life satisfaction are drawn in the final sections of this article.

THE FACTORS OF SUCCESSFUL SETTLEMENT AS COMPONENTS OF REFUGEE LIFE SATISFACTION: A THREE-GROUP COMPARISON

Table 2 shows how the three refugee groups scored on specific domains of successful settlement, based on self-assessment: health status, employment
### Table 2  Descriptive statistics for life satisfaction domains in three refugee groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Domains of settlement success/life satisfaction</th>
<th>Ex-Yugoslavs</th>
<th>Africans</th>
<th>Middle East</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Range</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 (0.72)</td>
<td>3.80 (0.41)</td>
<td>3.59 (0.64)</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>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job satisfaction</td>
<td>1–4</td>
<td>2.79 (1.07)</td>
<td>2.55 (0.94)</td>
<td>2.79 (1.02)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial satisfaction.</td>
<td>1–4</td>
<td>2.36 (1.02)</td>
<td>2.06 (0.99)</td>
<td>1.88 (1.01)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social support</td>
<td>1–4</td>
<td>3.02 (0.94)</td>
<td>3.14 (0.61)</td>
<td>2.90 (0.68)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australian networks</td>
<td>1–4</td>
<td>2.52 (0.95)</td>
<td>2.67 (0.72)</td>
<td>3.00 (0.61)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acculturation</td>
<td>1–4</td>
<td>2.98 (1.11)</td>
<td>3.44 (0.79)</td>
<td>3.27 (0.93)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adaptation</td>
<td>1–4</td>
<td>3.18 (1.10)</td>
<td>3.35 (0.86)</td>
<td>3.59 (0.61)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Street’ discrimination (lack of)</td>
<td>1–4</td>
<td>3.02 (1.00)</td>
<td>2.55 (0.84)</td>
<td>2.63 (0.91)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: Questions on domains of life satisfaction were answered on a four-point scale, where 1 was the worst outcome (‘not at all happy’), and 4 was the best outcome (‘entirely happy’). In between were gradients ‘mostly’ and ‘somewhat’, or similar, appropriate to the question.*
status, job satisfaction, financial satisfaction, social support, Australian networks, acculturation (cognitive aspect) and adaptation (practical aspect) in the new environment, and the perception of street discrimination (we asked separately about discrimination in the labour market).10

These domains largely correspond to those usually included in the surveys of life satisfaction of the general population: material well-being, health, productivity (work, employment) and intimate and social relationships (Cummins, 1996). The choice of life satisfaction domains is always to a degree arbitrary. Cummins (1996) reviewed the life satisfaction literature and argued in favour of seven domains, while The Economist (2005) QoL index used nine domains. In this article, four immigrant-specific domains are added: acculturation, adaptation, Australian networks and the everyday experience of discrimination.

As shown in Table 2, our respondents (and each of the three groups individually) were overall most satisfied with their health (arguably due to the exclusion from the sample of those suffering poor health and consequently not part of the job search/workforce), and the least satisfied with their financial situation. All groups scored relatively high on acculturation and adaptation, which indicated that they were not (anymore) in a state of acute acculturation stress. This may also be due to the high educational qualifications and good English proficiency of our respondents, especially participants from Africa and the Middle East – who indeed have better scores on acculturation and adaptation than ex-Yugoslavs, although most of them had been in Australia for a shorter time. This acculturation/adaptation advantage may also be partly due to the younger age of the two groups (Table 1), when compared to ex-Yugoslavs.

Overall life satisfaction was measured by two items (on a four-point scale): ‘general life satisfaction’ and ‘life back to normal’. When constructing the questionnaire it was presumed that the two questions ‘Are you generally satisfied with your life at the moment?’ and ‘Do you feel your life is “back to normal”?’ would both measure a subjective perception of successful settlement or ‘refugee life satisfaction’. The ‘life back to normal’ measure is the one specific for refugees, for whom settlement is also a process of re-establishing a ‘normal’ – relatively stable and predictable – life. Table 3 shows descriptive statistics for the two items, which were highly correlated ($r = .681, p = .000$). In addition, 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), which could then be compared with the scores for the general population established in life satisfaction research.11

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 on life satisfaction. Although the difference between the three groups was not statistically significant,
Table 3  Overall life satisfaction of the three refugee groups

<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>General satisfaction</td>
<td>1–4</td>
<td>3.12 (0.98)</td>
<td>2.92 (0.73)</td>
<td>2.93 (0.52)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life back to normal</td>
<td>1–4</td>
<td>3.06 (1.07)</td>
<td>2.80 (0.68)</td>
<td>2.80 (0.68)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RLS score</td>
<td>1–4</td>
<td>3.09 (0.97)</td>
<td>2.86 (0.67)</td>
<td>2.87 (0.53)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Bosnians had a noticeably different pattern of response to the two questions that were combined into the RLS score: 46 percent declared they were ‘entirely satisfied with their life at the moment’ and 48 percent felt their life was ‘entirely back to normal’, while only 10–12 percent of the other two groups felt that way. Chi-square test showed that the distribution of responses was significantly different among Bosnians when compared to the other two groups ($p = .000$). Gender and age differences between the subsamples (Table 1) may have partly accounted for the higher life satisfaction of Bosnians, which is analysed in more detail later. 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, 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 considering these data. For example, our sample was relatively small and purposefully chosen to include people with educational qualifications and functional English. Such a population may have had higher expectations of their Australian life, especially in terms of employment outcomes, and may consequently rate their general satisfaction lower when these expectations were not fulfilled. For example, 44 percent of 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. This gap may have impacted on their satisfaction with settlement and life in Australia in general.

As to the Middle Eastern participants, a male key informant (Iraqi settlement worker, university-educated, in his thirties) told us Iraqis did not want to express dissatisfaction and be seen to criticize the host country and settlement services provided by its government:

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. . . . people are afraid . . . the government may cut their Centrelink [social security] payments. . . . They apply the experience from their country . . .

Another Iraqi key informant (a female settlement worker, university-educated, in her thirties) confirmed that her compatriots’ expressions of general satisfaction are almost always exaggerated due to a fear of criticizing authorities, internalized during their socialization and life under a tyrannical regime.
THE DOMAINS OF SETTLEMENT SUCCESS AS PREDICTORS OF OVERALL LIFE SATISFACTION

When the RLS score for the total sample was correlated with each of the domains of life satisfaction, eight of them were significantly correlated with overall life satisfaction. Out of these, six were correlated at the higher level of significance (\(p \leq .01\)): job satisfaction, financial satisfaction, social support, adaptation, Australian networks and acculturation. Employment status and length of residence showed weak correlation with overall satisfaction (\(p \leq .05\)).

It is interesting to note that in the total sample (\(N = 150\)), the experience of street discrimination and health status were not correlated with life satisfaction. The reason why health, usually one of the strongest correlates of happiness in the general adult population (Bradley and Corwyn, 2004: 389), was not relevant in our sample may lie in the fact that, as mentioned, our sample implicitly excluded those affected by poor health. The weak association of street discrimination and life satisfaction is counterintuitive and more attention is devoted to this later.

When three groups (\(n = 50\)) were analysed separately, four domains were highly correlated with overall satisfaction among Bosnians: job satisfaction, with the convincingly highest score (\(r = .714\)), followed by financial satisfaction, social support and acculturation. For Africans, the highest correlation with overall satisfaction belonged to social support (\(r = .459\)) followed by financial satisfaction and adaptation. For Iraqis, the two highest correlations were the same as for Africans (financial satisfaction and adaptation, at a moderate level, \(r = .452\) and \(.436\) respectively), and the third one was job satisfaction. The most striking result is the high correlation between overall life satisfaction and job satisfaction for Bosnians, when compared with the other two groups.

Significant correlations (\(p = .000\)) among the variables (domains of life satisfaction) created three variable ‘pairs’: financial satisfaction and job satisfaction (\(r = .568\)); successful adaptation and acculturation (\(r = .515\)); and Australian networks and adaptation (\(r = .498\)). The first relationship may indicate that, for most respondents, job satisfaction was strongly associated with a satisfactory income from the job – that is, people who were happy with their financial situation were also likely to declare they had satisfactory jobs, even if those jobs were below their qualifications (as was the case with 80 percent of Bosnian respondents). The second relationship may indicate that people who ‘understood’ the host culture also adapted better in a practical sense. The third relationship indicates that those who had Australian friends (outside their ethnic/language group) found adaptation less difficult. These are not necessarily causal relationships: for example, those who, for whatever reason, found acculturation less difficult (e.g.
because they were more proficient in English or better educated) might have been more open to forming extra-ethnic friendships and more likely to attract Australian-born friends; or, conversely, those who had Australian friends may have found their acculturation less stressful, as the friends acted as helpful insiders.

The relationships between variables were further explored through a multiple regression analysis. Given a relatively small number of cases in each group (n = 50), a regression model with four predictors (domains of settlement success as independent variables) of overall life satisfaction was used. Job satisfaction was by far the strongest predictor (β = .561*** for general satisfaction of Bosnians, and acculturation was also significant (β = .279*). Together with another two predictors in the model (social support and financial satisfaction), they explained 60 percent of general satisfaction in this group. Given that job satisfaction is highly correlated with financial satisfaction, it is likely that the latter has contributed to the explanatory power of the model. For Africans, social support was revealed as the main predictor (β = .568*** of general satisfaction, while financial satisfaction was also significant (β = .501*). The four variables accounted for 57 percent of life satisfaction for Africans. The chosen model has less explanatory power in the case of Middle Easterners (due to considerably more heterogeneity in terms of length of residence, see Table 1): it explained 38 percent of variance in general satisfaction, with only financial satisfaction being a significant predictor (β = .357*).

REFUGEE LIFE SATISFACTION: COPING WITH VISIBILITY, DISCRIMINATION AND LOSS OF STATUS

The three groups’ different association of life satisfaction domains with overall satisfaction can be attributed partly to their pre-Australian experiences and cultural differences, which created certain expectations, and partly to the different levels and types of visibility and consequently differential settlement outcomes. The latter are also affected by the length of residence, but even more by respondents’ demographic and human capital characteristics (age, education/skills, English proficiency). Visibility made refugees vulnerable to street discrimination and labour market discrimination: about one-third of respondents provided comments on this in the survey. Once cultural expectations were readjusted following the early experience of settlement in Australia, and discrimination was ‘included’ in the expectations, the hierarchy of life satisfaction domains may have undergone change. For example, once people realized that securing a job at their level of qualifications was not as easy as they had hoped, they may have
readjusted their priorities towards achieving financial security (through a lower-status job), supportive social networks, enjoying good health and valuing educational and other opportunities for their children – the process that may have been well under way among Bosnians at the time of the survey because of their longer residence in Australia. The priorities of Iraqis, and the (perhaps temporarily) diminished importance of unemployment and even of being exposed to discrimination, were explained by the Iraqi informant in a follow-up interview:

[The] Iraqi community . . . [is] not happy here . . . the system is against them sometimes . . . Job Network [government-funded employment assistance] is not fair to people from this region, from the Middle East . . . they are always below . . . because of their appearance . . . Most Iraqis have large families, the wife is on parenting allowance, the father on [a] pension, so therefore they do not care whether Job Network helps them or not . . . Traditionally they would try to bring their family from Iraq.

Valtonen (2004: 71) described unemployment in countries with strong welfare rights as ‘differential exclusion’, where ‘welfare rights buffer the negative effects of labour market marginalization’. Unemployment, especially long term, remains one of the paradigmatic situations of social exclusion. A significant loss of occupational and consequently social status can also be described as marginalization. This situation affected many respondents and lowered their self-reported life satisfaction, although it did not translate into expressions of general dissatisfaction. There was, however, much suppressed frustration among people who held high-status jobs in their countries of origin. They felt like second-class citizens in Australia because they were not able, due to perceived discrimination, to compete with locals for good jobs and were instead relegated to the secondary labour market (Colic-Peisker and Tilbury, 2006). In the respondents’ comments, and also in recent media reports, the frustration about discrimination in the job market penetrated through a generally adopted refugee discourse of gratitude. The accounts typically reported discrimination because of a Muslim name, appearance, or dress in case of women (among the Middle Eastern respondents) and ‘black skin’ (among Africans). These two different types of visibility may be translated into different types of mainstream prejudice (e.g. fear of terrorism vs suspicion of educational credentials and work ethic; see Tilbury and Colic-Peisker, 2006), but the discrimination originating from such prejudices may have similar consequences in the labour market and other settlement domains.

Although street discrimination did not seem to have significantly affected general life satisfaction, discrimination in the labour market did affect overall satisfaction. As to the first, the mainly verbal street incidents people experienced because of their visibility (only 18 percent of Africans and 20 percent of Iraqis declared they had never experienced them,
compared to 40 percent of Bosnians) were treated pragmatically: they found it unpleasant but largely inconsequential for their lives and moved on quickly. A large majority of respondents in the three groups (70 percent of Bosnians, 74 percent of Africans and 78 percent of Middle Eastern respondents) considered Australians to be ‘entirely’ or ‘mostly’ ‘friendly and accepting’. The Iraqi female key informant commented:

Yes, sometimes you feel that you are uncomfortable in this environment and you are not in the right place. . . . But maybe these feelings do not last for long, you know. After a while you forget about it [she had just described being harassed on the train because of her hijab] and you get back to your normal life. But generally they [Iraqis] have a very good opinion about Australian people. . . . I can assure you that they [Iraqis] love Australian people and they feel they are friendly . . . you don’t feel that they are discriminating [against] you or doing anything or, you know, looking down on you because you are a refugee or migrant.

As mentioned, the experience of discrimination in the job market did affect life satisfaction. t-Testing showed that the RLS score of those who had ‘experienced discrimination in the job market’ was significantly lower, compared to those who had not ($p = .006$). On the other hand, difficulties in finding a job where discrimination was not perceived as a reason did not significantly affect life satisfaction. This may also reflect the refugees’ pragmatic focus: unemployment, loss of occupational status, lack of promotion and harassment in the workplace have more potential to affect one’s well-being than isolated street incidents. Labour market discrimination affects one’s financial outcomes, family relations, status in the ethnic and wider community and also one’s self-respect. Finally, labour market location is the main element of one’s socioeconomic location. Our data confirm that women were less affected by the loss of status: they had significantly worse employment outcomes but only slightly little lower levels of life satisfaction than men.13

On average, the socioeconomic status of our highly educated respondents – measured through their employment status (from ‘unemployed’ to ‘full-time employed’) and job status (from ‘working below’ to ‘working above’ one’s level of formal skills) – was considerably lower than that of the general population. Unemployment was much higher than in the general population (28 vs 5 percent) and their income was considerably lower than the Australian average. At the time of the 2006 Census, the median individual weekly income for the Bosnia and Herzegovina-born in Australia aged 15 years and over was AU$299, AU$228 for the Iraqi-born and AU$342 for Ethiopian-born, compared with AU$431 for all overseas-born and AU$488 for all Australia-born. The total Australian population had a median individual weekly income of AU$466 (DIAC, 2006).

In spite of the relatively poor employment outcomes, lowered job status and lower income when compared with the general population, refugee life
satisfaction hovered around the ‘mostly satisfied’ mark (2.94 out of 4, Table 3). This result, using Cummins’s methodology, translates into 64.6 SM (scale maximum) or about 10 percent SM lower than the general Australian population (and that of other western countries), whose life satisfaction has been set at about 75 percent SM on average over the past decade (Cummins, 1996, 2000; Cummins et al., 2005). Our respondents’ RLS score corresponded almost perfectly to the aggregate result from the domain means (Table 2), which is 2.92 or 64 SM, indicating that the chosen domains were indeed the constituents of the overall life satisfaction. 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 (2.86 and 2.87 on the scale 1–4) and about 13 percentage points below the general population. This is a significantly lower score, as the normative range for the Australian general population, grouped in Electoral Divisions, is 69.4–78.6 SM (Cummins et al., 2005: 5). Therefore, only the ex-Yugoslav RLS score is within the normative range for the general population, whereas Middle Easterners and Africans fall outside it.

This difference seems at least partly due to objectively measurable factors: ex-Yugoslavs had better employment outcomes (unemployment of ‘only’ 14 percent compared to 32 and 38 percent for Africans and Middle Easterners respectively) as well as considerably higher self-reported income (although we cannot fully rely on these numbers, the difference is indicative enough). The hard facts of lower unemployment, higher income (in spite of the large majority still working below their level of skills) and lower levels of experience of discrimination were likely to have influenced this difference in life satisfaction. Demographic differences found in life satisfaction research, where older people and women tend to have higher life satisfaction, may have also played a role (Cummins et al., 2005; Diener, 1984; Judge and Watanabe, 1993; Tran and Nguyen, 1994). The finding that minorities in western societies tend to have lower life satisfaction than the ‘whites’ (Bradley and Corwyn, 2004)14 may work for ex-Yugoslavs, who were the only Europeans among recently arrived refugees and therefore likely to find their path to social inclusion less overgrown with mainstream prejudices in response to visibility (Colic-Peisker, 2005). Suppressing dissatisfaction about the loss of occupational and general social status and transferring hope for full social inclusion to their children seemed endemic among Bosnians, because of the expectation that the children, unhampered by racial visibility and without a foreign accent, will be able to fully assimilate into the Australian mainstream. According to recent reports, this may be considerably more problematic for the highly visible black Africans (Anderson, 2006; Hillier, 2002; Nsubuga-Kyobe and Dimock, 2002).

At least in part, the often-mentioned psychological resilience of refugees, who not only cope with practical difficulties of their resettlement, but find
ways of accepting apparent disadvantages brought about by their visibility and minority status, can be seen as well-being homeostasis. In other words, after several years in Australia, most people would be over the dip in the well-being curve caused by forced migration and back to their ‘set happiness point’ (Cummins et al., 2005). Also relevant in the analysis of refugee life satisfaction is the reported non-linear relationship between objective and subjective QoL indicators (Cummins, 2000: 64). For example, the most rapid rise in life satisfaction occurs when the lowest income levels improve, which pertains to refugees, most of whom start their settlement in the West literally ‘from zero’. Compared to the usually precarious pre-arrival conditions, receiving welfare benefits in Australia may be initially seen as a bonanza. Moving from welfare to an entry-level job is also likely to have a positive effect on satisfaction, even though objectively people may still be below the poverty line of an affluent society and in jobs below their qualifications. This mechanism also pertains to other, non-material components of life satisfaction: people with a very low level of objective well-being (in terms of loss of safety, health, community support, etc., where refugees can be considered a paradigmatic case) experience a much steeper increase in subjective satisfaction once their objective indicators in these areas improve, compared to people whose objective indicators had improved from an already high level (Cummins, 1996).

IN THE EYE OF THE BEHOLDER: SUBJECTIVE AND CROSS-CULTURAL DETERMINANTS OF LIFE SATISFACTION

Assessing one’s own life satisfaction involves a two-fold cognitive comparison: one is a comparison of present circumstances with the immediate and longer-term past, and the other is a comparison with the desired ‘ideal’ circumstances (a comparison with the well-off strata of the general population would have the same meaning in this case). In the early years of settlement, refugees tend to compare their circumstances with the circumstances from which they fled and with other members of their refugee communities, rather than with the mainstream host population. This comparison works in favour of the feeling of satisfaction. Our key informants confirmed this inference. This is an account of the African male key informant (settlement worker, 40 years old, university-educated):

Maybe because Australia is very peaceful, that’s why people are satisfied, you know. But if you live in other place, maybe, you may have everything but yet [are] not sure of what’s gonna happen; the next minute they are gonna come and kill you. Then if you compare to a place where at least there is security, then people are definitely satisfied with that. That’s one reason, I think, that people would declare: they’re going to be satisfied compared to where they come from.
The following is an account of the Iraqi female key informant, which points to the same interpretation.

I think the most important thing for all people is... they are safe here in this country and they came here for better education for their children maybe. You need to give a future for your children, to have a better life, health system, you know, sort of things like that... I mean for Iraq now, or for the last 10 years... safety is the most important thing; which makes them [Iraqis in Australia] very happy.

In the Report from the Longitudinal Study of Immigrants in Australia (LSIA), refugees attached much importance to safety and disliked the crime and lack of discipline more than other visa categories (Richardson et al., 2004b: 81). Unsurprisingly, they were also more likely to appreciate Australia as a democratic, stable and peaceful country. Some other LSIA findings are also comparable to our findings. For example, in the LSIA Report the relationship between settlement success and life satisfaction is construed as mutually reinforcing. LSIA also reported that refugees were on average, and overall, more satisfied with their lives than the ‘independent’ (skill-based) migrants (Richardson et al., 2004b: 6), which confirms the importance of comparison with previous circumstances rather than indicating an ‘objective’ settlement success – given that refugees have significantly worse employment outcomes and lower earnings than skilled migrants (DIMIA, 2005b; Richardson et al., 2004a).

The high refugee satisfaction reported by LSIA, in spite of settlement difficulties, may also be partly based in a tacit acceptance of the low social status and discrimination on the basis of ‘otherness’ inferred from racial visibility and cultural distance. The following quotes are illustrative. The Iraqi female informant claimed she would not even look for a better-paid job at her level of qualifications:

I was thinking to go back to accountancy but... I have this feeling that I wouldn’t get any job in this field because there’s a lot of competency out there, you know. There [are] a lot of accountants, maybe that’s why.

[Q: There’s a lot of need as well – everyone needs accountants...]

I’m always thinking ‘ah, nobody will give me a job like accountant there because with my age [late thirties]. . . . Maybe with my background, maybe because I’m a Muslim putting [on] this scarf, this is one of the reasons as well.

After describing her experience of street racism she also blamed her hijab rather than racist prejudice:

Yes, there are things happening, even for me. If it is in the streets, it’s happened for me many times. I’m a Muslim. I’m putting the scarf [on]. . . . With the scarf, as I told you, I think the most important thing or the problem is the scarf because if I wasn’t putting [on] the scarf...
The African female key informant described racial visibility as ‘uncomfortable’ and explained why discrimination was expected:

Maybe because all the things they say about the black race [are] so negative that they can’t associate anything positive with you. And if you’ve come here, you must have done something or you’re about to do something wrong. . . . Also on our side . . . we [black people] also have our own paranoia because you know that you are discriminated [against] most of the time so you internalize it and maybe it follows you. . . . It’s like a bag you’re carrying.

The comparative results for the three refugee groups show that cultural frames of reference and culturally determined preferences influence how refugees perceive their settlement success and how this translates into their overall satisfaction with life. For example, the significance of job satisfaction for general life satisfaction, extensively researched and established in the literature (Judge and Watanabe, 1993), has only been confirmed for the ex-Yugoslavs. This may be partly attributed to the fact that, in the pre-war Communist ex-Yugoslavia, paid employment was a universal experience and an important part of life for both genders, while the welfare system was rudimentary. Hence, upon arriving in Australia, welfare payments were perceived as demeaning handouts. In addition, given that a large majority worked below their skills in Australia, it seems that it is a job as a source of income rather than a job as a source of status and self-actualization that makes this group of respondents satisfied (Colic-Peisker and Tilbury, 2003: 70–1).

The high significance of social support for the life satisfaction of Africans may be a reflection of the importance they place on the extended family and community, as our key respondents explained. The importance of financial satisfaction for African and Middle Eastern respondents is, apart from already discussed reasons, consistent with the fact that a great majority of them provide financial assistance to overseas relatives (86 and 60 percent respectively). Their incomes, even though below the Australian average, may allow them to fulfil this important obligation to their overseas kin.

CONCLUSION

This article establishes a new nexus between settlement (integration) success research, well developed in countries of immigration, and the life satisfaction research. Without attempting to generalize our findings beyond the ‘high human capital’ refugees surveyed in our research, it reports participants’ own perception of settlement success using domains of life satisfaction. In doing so, it diverges from the solely economically focused idea of objectively measurable settlement success, which dominates government
thinking and is a significant part of social science research of immigrant settlement.

This study confirms that the objective indicators of refugee settlement success (or otherwise) – unemployment, the loss of occupational status and income – are rather bleak. Our respondents were confronted with the loss of their pre-migration socioeconomic status and this affected their life satisfaction. Well-educated and (previously) middle-class people may be better equipped to cope with resettlement but they also may have much to lose in the process. Their employment appears as a necessary, but not a sufficient condition for successful settlement, as it often implies downward mobility and consequent dissatisfaction. On the other hand, the still-fresh memories of war and flight, alongside enjoying safety in Australia and the hope that their children will have a good life and experience social mobility, may have partly accounted for the fact that the refugee life satisfaction was not dramatically lower than in the general population. Our findings also point to the relative deprivation theory: our respondents, being relatively recent arrivals, tended to contain their social comparison within their ethnic communities and their relationship to mainstream Australia was still determined by a discourse of gratitude. They did not seem to have a strong sense of social entitlement and they expected, as well as accepted, a degree of mainstream prejudice and discrimination rather than expecting full social inclusion. In the later stages of settlement, however, the discourse of gratitude may start to dissipate. Moreover, the second generation, who will have grown up in Australia, will use a different comparison and have a mainstream sense of social entitlement. If they, because of their visibility, continue to experience discrimination and perceive themselves as socially excluded, this can cause considerable dissatisfaction and resentment.

Looking at the three refugee groups comparatively, the measurable settlement outcomes, as well as the self-reported life satisfaction, were the most favourable among ex-Yugoslavs. The different demographic (age and gender) composition of our subsamples seems to combine with the racial ‘invisibility’ of ex-Yugoslavs in creating both their settlement success and life satisfaction advantage. Of course, a number of other cross-cultural, social, political and personal factors influence the life satisfaction and its domains in the three recently arrived refugee groups in Australia.

It should be noted that this study has methodological limitations in terms of sample size and composition, and its findings cannot be generalized to entire refugee populations. In addition, as Cummins (2000: 70) observed, the idea of measuring life satisfaction has been dominated by western thinking: it operates with an essentially western, middle-class concept of success, and therefore ‘[does] not travel well to other lands’. However, the relationship of the experience of discrimination and downward mobility with life satisfaction of educated refugees deserves further investigation.
Visible minorities are an ever-larger presence 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 a deeper insight into their settlement and the problems involved. Findings of research such as that presented in this article may be particularly relevant for further redesigning the comprehensive refugee resettlement programme (IHSS), which may cater well for the more problematic end (in terms of refugee trauma and low human capital) of refugee intake, but neglects the ‘refugee middle class’, which is well represented among humanitarian entrants. In addition, anti-discriminatory intentions, paradoxically, completely erased the issue of racial visibility from the refugee resettlement assistance repertory. Unfortunately, the issue keeps coming back through the reality of resettlement and needs to be acknowledged and tackled, as it impacts significantly on settlement success, as well as the life satisfaction of refugees and other ‘visible’ migrants. On a wider plane, this research hopes to contribute to mutual understanding between minority and majority populations, especially in the post-September-11 era of the apparent crisis of multiculturalism in Australia and other western societies.

Notes

1 This term is meant to cover all categories of permanently protected humanitarian entrants in Australia.
2 Developed countries with predominantly white populations: Europe, North America and Australia.
3 Although the total immigration programme has grown considerably over the past decade, projected to be at an all-time high of c. 300,000 people (about one-third of the intake are temporary entrants) in the current financial year (2008/9), the humanitarian programme has not grown at the same rate. This year’s projection (under the new Australian Labor government) is 13,500 humanitarian entrants, with an additional 500 places for Iraqi refugees. Last year, 12,247 people entered Australia on humanitarian visas (DIAC, 2008: 26), and 13,347 in 2004–5 (DIMIA, 2005a: 11). The numbers were smaller for 2000–3, about 10,000 people.
4 It is important to note that the on-shore humanitarian entrants (asylum seekers) can in the first instance only be granted a temporary protection visa (TPV, usually for three years), after their claims are checked and they are released from immigration detention into the community – a process that in some cases lasts for years, and is the focus of efforts of refugee advocates and human rights activists. Once granted, a TPV qualifies its holder for a minimal settlement support. This is a consequence of the Australian government’s efforts to reduce numbers of asylum seekers – a strategy that has, using draconian means, been successful since the late 1990s. In the 2000s, on-shore asylum seekers have only taken a small fraction of the humanitarian places – in 2004–5 only 8 percent (DIMIA, 2005a: 11).

Economists are interested in the relationship between affluence, usually measured as GDP per capita, and well-being (see Stutzer, 2004; *The Economist*, 2005).


At the time of writing (2008), the composition of the humanitarian intake has shifted away from sub-Saharan Africa and towards Asia (Burma, Nepal, Afghanistan and Iraq in particular), although the Sudanese intake is still substantial (DIAC, 2008: 26).

Mean ages in years are calculated by multiplying the mean of each age bracket (e.g. 28 years for the 21–35 bracket) by the statistical mean for each refugee group.

The questions asked in the survey were:

Are you in good health? (health)
What is your employment status? (employment status)
Are you happy with your current job? (job satisfaction)
Are you happy with your financial situation? (financial satisfaction)
Are you happy with your (private) social network in Perth? (social support)
Do you mix with Australians socially (people other than your compatriots)? (Australian networks)
Do you have problems understanding Australian way of life? (acculturation)
Do you have problems adapting to Australian way of life? (adaptation)
Have you ever been treated in an unpleasant way because you are a migrant/refugee? (discrimination)

All questions are answered on a four-point scale, e.g. Are you in good health?
a. yes, entirely; b. mostly; c. somewhat; d. not at all.

There are no census or other data on life satisfaction of refugees that would make a comparison with our sample possible. There are data on employment, income and housing for separate overseas-born groups, in which the visa category does not feature, however – which means that refugees cannot be distinguished from other immigrant categories.

Discrimination in the labour market was not included in the correlation and regression analysis because it was measured differently in the survey (by offering ‘yes’ and ‘no’ answers to a range of reasons for perceived discrimination). *t*-Test confirmed its significance for life satisfaction.

For many women, the loss of professional status may be less traumatic, as they may opt for the family/motherhood/housewife role or achieve the reflected status through the husband – a rare case perhaps where patriarchy may work in favour of women (see also Franz, 2003).

Cummins et al. (2005: 22) found that ethnically more mixed electoral divisions had lower life satisfaction scores, although they did not have a lower socioeconomic profile (measured by income, levels of employment and education).
15 The LSIA started in the mid-1990s. It uses a large representative sample of immigrants across visa categories.
16 Earlier economic migrants from ex-Yugoslavia had the highest rate of female employment of all migrant communities.

References


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