LIFE SATISFACTION OF THE BOSNIAN REFUGEES IN SAINT LOUIS, MO

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ABSTRACT

Using survey data, this study explored life satisfaction of refugees from Bosnia-Herzegovina in St. Louis, Missouri. The results showed no gender differences among any of the major variables. A hierarchical regression analysis found that the demographic characteristics did not predict life satisfaction except for education and that while discrimination had a negative impact on life satisfaction, English competency, attachment to the US, and sense of coherence had a positive impact on life satisfaction. The study has implications for social service agencies and others involved with and serving refugees.

INTRODUCTION

In the 1992-1995 Bosnian war, more than 100,000 people lost their lives, and about 2 million Bosnians were displaced from their homes (Coughlan & Owens-Manley, 2006). The US is one of ten nations that accepted Bosnian war survivors as refugees. The US government designated St. Louis, Missouri, as one of the preferred resettlement communities for Bosnian refugees. The first Bosnian refugees arrived in St. Louis in 1993. During the next several years, a large number of Bosnians who had resettled in other areas of the United States migrated to St. Louis because of the lower cost of housing available when compared to other large cities, employment opportunities, or for reunification with friends and family. Today, there is an estimated 50,000 Bosnians in the St. Louis area.

Although a number of studies on refugees have focused on mental health and addressed perceived behavioral problems, there is a growing recognition in the refugee research that refugees' resettlement process needs to be studied while also taking into account their acculturation and life satisfaction in the host society (Colic-Peisker, 2002; Gold, 1992; Juan and Leonard, 1998; Matsuo, 2005; Mayadas and Segal, 2000). Being a refugee does not necessarily imply low psychological well-being and therefore heavy emphasis on the refugees' mental health often stigmatizes the group and overlooks other important aspects of their needs. Bosnians in St. Louis are a very resilient group and demonstrate slow but steady success in their resettlement process, while clearly recreating a normal life similar to the one they had back in Bosnia (Matsuo 2005). It is, therefore, important to study the positive aspects of acculturation, which Bosnians demonstrate for their ultimate survival in a host country, as well as to explore their life satisfaction in the US.

FACTORS AFFECTING LIFE SATISFACTION

Previous studies have explored life satisfaction of refugees in different parts of the world and identified several factors affecting their life satisfaction:

Language Competency: Learning language in the host society and securing employment are two of the most important issues for refugees (Corvo & Peterson, 2005). For the Yugoslavian refugees in Sweden, competency in the majority language was essential for labor marker integration as well as the social contact with Swedes (Kivling-Boden & Sundbom, 2001).

Discrimination: Discrimination is another barrier that affects life satisfaction of refugees. Bosnians, however, as 'white and Western-dressed,' were less likely to be perceived as the 'other,' and were found to strongly refuse any experiences of prejudice or discrimination (Colic-Peisker & Walker, 2003; Matsuo, 2005).

Sense of Coherence: A strong relationship between sense of coherence and life satisfaction was found in studies dealing with the refugee population (Ghazinour, Richter, and Eisemann 2004; Kibour, 2003; Ying and Akutsu, 1997). For Bosnian refugees, the stressful war-related experiences, migration stress, learning a new language and new culture's rules and norms, impact their coping strategies even years later (Plante, Simicic, Andersen, & Manuel, 2002). Possessing a high SOC can help refugees cope with mental stress caused by the process of migration and acculturation.

Attachment to the Host Society: Attachment to the host society is not often discussed in the literature on refugee resettlement. Matsuo (2005) found that life satisfaction of Bosnian refugees in the US varied according to the strength of attachment that they had to the host country and that educated refugees had lower life satisfaction than less educated refugees because of the occupational downward mobility experienced in the host county.

Hypotheses

1. Perceived English competency will have a positive impact on Bosnians refugees' life satisfaction.

2. Perceived discrimination will have a negative impact on Bosnian refugees' life satisfaction.

3. Refugees with high SOC are more likely to show life satisfaction than those who have low SOC.

4. Refugees who experience strong attachment to the USA will show higher life satisfaction.

METHOD

Data

This study used convenience sampling, one type of nonprobability sampling, for data collection because of the lack of sampling frame for this population. One of the authors conducted a fieldwork prior to data collection for this study and developed a network of informants in the Bosnian community in St. Louis. She then obtained names of Bosnian refugees from these informants, and constructed a mailing list that contained 820 different names. Survey questionnaires were mailed to those potential participants, and 175 completed questionnaires were returned, thus the response rate of 21.3%.

Variables

Life Satisfaction was measured by 7 items selected from the Satisfaction With Life Scale (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985). Cronbach's alpha achieved was 0.82

English Competency was measured on a 9-item scale obtained from the Stephenson Multigroup Acculturation Scale (Stephenson, 2000), and revised with the author's permission. Cronbach's alpha for the scale was 0.87.

Discrimination was measured by 9 items selected from a questionnaire that one of the authors of this study had previously developed (Matsuo, 1992). Cronbach's alpha was found to be 0.95.

Sense of Coherence was measured by 6 items selected from the Personality and Social Psychological Attitudes (Robinson, Shaver, and Wrightsman, 1991). Cronbach's alpha was 0.70.

Attachment to the US was measured by a 7-item scale also obtained from the Stephenson Multigroup Acculturation Scale (Stephenson, 2000) and revised with the author's permission. Cronbach's alpha for this scale was 0.81.

RESULTS

Demographic Characteristics
• 43.4% were female, 56.6% males
• 71.5% married, 13.9% separated/widowed, 7.9% single
• 45.5% some college or above college education, 54.5% high school/trade school or below.
• mean age of this sample was 45.04 (SD=14.82)
• mean years spent in the US was 6.13 (SD=2.15)
• 97.6% were Muslim, remaining sample reported no religious affiliation
• 12% came from big cities, 16% from regional centers/towns, 46% from small towns, 21% from villages
• 36% came directly to US, 30% previously resettled in Germany and 22% in Croatia
• 85% mentioned that St. Louis was the first city they arrived to in the US
• 53% had family income below $35,000, 25% $35,000-$50,000, the remaining $50,000 or higher
• 76.4% owned a home
• 86% had relatives in Bosnia, 75% reported sending financial support to these relatives
• 16% of the sample were US citizens
• 98% lost neighbors in the war, 73% lost family members
• 70% reported seeing violence in the war, 55% experienced direct physical violence
• 44% said that they visited Bosnia after they resettled in the US

Table 1: *Mean, Median, and Standard Deviation of Life Satisfaction and Other Major Variables*

Variables (Range)	Mean	Median	Standard Deviation
English Competency (0-36)	16.00	17.00	14.82
Discrimination (0-36)	9.91	7.00	9.98
Attachment to the US (0-28)	25.60	26.00	8.68
Life Satisfaction (0-28)	14.14	14.00	6.24
Sense of Coherence (0-24)	17.21	18.00	4.45

Hierarchical Regression Analyses

Table 1: *Hierarchical Regression Analysis of Life Satisfaction (Standardized Coefficient)*

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Sex	1.077	1.114	1.396*
1=male, 2=female	(0.090)	(0.093)	(0.116)
Age	-0.029	0.033	0.037
	(-0.071)	(0.081)	(0.033)
Years in US	0.398	0.356	0.095
	(0.139)	(0.125)	(0.033)
Education	-0.065	-0.436*	-0.375*
	(-0.022)	(-0.150)	(-0.129)
Family Income		0.289*	0.188*
		(0.163)	(0.106)
English Competency		0.278***	0.160**
		(0.354)	(0.203)
Discrimination		-0.268***	-0.117**
		(-0.436)	(-0.190)
Attachment			0.293***
			(0.410)
Sense of Coherence			0.554***
			(0.366)
Constant	11.631***	6.945*	-8.296**
R^2	0.025	0.296	0.601
ΔR^2	0.025	0.271	0.305
F-statistics	0.932	8.698***	23.924***
ΔF	0.932	18.608***	54.678***

* $p<0.05$, ** $p<0.01$, *** $p<0.001$

All four major constructs, including English competency, discrimination, attachment to the US, and sense of coherence, had impact on Bosnian refugees' life satisfaction as hypothesized. However, it was surprising that none of the demographic variables included in Model 1 predicted life satisfaction because demographic variables are usually important factors in predicting outcomes such as these. Results from this study do, however, require caution in drawing some implications because the sampling was based on a convenience sample.

CONCLUSIONS

Although demographic characteristics are often good predictors of a number of outcomes in many studies, none of the demographic characteristics explained life satisfaction of Bosnian refugees. The negative impact of education on life satisfaction when other variables are controlled for might be due to occupational downward mobility due to refugees' lack of English competency and a lack of recertification program in the US.

Attachment to the US and sense of coherence were two major predictors of Bosnian refugees' life satisfaction in this study. Those refugees who held strong attachment to the US and reported a greater sense of coherence appeared to have greater life satisfaction in the US.

English competency was also found to be one of the strongest predictors of one's life satisfaction. This finding was in line with previous studies that have suggested English competency to be a significant predictor of life satisfaction (Tran and Nguyen, 1994; Gardner, 2002).

This study further found that Bosnian refugees scored relatively low on discrimination, which is consistent with other literature on Bosnian refugees (Colic-Peisker & Walker, 2003; Matsuo 2005). Again, this finding might be well explained by the fact that Bosnians are white and are, therefore, an invisible group for whom it is much easier to blend into the mainstream society than it might be for other visible minority groups.

IMPLICATIONS

The life satisfaction of Bosnian refugees in St. Louis, MO is still low even years after they resettled in the US. The findings that those who are educated reported lower life satisfaction than did those who are less educated, and that English language competency is one of the important predictors of life satisfaction, have numerous suggestions for government agencies and service providers dealing with refugees.

The future studies addressing refugees' English competency, should discuss the existence of 'ethnic bubbles' ('ethnic bubbles' are caused by close proximity of one's household to other ethnically same households).

Another important finding was a statistically significant impact of sense of coherence on life satisfaction. It is extremely meaningful for both counselors and refugees to understand what is possible and what is not possible during the process of resettlement in the host society.