Factors impacting life satisfaction of refugees in Australia: A mixed method study

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Individuals from war-torn countries seek refuge in Australia. Their life satisfaction, which depends on a range of personal and contextual factors, is not fully understood. The present study used a mixed method approach to explore the life satisfaction of former refugees in Australia. In the first phase, former refugees (N=197) from Ethiopia, Congo and Burma completed a battery of questionnaires with the help of interpreters. Analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to investigate the effect of demographic factors on life satisfaction. Life satisfaction of the participants differed on the basis of country of origin, employment status, and English proficiency.

Multiple regression analysis indicated that although age, length of stay, presence of acculturation, absence of acculturative stress and resilience accounted for 40% of the variability in life satisfaction, resilience emerged as the most significant factor.

In the second phase another sample comprising 47 former refugees from the three countries were interviewed. Themes emerging from the qualitative analysis supported the quantitative data. The Ethiopian and Congolese participants were relatively more satisfied with their lives than participants from Burma. Those with good problem solving and language skills, and an ability to find resources, services, support and employment, reported experiencing better well-being and life satisfaction. The study has implications for mental and allied health professionals, who work with former refugees. The findings highlight personal and contextual factors that can be enhanced to increase the life satisfaction of former refugees settled in Australia.

There is now substantial evidence that life satisfaction is important for the health and wellbeing of all members of society (Diener, Ng, Harter, & Arora, 2010). A mentally and physically healthy population leads to a society which is well developed socially and economically (Diener, Seligman, Choi, & Oishi, 2018). There is also a consensus that a range of psychosocial, demographic and economic determinants may be responsible for this life satisfaction (Tay, Ng, Kuykendall, & Diener, 2014). Australia is a multicultural society, where many culturally and linguistically diverse communities live along with the larger majority. This culturally and linguistically diverse society also comprises individuals from refugee backgrounds, who have fled war-torn countries for safer haven. Though there has been extensive work with the larger majority, there is limited information about the life satisfaction of those from a refugee background (termed for brevity in this paper ‘former refugees’).

Along with demographic factors, this population is significantly influenced by a number of other migration related experiences such as acculturation and acculturative stress. Despite these challenges, they demonstrate resilience and personal strengths which may contribute to life satisfaction. As the primary goal of the resettlement process is to help former refugees attain a satisfactory life, it is vital to understand personal and contextual factors that promote the life satisfaction of this population (Dako-Gyeke & Adu, 2017).

Therefore, the present study used mixed methods to explore the life satisfaction of former refugees in Australia. Factors that may promote or hinder life satisfaction were examined. Taking into
account the refugee communities that emerged in the last decade, former refugees from Ethiopia, Democratic Republic of Congo and Myanmar who fled their home country due to natural calamity, civil war, ethnic, religious, or cultural discrimination, were the focus of this present investigation (Refugee Council of Australia, 2015).

**Life Satisfaction and its Determinants**

Life satisfaction is defined as an individual’s subjective and cognitive appraisal of his or her quality of life and well-being. It is based on one’s personal criteria and judgement (Diener, Tay, & Oishi, 2013) and can range from positive to negative (Diener et al., 2018). To date, most of the research conducted in the West has identified a range of demographic and psychosocial factors associated with life satisfaction.

Economic security and stability has emerged as a salient factor associated with life satisfaction (Diener et al., 2010). Quality employment, which enhances economic security, is positively correlated with life satisfaction (Cheng & Chan, 2008; Khattab & Fenton, 2009). A number of employment related factors are also connected with life satisfaction. For example, educational qualifications (Davis & Friedrich, 2004) as well as ongoing attempts to undertake training to develop further professional skills (Hillman & McMillan, 2005; Yamashita, López, Stevens, & Keene, 2017) increase the probability of employment and consequently promote life satisfaction (Brown, Woolf, & Smith, 2012; Colic Peisker, 2009). Researchers studying the relationship between gender and an individual’s satisfaction with life have found mixed outcomes. Some studies have found gender has no effect on life satisfaction (Berg, Hassing, McClearn, & Johansson, 2006), while others have found women experience more distress than men and a lower level of life satisfaction (Tay et al., 2014). Similarly, studies on age have produced mixed results. McAdams, Lucas & Donnellan (2012), found no relationship between aging and life satisfaction, while other researchers (Cooper et al., 2011; Twenge, Sherman, & Lyubomirsky, 2016), found life satisfaction to be higher during adolescence and to decline with age.

According to these researchers, older people, compared with younger people, were unhappy. Along with these objective measures, a range of other psychosocial and cultural factors associated with one’s satisfaction with life have emerged. One’s physical health (Bradley & Corwyn, 2004) and well-being in the form of support, a sense of belonging and connectedness are argued to be important factors for quality of life (Brown et al., 2012).

Considering the increased trend of global migration, researchers have begun to examine the life satisfaction of those who relocate. War-related or other atrocities and threat to safety have pushed people to leave their country of origin for safe haven elsewhere. Consequently, individuals from a number of countries with conflict or calamity, have sought refuge in Australia. While refugees share many demographic factors with non-refugee populations, a number of variables differentiate them from other migrant groups and the host population. Compared to migrants, refugees often experience physical and psychological trauma in their home country, flee from persecution, are forcibly displaced, lose material gains and often spend protracted amounts of time in refugee camps (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2014). They then move to a vastly different host country with an unfamiliar language and encounter adjustment challenges. Thus, it is important to study the factors associated with life satisfaction of this vulnerable population, once they have relocated to their adopted country.

**Life Satisfaction Research with Refugee Populations**

A review of the literature indicates that most previous investigations have focussed on psychological distress and adjustment of former refugees. There is now a growing agreement among researchers that despite personal and environmental challenges the majority of these individuals adjust to their new environment and experience a...
satisfactory life (Colic-Peisker, 2009; Var, Poyrazli, & Grahame, 2013). However, these positive developments in former refugees have not been explored extensively. The relationship between demographic factors and the life satisfaction of former refugees has not yet been investigated thoroughly. Most of the information about the life satisfaction of former refugees is inferred indirectly through studies focussing on other issues related to their resettlement in a new country, such as employment or acculturation (e.g., Colic-Peisker & Tilbury, 2007; Hebbani, Obijiofor & Bristed, 2012). Though the findings of these studies are not conclusive, they provide some directions about the role demographic and psychosocial factors may play in the life satisfaction of refugee populations.

Refugees encounter a range of challenges related to demographic and psychosocial factors. Learning a new language is a major source of stress for newly arrived refugees and these skills develop over time (Kim, Ehrich, & Ficorilli, 2012). Limited proficiency in the language of the receiving country is associated with a low level of life satisfaction (Watkins, Razee, & Richters, 2012). Additionally, language proficiency is directly associated with employment (Hebbani & Colic-Peisker, 2012; Hebbani & Preece, 2015), which enhances life satisfaction (Matsuo & Poljarevic, 2011). Refinements in education and skills are related to a surge in life satisfaction (Botta, 2014; Mansourian & Rajaei, 2018) in those who have migrated and relocated to a new country. Consistent with research on members of wider society, employment has emerged as an important factor associated with the life satisfaction of refugees as it provides financial support and income to this population (Tilbury & Colic-Peisker, 2007). As having a flexible and open outlook towards employment is helpful, those who have a more flexible attitude to employment and are willing to adapt have more success in finding a job (Campion, 2018). Nevertheless, studies have also indicated that life satisfaction varies depending on the type of experiences encountered in a work environment. Refugees who encounter biases and prejudicial treatment at work have reported a lower level of life satisfaction (Colic-Peisker, 2009). Murray’s (2010) study with Sudanese refugees in Australia also found that discrimination and other barriers in finding employment were key areas of dissatisfaction.

Taking into account that women can encounter more traumatic challenges in the migration and resettlement process, there is an assumption that their life satisfaction may be lower than that of men (Brand, Loh, & Guilfoyle, 2014; Schubert & Punamäki, 2011). Similarly, although the association between age and life satisfaction has not been fully examined, there are indications that older refugees may be more dissatisfied with their lives and the resettlement process than younger refugees (Chiem, 2008). Further, as refugees in Australia are from different parts of the world socio-political backgrounds of these countries vary. Therefore, the pre-migration experiences of former refugees can differ, depending on the duration and complexity of civil war or unrest in these countries. While there is at present no reported relationship between the country of origin and life satisfaction, pre-migration traumatic experiences are reported to negatively impact the life satisfaction of refugees (Choi et al., 2017). The directions highlighted by the literature require further investigations.

Acculturative Stress, Acculturation and Resilience.

There is now substantial evidence that adjusting to a new country is challenging (Berry & Hou, 2016). The psychological distress experienced as a result of these adjustments is referred to as acculturation stress (Berry, 2006). Refugees encounter a range of resettlement related stressors such as social isolation, and exposure to a new language, environment and culture, which can cause psychological distress (Berry, 2008). Day to day hassles of resettling in a new country can impact negatively on the wellbeing of newly arrived refugees (Seglem, Oppedal, & Roysamb, 2014), and
can lead to more severe mental health concerns (Khawaja & Milner, 2012). Mental and physical health along with poverty and trauma negatively impact life satisfaction (Gana, et al., 2013; Onyut et al., 2009). Recent studies on refugees indicated that acculturative stress is associated with a low level of life satisfaction (Birman & Tran, 2008). There is evidence emerging that as refugees spend more time in their adopted country (Hillman & McMillan, 2005) they acculturate and adapt more to the new setting, become more adept at communicating and navigating the new environment and systems, and consequently their life satisfaction improves (Birman, Simon, Chan, & Tran, 2014). As a result, length of stay in a new country is reported to be associated with an increase in life satisfaction (Bowen, 2004).

Acculturation refers to the changes that occur as newly arrived people interact with the host society (Berry, 2008). Refugees’ ideas, behaviours and communication styles change as they are exposed to the cultural norms of the host society (Khawaja & Milner, 2012). Newly arrived refugees can adopt different strategies to acculturate. However, a bi-dimensional approach, which involves retaining one’s own original heritage, tradition and values and adopting the culture, values and norms of the host society, appears to be the most suitable outcome (Berry, 2005). This integration of the original belief systems and values along with the new skills and societal rules enable the newly arrived to effectively interact with the host society and problem solve in their new environment (Khawaja, Moisuc, & Ramirez, 2014). Integration is supported as a positive way of adapting and adjusting to the new environment (Berry, 2008). There is now emerging evidence that this type of acculturation is associated with life satisfaction (Berry & Hou, 2016). Taking into account these recent developments, the link between the integration of former refugees and their satisfaction with life warrants further exploration. Despite challenges and limited material gains, former refugees demonstrate immense personal strengths and resourcefulness, which are reported to help them manage migration related challenges (Dako-Gyeke & Adu, 2017). Resilience, in terms of refugees and resettlement, can be defined as, “an ability to cope and withstand the stress associated with becoming a refugee, and recovering from these challenges” (Brand et al., 2014, p. 102). Personal strengths and qualities, such as hope, optimism, rational problem solving, cognitive reframing of the situations and religious beliefs are associated with wellbeing and life-satisfaction (Lam, 2004; Khawaja, White, Schweitzer, & Greenslade, 2008; Seglem et al., 2014). Further, resourcefulness, in the form of social support from their own ethnic group, and/or the larger society, and a sense of belonging and connectedness is associated with their life satisfaction (Birman et al., 2014; Mansourian & Rajaei, 2018). Considering that the evidence emerging from the investigations conducted on former refugees throw light on resilience and its links with life satisfaction, this relationship is an important area to explore further.

**Present Study**

There is extensive evidence that life satisfaction is important for health and wellbeing. Further, determinants of life satisfaction have been explored using the general populations in the West. Increasingly, Western countries including Australia, are resettling refugees from non-Western countries on humanitarian grounds (UNHCR, 2014). It is therefore important to explore the personal and contextual factors that are associated with their subjective experiences of life satisfaction. There is a dearth of research on the life satisfaction of those who are from refugee backgrounds as very few studies have directly examined this construct. The limited data that is available indicates that demographic factors such as employment, English language proficiency, gender, age, duration of stay and the country of origin may be related to the life satisfaction of former refugees (Botha, 2014; Bowen, 2004; Brand et al., 2014; Chiem, 2008; Choi et al., 2017; Matsuo & Poljarevic, 2011). Links are also highlighted
between migration related factors, such as acculturative stress and bi-dimensional acculturation and life satisfaction (Birman & Tran, 2008; Berry & Hou, 2016). Finally, personal resources such as resilience are emerging as associated with life satisfaction (Seglem et al., 2014). These findings are based on few studies and further investigations are warranted.

Taking into account that life satisfaction of refugees is a new area of research and the fact that it has not been explored extensively in communities from refugee backgrounds in Australia, the present study utilised a mixed methods approach (in line with Colic-Peisker’s 2009 study). McKim (2017, p.203) argued “studies that use a mixed methods approach gain a deeper, broader understanding of the phenomenon than studies that do not utilise both a quantitative and qualitative approach”.

Firstly, in Phase 1, a quantitative method was used with a larger sample of former refugees to examine a series of hypotheses. Secondly, in Phase 2, to gain a more detailed insight, a smaller number of former refugees were interviewed. It was expected that data collected from the two approaches would provide a more comprehensive picture of the factors associated with the life satisfaction of the former refugees, allowing triangulation and adding rigor to the findings (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998).

Keeping in mind that a number of demographic variables promote the resettlement of former refugees in a new country (for details, see Khawaja, Hebbani, Gallois, & Mackinnon, 2019), it was hypothesised that in Phase 1, life satisfaction levels would differ on the basis of education level, English proficiency, and employment status. It was hypothesised that those who are employed, with higher education and English proficiency, would report higher levels of life satisfaction. As past literature on gender has had mixed outcomes, no hypothesis was specified for the life satisfaction of men and women. Further, as there is limited information about the resettlement of the three country groups in communities in the West, no hypothesis was specified for the differences among the life satisfaction of these communities. Finally, it was hypothesised that age, length of stay, acculturation, and resilience would all be positively associated with life satisfaction, while acculturative stress would be negatively associated. The goal of Phase 2 was to develop a deeper understanding of life satisfaction related experiences. We envisaged that data from both phases combined would provide us with a holistic picture of refugee life satisfaction in Australia.

**Phase 1: Quantitative Study Method**

**Procedure**

Ethical, health and safety clearances were first obtained from the respective universities. Data were collected in South-East Queensland as a part of a larger study funded by an ARC Linkage grant (LP120200076). The aim of this larger study was to explore the employment aspirations and inter-generational communication of former refugees from Burma, Congo and Ethiopia (Hebbani et al., 2016). Access Community Services Limited, a local refugee employment services provider (named in the rest of the paper as ‘Access’) was the partner organization and assisted in the data collection. Bilingual and Bicultural Assistants (BBAs) from Access as well as representatives from the ethnic communities were consulted in the modification and translation process of the questionnaires. The bilingual and cultural experts assisted in making the questionnaires easy, user friendly and appropriate (for details please see Khawaja et al., 2019). This process involved shortlisting appropriate items or rewording the items to make the process of completing surveys easier.

Access’ BBAs disseminated information about the study among the three targeted refugee communities. Members of these communities were invited to participate in the study. Those who volunteered to participate in the study completed questionnaires at Access offices, churches, or community venues after religious or cultural events. The inclusion criterion was set at a
minimum of one year of stay in Australia. It was expected that a minimum of one year would allow the newly arrived refugees a reasonable time to overcome initial culture shock. Written informed consent was obtained from the participants. The questionnaire was available in English or the participants’ native languages. Participants proficient in English or their native language were able to complete the questionnaires themselves. Those who had literacy difficulties were assisted by researchers and/or a BBA in completing the questionnaires. Each participant received a $20 grocery voucher as compensation as most accrued some expense to travel to the data collection venue.

Participants

One hundred and ninety-seven former refugees, from Burma (50%), Congo (32%) and Ethiopia (18%), who lived in South-East Queensland took part in Phase 1. They were 49% men and 51% women. Their mean age was 42 years (range: 21-84 years; SD = 9.92). Forty-one per cent had some primary education, while others had attended high school (30%) or tertiary studies (24%), and a small proportion (5%) had no education. Most reported being able to speak English ‘a little’ (64%); some were fluent (19%); and others had no English language skills (17%). The participants were employed (34%), unemployed (32%), and 34% were unemployed and undertaking vocational training. Overall, their duration of stay in Australia ranged from 1 to 22 years. The mean duration of stay for those from Burma was four years (range = 1-12 years; SD = 2.4), for those from Congo was five years (range: 1-12 years; SD = 2.80), and for those from Ethiopia was 10 years (range: 1-22 years; SD = 5.29). Ninety-two percent of the participants were Christian, while others were Muslim, Buddhist or Hindu.

Measures

Demographic Form. A demographic form collected information about the participants’ age, gender, country of origin, duration of stay in Australia, education level, employment status, and English proficiency. Three items used a 3-point Likert scale (not at all, a little, and fluent) to measure their self-reported ability to speak, read, and write English.

Life Satisfaction. The research team developed a scale to measure the life satisfaction of participants from a refugee background. The goal of the new scale was to understand how the participants perceived their current wellbeing and satisfaction with life after their relocation to a new country. One of the items (I am satisfied with my life) was taken from Diener, Emmons, Larsen and Griffin, (1985) original The Satisfaction with Life Scale. After taking into account the literature on refugees and migrants, six other items were generated. The content of these additional items reflected well-being (‘My health is good’; ‘I am satisfied with my financial situation’), and aspects of life that are important for migrants and refugees to resettle and establish a supportive network in the new setting (‘Australia is a good country to live in’; ‘I live in harmonious family / household’; ‘I have a supportive community’; ‘I have good Australian friends/ work colleagues/ neighbours’). Based on the present data the Cronbach alpha for this new scale was .66.

Acculturation and Resilience.

Acculturation and resilience was measured through the subscales of the Adult Acculturation and Resilience Scale (AARS) (Khawaja et al., 2014). The 27-item scale, with three factors, Acculturation (11 items), Resilience (14 items) and Spirituality (2 items), was developed using a culturally and linguistically diverse population in Australia. The subscales Acculturation and Resilience were included in the measures, while Spirituality was excluded. The Acculturation sub-scale measures respondents’ bi-dimensional acculturation reflected by retention of original cultural strengths and acceptance of host society’s values (‘I am proud of my cultural background’; ‘I like the Australian way of living’). Higher scores indicate higher levels of integration into Australian society. The sub-scale of Resilience measured personal strengths, ability to bounce back from migration-related difficulties and skills to solve problems and
cope with the new situations (‘In a difficult situation, I usually find my way out’; ‘I am confident with my personal strengths/skills’). Four items, such as ‘I can manage my two worlds’ were excluded as they were considered too abstract, inappropriate for a population with limited education, and difficult to translate. Khawaja et al. (2014) reported satisfactory internal consistency for Acculturation (.83) and Resilience (.89) subscales. The authors reported that test-retest reliability for Acculturation (.65) and Resilience (.80) was sound. These outcomes were based on ethnically diverse individuals in Australia. Based on the current data the Cronbach alphas for the Acculturation and Resilience subscales were .78 and .76 respectively.

**Acculturative Stress.** Seven items extracted from the Multidimensional Acculturative Stress Scale measured acculturative stress (MASS: Jibeen & Khalid, 2010). This 24-item scale was developed to measure the stressors of Pakistani migrants settled in Canada. The five subscales focused on the migrants’ experiences of discrimination, lack of opportunities for occupational and financial mobility, threat to ethnic identity, homesickness and language barriers. Modifications included changing ‘Canada’ into ‘Australia’. The key items from each subscale, which covered societal prejudices, mismatched expectations, cultural dissonance, and increased burden of family responsibilities, were retained. The selected items covered discrimination (‘I feel like a foreigner in Australia’; ‘I feel that Australians do not treat me with respect’; ‘I think that many opportunities are denied to me because I am from another country’); threat to identity (‘I am often unsure how to act because Australian customs are so different from my country’s customs’); lack of opportunities for occupational and financial mobility (‘I am disappointed that my life is not what I hoped for before coming to Australia’); and homesickness (‘My family responsibilities have increased after coming to Australia’). Based on the present data the Cronbach alpha for this scale was .77.

The original Likert scales of the above measures were reduced to 3 (not at all, a little and a lot) to simplify the test-taking process for participants, who were not familiar with the paper and pencil measures. Visual cues, which consisted of small, medium and larger circles were added to make the Likert scales easy to comprehend.

**Design**

A cross-sectional design was used. Assumptions of normality were investigated. Internal consistency for the measures used in the analyses was examined. To address the first hypothesis, a series of one-way ANOVAs were conducted to examine if life satisfaction differed on the basis of demographic factors. Gender, country of origin, education, English proficiency and employment and occupational training were the independent variables and scores on life satisfaction were the dependent variable. As per ANOVA rules, a minimum of 30 participants per group were required and this requirement was met. Multiple regression was used to address the second hypothesis. Age, length of stay, acculturation, resilience and acculturative stress were entered as independent variables and life satisfaction was entered as the dependent variable. A G power analysis indicated that a regression with $\alpha = .05$, a medium effect size, five independent variables and one dependent variable would require a sample of 98 participants.

**Results**

Data were examined for assumptions of normality and missing data. Data were randomly missing for 25 cases, which were deleted from the analyses. Hence, the total number of participants after excluding the missing data was 197. The average score on the Life Satisfaction scale was 10.64 (SD: 2.60; range: 3-14). Scores on the Life Satisfaction scale were negatively skewed, with more participants scoring high and expressing a satisfaction with life. Data were not transformed as it was regarded as an accurate reflection of the communities under investigation.
Impact of Demographics on Life Satisfaction

Analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to investigate the impact of various demographic factors on life satisfaction. Assumptions of normality were not met for this sample, due to the significant negative skew. However, ANOVA is considered robust to violations of this assumption (Allen & Bennett, 2012).

Gender and Country of Origin

For gender, the ANOVA was not significant, $F (1, 194) = .04, p = .843$. The ANOVA was statistically significant for country of origin, $F (2, 194) = 13.15, p < .001$. The effect size for country of origin is medium to large, $f = .368$. Post-hoc analyses with Tukey’s HSD (using an $\alpha$ of .05) revealed that participants from Ethiopia ($M = 12.16, SD = 2.09, p < .001$) and Congo ($M = 11.02, SD = 2.64, p = .009$) had significantly higher scores than participants from Burma ($M = 9.82, SD = 2.47$). There was no significant difference between life satisfaction scores of participants from Ethiopia or Congo.

Education and English Proficiency

The ANOVA was not significant for education. In the case of English proficiency, the ANOVA was statistically significant, $F (2, 194) = 4.67, p = .010$. The effect size for English proficiency was medium, $f = .22$. Post-hoc analyses with Tukey’s HSD (using an $\alpha$ of .05) revealed that participants with medium ($M = 10.81, SD = 2.45, p = .043$) or high levels of English proficiency ($M = 11.26, SD = 2.70, p = .011$) had significantly higher scores on life satisfaction than those with a low level of English proficiency ($M = 9.74, SD = 2.66$). There was no significant difference between life satisfaction scores of participants with medium and high levels of proficiency.

Employment and Occupational Training

Participants’ employment status was categorised into three groups: those who were employed, unemployed, and unemployed and undertaking vocational training/studying. The ANOVA was statistically significant, $F (3, 192) = 5.47, p = .001$. The effect size for employment is medium, $f = .29$. Post-hoc analyses with Tukey’s HSD (using an $\alpha$ of .05) revealed that participants who were employed ($M = 11.32, SD = 2.14, p = .004$) or unemployed ($M = 11.32, SD = 2.66, p = .01$) had significantly higher scores on life satisfaction than participants who were unemployed and undertaking vocational training ($M = 9.8, SD = 2.67$).

Multiple Regression

To estimate the proportion of variance in life satisfaction that could be accounted for by age, length of stay, acculturation, resilience and acculturative stress, a standard multiple regression analysis was carried out. Inspection of the normal probability plot of standardised residuals and the scatterplot of standardised residuals against standardised predicted values suggested that the assumptions of normality, linearity and homoscedasticity of residuals were met. Mahalanobis distance indicated two multivariate outliers, with values exceeding the critical $\chi^2$ for $df = 5$ (at $\alpha = .001$) of 20.52. These outliers were excluded from the analysis. A bivariate correlation among age, length of stay, acculturation, resilience and acculturative stress indicated minimum to moderate correlations (Table 1).

The independent variables (age, length of stay, acculturation, acculturative stress and resilience) accounted for 40% of the variability in life satisfaction, $R^2 = .40$, adjusted $R^2 = .38$, $F (5, 139) = 18.78, p = .001$. An effect of this magnitude can be considered large ($f^2 = .67$). Unstandardised (B) and standardised ($\beta$) regression coefficients and squared semi-partial (or ‘part’) correlations ($sr^2$) for each predictor are reported in Table 1. The semi-partial correlations indicate variance in life satisfaction uniquely explained by each variable. It can be seen that resilience explains 20% of the variance in life satisfaction.
Discussion

To summarise, hypotheses in Phase 1 were partially supported. Country of origin was associated with life satisfaction as participants from Burma were less satisfied (possibly as they were relatively recent arrivals as compared with the other former refugee groups) than the Ethiopian and Congolese participants, which requires further exploration. Similarly, consistent with previous studies, English proficiency was associated with increase in life satisfaction (Hebbani & Preece, 2015; Matsua & Poljarevic, 2011). In line with Berg et al.’s (2006) findings, there was no difference in life satisfaction on the basis of gender. The responses on the Life

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>[95% CI]</th>
<th>Bivariate r</th>
<th>Bivariate r²</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Age</td>
<td>.002</td>
<td>[-.034, .039]</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>.030</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Length of Stay</td>
<td>.073</td>
<td>[-.010, .124]</td>
<td>.013</td>
<td>.222**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Acculturation</td>
<td>.053</td>
<td>[-.059, .155]</td>
<td>.003</td>
<td>.365**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Acculturative Stress</td>
<td>-.084</td>
<td>[-.184, .015]</td>
<td>-.111</td>
<td>.020</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Resilience</td>
<td>.326</td>
<td>[.232, .421]</td>
<td>.505**</td>
<td>.519**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. N = 146, CI = confidence interval. * p < .05, ** p < .01.
Satisfaction scale indicated that men and women were encountering similar experiences. Age was not related to life satisfaction as has been found previously (McAdams et al., 2012). Being in the younger or older age group did not impact these refugees. Contrary to previous outcomes (Botha, 2014; Davis & Friedrich, 2004) life satisfaction was not influenced by participants’ level of education. Rather, participants with varying levels of education had similar levels of life satisfaction. In the case of employment status, contrary to past results (Cheng & Chan, 2008; Tilbury & Colic-Peisker, 2007), life satisfaction was not different for participants who were employed or unemployed. However, those who were not working but undertaking vocational training had lower life satisfaction. It is possible that studying aggravated pressures in these unemployed newly arrived individuals (Hillman & McMillan, 2005). This is an area which requires further investigation. Acculturation and an absence of acculturative stress were not significantly associated with life satisfaction. It is possible that participants, who had limited interaction with the mainstream population due to their limited English skills and employment opportunities, interacted more within their own ethnic enclaves. It may have been the personal strengths and positive coping that contributed to the well-being of these participants. Consistent with previous studies, the findings indicated that resilience was significantly associated with life satisfaction (Dako-Gyeke & Abu, 2017; Lam, 2004, Khawaja et al., 2008; Seglem, et al., 2014). To gain an in-depth understanding of the participants’ life satisfaction, a qualitative approach was undertaken in Phase 2 of the study.

**Phase 2 – Qualitative Study**

After the quantitative analyses, qualitative data were gathered from individual interviews with former refugee participants from Burma, Congo, and Ethiopia.

**Method**

**Participants**

Forty-seven participants, who resided in South-East Queensland, took part in qualitative interviews. They were 55% women and 45% men. More than half of the participants were from Burma (54%), and the remaining participants were from Ethiopia (23%) and Congo (23%). The years spent in camps prior to arrival in Australia ranged from 4-30 years for those from Burma, 2-31 years for those from Ethiopia, and 1-12 years for those from Congo. The number of children in the family unit ranged from 1-11. Fifty-one per cent of participants had been in Australia for more than six years (mainly participants from Ethiopia), while the duration of stay for the others was less than six years (mainly participants from Burma and Congo). Nearly half (54%) of the participants were employed and 47% were unemployed. Of those who were employed, 16 (64%) had been in Australia more than six years. Ninety-five percent of them were Christian, the others were Buddhist.

**Procedure**

After the completion of Phase 1, information about the Phase 2 study was distributed among the three refugee communities with the help of Access. The inclusion criteria for Phase 1 were repeated in Phase 2. In order to get a balanced perspective, an attempt was made to recruit men and women, who were employed or unemployed. The semi-structured interview probes were developed by the researchers. The participants were asked about their life (‘Are you happy with your life?’ ‘What makes your life happy or unhappy?’ ‘Can you please give us some examples?’ ‘Can you tell us more?’). The semi-structured interviews were conducted in participants’ homes, or at other locations which were agreeable to participants such as at church services or in a public park. The aims of the study, consent form, and confidentiality were explained to the participants at the start of each interview and written consents were obtained. Participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any
time without any consequence. Access’ BBAs helped during the interviews as interpreters when needed. The interviews lasted from half an hour to an hour and each participant received a $20 grocery voucher as compensation.

Data Analysis

The interviews were audiotaped and then underwent verbatim transcription by a professional transcription service experienced with multilingual transcription. The second author and two other members of the larger team used a Thematic Analysis approach (Braun & Clark, 2006) from a realist perspective (Maxwell, 2002) to analyse the data as this was an exploratory study. All transcripts were read multiple times to become familiar with the data and the emerging patterns. Codes were generated and labelled by the three analysts. All members then read each transcribed file individually to assign codes to the text. Codes were combined to form overarching themes that depicted data. The three members reviewed emerging themes for member checking and triangulation (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998).

Findings

Data analyses identified two main themes, which focused on factors that promoted or hindered participants’ levels of life satisfaction. Participants further elaborated on how various aspects of their life contributed to their subjective happiness or distress.

Factors Promoting Life Satisfaction

Country of Origin, Duration of Stay, and Employment. When asked to comment on how the participants thought their lives were, the narratives revealed that the Ethiopian participants reported higher levels of life satisfaction when compared to the other two national groups. They made the highest number of references to being happy and contented with their life. The content of their verbalisation indicated that they felt that they were settled in their lives, with a reasonable income, and a satisfactory family life. Those who were parents of school or university aged children described being very happy with their children’s academic achievements. One woman from Ethiopia explained that she had been in Australia for 20 years. She had worked for 15 years at a nursing home, and when she got laid off, she completed the necessary qualifications to start her own home day care:

So yeah, just be happy, and always possibilities. When you didn’t get this one, you will get something different. What I get today, I just thank God. And tomorrow is tomorrow. Because like we didn’t know, like what’s happening tomorrow.

On the other hand, participants from Burma were the least satisfied with their lives; they reported feeling unsettled and still finding their way in the new country. Those from Congo fell between the two groups. The comments on life satisfaction were related to their duration of stay in Australia. With the passage of time, the overall quality of life improved. A subjective feeling of fulfilment was also related to being employed. Once again, those from Ethiopia commented on having stable jobs, while participants from the other communities were struggling to find employment. A trend was noted that those from the Congo wanted to be self-employed. One self-employed woman from Congo was very happy to manage her own business:

“oh, I’m so happy, you know”.

Most of the participants from Burma were attending English courses in an attempt to secure a job.

Safety. In general, participants across the three communities considered the safe and peaceful life in Australia as a factor contributing to life satisfaction. They expressed happiness about being in a relatively safe and peaceful country after being displaced and living in refugee camps for many years. An unemployed woman from Burma said “um, at the moment, my life, comparing [compared] to what my life in Burma, a lot better, because I have here I can see you have a safe[ty], in my country, I don’t have any safe[ty] ”. Another employed woman said “the good thing is living in this country is freedom and I can go where I want to go. I do not need to be too scared, like back home”. Similarly, an unemployed man
from Congo stated “my first happiness is that there is peace”. An employed man from Ethiopia who had been in Australia for 16 years, had a Masters in Business Administration (MBA), but still drove a taxi and said:

For me, Australia, the benefit which I found from this country is that [the] best thing is peace. It’s very peaceful situation. I can stay, I can sleep without any you know problem, suspicious things. That’s the good thing. That’s the best thing which I didn’t have in Ethiopia.

Thus, being safe from threats, dangers and war related atrocities was perceived positively by the participants.

**Resilience.** Despite their varied struggles, all participants reported being resilient through their reliance on their religion and faith in God. The vast majority of them had very strong ties with the Christian church. In general, it was customary for all families to spend nearly half of the Sunday together as a part of church related activities. Religious activities were combined with cultural and social activities. There was a strong sense of being a survivor. An unemployed woman from Congo added: “we thank God that we are alive and we happy we’re eating, and children are going to school, so that’s the most important thing”.

A sense of community also helped them cope as they provided emotional and practical support to each other. An unemployed man from Congo said, “you know, in Western World they only count the children that you gave birth to but in my culture, everybody that I’m caring for is my child and I have a very long and big chain”. Lastly, there was also a sense of hope and optimism that life in the future would be better, particularly for their children.

**Factors Hindering Life Satisfaction**

**Unemployment.** Nearly half of the participants in this phase of the study were unemployed. They described their life satisfaction as “medium to low.” Not earning an income caused financial stress and hampered their future job prospects, which in combination resulted in lower levels of subjective well-being. There was a general consensus that financial hardship due to unemployment was severe, despite getting some financial support from government assistance. Although there was appreciation for the funds they received from the government, the overall concern was that the money was not enough for their large families. As an unemployed Congolese man with eight children reported:

*I appreciate the Australian government but in terms of life, there is still a little bit of stress and I should also acknowledge the fact that the Australian government gives a little bit of support to job seekers. But I can’t be distracted with that little amount we get and I’m also not satisfied with it. I would like to do more.*

Some participants, who were single parents, experienced even more distress. An unemployed woman from Ethiopia explained that it was difficult to survive solely on government funding (i.e., Centrelink payment): “but, just you know the money they gave us is like, you know to cover only for the bill, mm, spend the electricity high, gas is high, telephone is high. Everything you know. The amount left is not much”.

Being separated from her husband, she lacked the support system she would have had back home and found it difficult to raise the children by herself.

Participants lacked the resources to set their own goals and activities. There was a general sense that being unemployed with no structure and purpose created monotony. Two unemployed women from Congo described their lives as ‘boring’ or ‘not exciting’ as they were unsuccessful in finding work. Some participants reported that even their efforts to improve their skills and qualifications did not result in securing a job. One unemployed mother from Congo explained that she was unemployed despite completing courses in aged care, cleaning, disability, food service and shop retail. She had to pay for these courses out of her own meagre funding and subsequently, she was unhappy: “there is life is not really happy
because you have spent much time in studies. And then end up you don’t get job, so is boring”. Similarly, an unemployed father kept renewing his security licence every year and was unable to find a job - his interpreter explained:

Yeah, he is a bit unhappy with the whole working experience. The fact that he’s tried, like, when he went to security companies and he’s renewing his licence a couple of occasions and you renew the licence and you don’t get a job but other people still getting those jobs, and you know, when you look at [that you wonder] why not me?

**English Proficiency.** Most participants who were unemployed also reported limited or no English proficiency. The language barrier impaired the chances of securing a job, which then affected the levels of life satisfaction of these individuals. Those who were unemployed due to poor English proficiency were aware that it was affecting their future employment trajectory. Language was more problematic for those who had been in Australia for a shorter duration. Most of the participants from Burma were still attending English language courses organised by the Australian government which they perceived as a source of distress. There were other participants, who had casual jobs, but were unable to improve their employment conditions due to limited English proficiency. One man from Burma, who had been in Australia for three years was earning some money, but was unable to pursue his ambition of setting up his own grocery store as he was not fluent in English. An examination of the comments indicated that acquisition of language was more difficult for older individuals. These participants were pessimistic about their future as they did not see themselves becoming employed. An interpreter for an unemployed older farmer from Burma, explained:

*He is not very comfortable right now, because he doesn’t get the job yet, but in future [he says] I have hope that I will - I want to buy the house, live like normal people. Mostly, yes, English is his main problem.*

Moreover, an absent or limited English proficiency made adjustment to, and navigation within, the Australian infrastructure very difficult. A number of participants across the three groups referred to the challenges of communicating in English with a range of government and non-government organisations. It was a challenge to organise their financial support, or to talk to someone about employment prospects. English language barriers also prevented them from interacting with school teachers, even when it was important to go and see them about their children’s issues or help them with their studies. An unemployed mother of six from Congo said, “I can’t [help them] because I can’t read English. So it’s hard for me to know exactly what’s going on with their studies”.

**Health Issues.** Some participants reported that personal or family members’ illnesses prevented them from working, which affected their life satisfaction. Nine out of 25 participants from Burma commented on being unemployed either due to their own ill health or due to being the primary carer for an ill spouse. Some participants, who had chronic illnesses, reported being pressurised by Centrelink (government assistance) to find employment. One unemployed woman from Burma, who ran a business in her country of origin was very ill and required repeated hospitalisation. She reported being hard-pressed by Centrelink to work despite her poor health. It seemed that government authorities sometimes misinterpreted the health issues as an excuse to not try hard to find a job. Another seriously ill mother from Congo reported that being sick with a job was worse than being unemployed. According to her, unemployed people were at least able to receive some financial support, while those who were unable to work due to health problems were neither paid nor given any financial support and subsequently were unable to support their families:

*I’m on medication from the first to the thirtieth of each month. Since I had this problem, it’s been three*
years and there is no improvement. I’m on medication and that’s the only problem I have. When I’m unemployed, at least I still getting the government welfare. It also became apparent that those participants who were caring for a sick family member felt unsupported and did not know how to organise professional assistance. One woman from Burma had to quit her job at a medical practice to look after her ill mother, who became incapacitated after an incident as reliable help was not available. She explained:

They [her employer] said that, don’t worry, yes, you can go [to work] and then someone will come and look after mum. And then when I came back [home], it’s – she [my mum] started screaming [at me as she was left all alone]. Yeah, sometimes this happen to us. For us, we cannot say anything [to our boss]. If you not happy with your job, quit. That’s why I would like to started my own business.

Acculturative Stress. Participants reflected on stress as a result of settling in a host culture which is vastly different from their original culture. They commented on being isolated and away from their family support. An unemployed Ethiopian woman who had been in Australia for five years stated that: “the difficulty is the sense of loneliness because it’s a different culture from Ethiopia. We grew up in a large family”. Another woman from Ethiopia said that she was happy in Australia, but at the same time, it was hard to be away from family:

Would you like to leave your kids, your family? But it happens a lot. Just go somewhere else to live, start from the scratch, learn their language, try to cope, everything. How would you feel?

It was interesting to note that some participants, who were working and dealing with the larger society, noticed prejudices and biases of the larger society. Sometimes, such behaviours were difficult to manage. An employed woman from Burma, who was working as a teacher-aide said:

I have the problem of how to use computer [at work] and then some colleagues - they want to look down [on] me but I try to learn. Yeah, myself, sometimes I want to quit my job. You know, I’m so disappointed.

Resettlement in a different country was not free from challenges. Participants reported disrupted social networks and isolation. Further, interactions with the locals were not always easy because of the prejudices and biases of the larger society.

Discussion
In summary, the participants from the three country groups differed on levels of life satisfaction. The participants from Burma reported lower levels of life satisfaction as compared to their Ethiopian and Congolese counterparts. Consistent with research, a number of factors were described as hurdles toward life satisfaction (Gana et al., 2013; Onyut et al., 2009; Seligman et al., 2014). English proficiency was an issue, especially for those who had recently arrived and were still struggling to learn the language (Matsua & Poljarevic, 2011; Watkins et al., 2012). In line with previous studies, being unemployed emerged as one of the most widely reported barriers to life satisfaction (Colic-Peisker, 2009; Murray, 2010). Participants were unemployed due to low/nil English proficiency, being in the process of undertaking vocational training and upskilling themselves, personal or family member’s ill health, and lastly, due to unknown reasons despite having local educational qualifications. Unemployment caused financial pressure despite some Centrelink support, particularly because refugee families tend to be larger compared to arrivals from other visa categories (Hugo, 2011).

A number of factors were found to promote life satisfaction. Being in a safe setting, receiving some financial support from the government, and having better educational and occupational opportunities after years of conflict and camp experiences...
was a source of happiness. Consistent with previous studies, (Brand et al., 2014; Hooberman, Rosenfield, Rasmussen, & Keller, 2010), participants were happy that their children led better lives than they had and were making use of the available educational opportunities. In line with Seglem et al. (2014), despite challenges, personal strengths and resilience played a strong role in their life satisfaction. In line with past studies they were able to draw their strength from religion and faith (Lam, 2004; Khawaja et al., 2008). Similar to findings from Birman et al. (2014), emotional and practical support from their community helped them cope with their difficulties.

**General Discussion**

A mixed method approach was used to investigate the life satisfaction of former refugees from Ethiopia, Congo, and Burma, settled in Australia. Findings obtained from the two methods complemented each other and provided information about the way former refugees judge their wellbeing and quality of life. Data gathered from the two phases of the study indicated that the three communities, with varying lengths of stay in Australia, differed on levels of life satisfaction. Those who have been in Australia for a longer period felt more satisfied with their lives. Both methods indicated that life satisfaction was associated with English proficiency and employment while language barriers and unemployment caused distress. The qualitative analyses further highlighted the challenges associated with securing a job. Finally, resilience emerged as the strongest predictor of life satisfaction in the quantitative analysis. The qualitative phase assisted in understanding the other sources of personal strength, coping and subjective well-being.

Burmese participants were most dissatisfied with their lives. Information obtained from interviews indicated that consistent with past studies (Choi et al., 2017; Colic-Peisker, 2009), Burmese participants were experiencing more health issues and acculturative stress as a result of their refugee and resettlement experience. In the case of participants from Ethiopia, it is possible that a longer stay in Australia may have contributed to their satisfaction with life. These outcomes support the arguments reported in other literature that acculturative stress impacts life satisfaction (Khawaja & Milner, 2012; Seglem et al., 2014) and that as refugees become more acculturated and socially integrated (Berry & Hou, 2016; Birman et al., 2014), their well-being improves.

The quantitative and qualitative approaches highlighted factors that facilitated and hindered life satisfaction. Language proficiency and employment play important roles in former refugees’ subjective experiences of life satisfaction. Language acquisition allows for a successful interaction with the host society and promotes the acculturation of the former refugees. Consistent with previous outcomes (Hebbani & Colic-Peisker, 2012; Hebbani & Preece, 2015; Hugo, 2011), English proficiency is also a known predictor of employment. Similar to Watkins et al.’s (2012) findings, low English proficiency prevented a number of participants from acquiring paid work or improving their employment situation.

The qualitative method helped in unpacking the factors that hindered obtaining employment (Murray, 2010). The interview data showed that poor health, personal and familial, acted as challenges to securing employment. A high number of participants, from Burma in particular, were carers of ill family members, or were ill themselves, perhaps as they had also spent relatively more time in refugee camps than their Ethiopian and Congolese counterparts. Their own ill health, and/or their responsibilities as a carer may have affected their life trajectory and subsequently their life satisfaction. This finding is consistent with past research which has shown health as being one of the strongest correlates of happiness among the general population (Bradley & Corwyn, 2004), and that good health has also been found to be one of the key indicators of successful refugee settlement (Brown et al., 2012; Gana et al., 2013; Onyut et al., 2009).
Data from the two phases supported resilience as a salient factor contributing to life satisfaction. In line with past studies (Birman et al., 2014; Mansourian, & Rajaei, 2018), quantitative data showed that those with good problem solving skills, and an ability to find resources and services and support, experienced greater well-being and life satisfaction. As a response to the interview questions, in line with past research (Lam, 2004; Khawaja et al., 2008), participants reported religion, their faith and community support as main sources of resilience. Qualitative data indicated that consistent with past studies (Botha, 2014; Tilbury & Colic-Peisker, 2007) the former refugees’ perceived educational opportunities, provision of basic needs and safety in Australia were salient factors contributing to their well-being. Consistent with other studies (Colic-Peisker, 2009; Hugo, 2011), being in a safe or peaceful country where their basic needs and sense of security were met (i.e., food, housing, some income from Centrelink) emerged as a facilitator of life satisfaction levels. Further, similar to Colic-Peisker’s (2009) findings, educational opportunities for themselves and their children, and the progress of their children, were sources of joy. The results supported the notion that material and financial gains were not associated with the subjective appraisal of life satisfaction of those from refugee backgrounds (Birman et al., 2014; Colic-Peisker, 2009; Matsuo & Poljaravic, 2011).

**Limitations and Future Directions**

This study is limited to former refugee communities from three specific country groups, settled in South-East Queensland, and subsequently, the results cannot be generalised to the entire refugee population. Future research with participants from a range of communities settled in Australia and other Western countries is warranted. The study was affected by other methodological procedures. Although the questionaries used in Phase 1 were translated and back translated in consultation with language and culture experts, and interpreters were used in the data collection process, it is unclear if meaning was lost through translations and language barriers of the participants. Despite the fact that the scales had adequate psychometric properties, it is unclear if they were culturally valid. Items generated to measure life satisfaction were positively phrased and could have been affected by response bias. Further, the concept of life satisfaction among former refugees warrants further investigation. The qualitative interviews were conducted with the assistance of the BBAs and it is unclear to what extent the presence of the interpreter affected the responses of the participants. Finally, both phases of the study were based on self-report data, and thus, were probably not free from the impact of social desirability in their responses. These are some of the methodology related issues that require attention in future.

**Conclusion**

In spite of the limitations, the study is the first if its kind to use a mixed method approach to examine the life satisfaction of former refugees from Ethiopia, Congo, and Burma settled in Australia. A combined approach helped in developing a better understanding of the factors related with refugees’ life satisfaction. The mixed
method findings indicated that being able to speak English and being in paid work were highly important for the former refugees. Their personal strengths and ties with religion acted as a buffer against their challenges and helped them attain a satisfactory life.

References


Notes

1. In this paper, we refer to refugee participants as ‘former refugees’ as many have themselves pointed out to us that upon arrival they have permanent residency status or Australian citizenship. They do not want

Former refugees
to carry the stigma attached to the term ‘refugee’ forever but at the same
acknowledge that it was once their identity.

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