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Refugees' perception of their new life in Germany

La Nuova Vita dei Rifugiati in Germania

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Abstract Since 2015, Germany has been hosting noticeable incoming flows of refugees and asylum seekers and despite the quality of life of refugees is expected to be improved in the aftermath of their arrival to Germany, refugees are still facing several problems of integration and economic deprivation. Using a sample of individuals from the first wave of the German IAB-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Refugees, we present some preliminary analyses on their life satisfaction (LS). A gamma glm was estimated to focus on the association among levels of LS and main socio-demographic characteristics as well as post-migration factors. Greater stability (both in the legal and personal sphere) in refugees' lives is positively associated to LS; while education increases consciousness, hence decreasing LS. Interesting insights come out for policy design.

Abstract *Dal 2015 la Germania accoglie flussi considerevoli di rifugiati e richiedenti asilo. Sebbene la qualità della loro vita sia oggettivamente migliorata essi fronteggiano ancora problemi di integrazione e deprivazione economica. Ricorrendo al campione tratto dalla prima onda della indagine tedesca sui rifugiati IAB-BAMF-SOEP, vengono qui presentate alcune analisi sulla soddisfazione generale per la nuova vita (LS). L'associazione tra i livelli di LS e le principali caratteristiche socio-demografiche nonché i fattori post migratori è stimata attraverso un glm con link Gamma. Gli elementi di stabilità nelle vite dei rifugiati (legati sia alla sfera legale che personale) sono associati a più alti livelli di LS, mentre l'istruzione elevata aumenta l'insoddisfazione. Spunti per politiche di integrazione emergono dalle analisi condotte.*

Key words: life satisfaction, subjective well-being, asylum seekers, Gamma generalized linear model

1 New Life in a High-Income Country

Germany has a leading role in Europe regarding the hosting of refugees, mainly Syrians, Afghans, and Iraqis. There has been a huge increase in the incoming flow since 2015, and in 2019 (the last data available) Germany was the fourth country in the world for the number of accommodated refugees [12]. These numbers, accumulated year by year, have been undermining the endurance of the German welfare system.

Once in Germany, there are no more risks to their lives, and the government provides accommodation and extensive access to health services. However, most of the refugees struggle to fully reach integration in the new society: finding a job and becoming economically independent, understanding the German cultural norms and rebuilding a network of relationships.

Most of the studies about socio-economic characteristics of refugees focus on education, employment, and language skills as the drivers for their integration. Amongst the main predictors of refugees' well-being, we find mental and general health, family ties, and housing conditions ([10], [1], [6], [11]).

Less is known about refugees' subjective well-being and their own perception of the new living conditions in the host country. Hence, life satisfaction (LS) of refugees is still an under-explored theme.

Issues of mental health (such as depression, anxiety, or post-traumatic distress) are reported in a recent and increasing strand of literature for refugees hosted also in highly developed countries (see, e.g., [9] on Sweden; [11] and [7] on Germany).

The role of family support in shaping refugees' well-being is widely acknowledged in the scientific literature. Fleeing wars and persecution, most refugees have left one or more relatives in their homeland or lost them during the conflicts or along migratory routes ([6] and [3]). On arrival in safe countries of destination, material living conditions are usually much better, while the psychological health is often affected by the trauma suffered. Mental health concerns are often reported for refugees even years after their arrival in safe countries ([9] and [11]). Consequences on their life satisfaction are indeed still debated and literature has often provided contradicting results [8].

The aim of this contribution is to add to studies concerning life satisfaction among refugees hosted in highly developed countries. This paper is divided into the following three sections: The subsequent section introduces data from the first wave of the IAB-BAMF-SOEP survey of refugees in Germany and presents the statistical model adopted to explain determinants of LS. The following Section 3 sets out our statistical analyses, and Section 4 concludes discussing the main results from this study.

2 Data and Methods

The IAB-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Refugees [2], the first wave of which was carried out in 2016, gathered socio-demographic information about those refugees and asylum seekers who entered Germany between 2013 and 2016. The general structure is that of the main European household surveys (namely the SOEP), with information recorded for both individuals and households.

Our sample is made up of 3,408 individuals: most of them are men (62%); Afghans, Eritreans, Iraqis, and Syrians account for about 83% of the sample. They are also quite young (mean age of 33.5 years)

In this survey, life satisfaction is understood to be a subjective aspect of the quality of life (see [5]); the main variable consists of people's self-assessment of their overall life satisfaction ("How satisfied are you currently with your life in general?" arranged on an 11-point scale). LS answers show the usual negatively skewed distribution with a generally high mean (mean = 7.28, standard deviation = 2.31, skewness = -0.88).

We estimated a Gamma regression model to focus on the association among levels of LS and main individual and household level characteristics. This model is a member of the class of the generalized linear models, where the link function $g(\cdot)$, which transforms the expectation of the response variable, $\mu_i = E(Y_i)$, to the linear predictor is a Gamma function, accommodating skewed distributions of the Y . Since LS has a negative skewness, we transformed the variable to be consistent with positive skewness of Gamma distribution.

Explanatory variables were organized into four thematic areas:

a) *sociodemographic variables*: sex of the respondents, their education level (arranged in three ordinal levels, according to ISCED standards), geographical area of origin (Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, former USSR; Africa; Balkan region, other countries), and quantiles of age;

b) *post-migration personal factors*: time spent in Germany (as the number of years passed between arrival in Germany and the time of the interview); legal residence permit (dummy variable in which we combined refugees, entitled to asylum and holders of subsidiary/humanitarian and other forms of international protection into one category, and placing into the other one those awaiting the response to asylum application and those whose application was dismissed) and concerns about their own economic situation (a lot, somewhat, not at all);

c) *post-migration family related factors*: family arrangements (household size and presence of a partner/spouse possibly cohabitant) and accommodation (shared with others or private);

d) *post-migration subjective well-being factors*: satisfaction with specific life domains (current living arrangements, the quality of the food, the privacy that they have, the safety of their neighbourhood and their own current health) on a 11-point scale.

3 Results

Satisfaction with life was generally rated lower by men (average score is 7.15; IC_{95%}: 7.05-7.25) than by women (7.50; IC_{95%}: 7.38-7.61), by people without or with a pending legal status (7.01; IC_{95%}: 6.88-7.15) than by refugees and holders of international protection (7.45; IC_{95%}: 7.36-7.55).

A Gamma generalized linear model was estimated to provide possible explanations of LS through the sets of covariates presented above. As already mentioned, we reversed the LS scores, so that $LS^* = \max(LS) - LS$. This means that positive coefficients for X variables express a decrease in LS. Table 1 displays the model estimates and their significance levels.

Socio-demographic factors: a weak significance emerges for the gender, with women more satisfied than men, other things being equal. People in the third quartile of age (33-40 years) show lower satisfaction with life when compared to the youngest. Education influences LS too: highly educated respondents are less satisfied than those with lowest levels of education, other things being equal; instead, respondents with low and medium level of education report the same LS. The country/area of origin is significantly associated with life satisfaction only for Afghans when compared to Syrians: the former have a higher level of life satisfaction. No statistically significant differences emerge between Syrians and people coming from other geographical areas.

Post-migration personal factors: As expected, even controlling for main socio-demographic characteristics, respondents' LS is higher among those who obtained any kind of legal protection than among those who had not (yet) received their residence permit. LS increases with the duration of the permanence in Germany (although the significance is only at 10%). LS decreases with the extent of financial concerns. Particularly, people partially concerned or not concerned at all with financial issues show higher level of LS than those very concerned.

Post-migration family related factors: the two covariates accounting for family arrangements are associated significantly with LS. Indeed, according to international studies (see, e.g., [3]), higher household size and having a cohabiting partner/spouse -which are both proxies of social support and, more in general, of social capital- increase refugees' LS. Particularly, not having a partner or living separated from him/her (that is not in the same house nor in the same city) lowers the life satisfaction, even controlling for other personal and family characteristics. Unexpectedly, respondents who live in private houses have a lower level of satisfaction than those who live in shared ones, other things being equal. These last results could be related to the feeling of loneliness and heavier organizational tasks even if this hypothesis would need a further in-depth analysis.

Post-migration subjective well-being: As accounted for in many studies, also perceived well-being measures, related to specific life domains, are highly significantly associated with overall life satisfaction. Increasing levels of satisfaction with health, living arrangements, privacy in the current living arrangements and feeling safe with neighbourhood positively affect LS.

Table 1: Generalized linear model (Gamma family, link log) for reversed Life Satisfaction

Variable	Beta	Variable	Beta
Socio-demographic factors		Economic concerns (ref. a lot)	
Female	-0.063*	Somewhat concerned	-0.141***
Quartiles of age (ref. Q ₁ : 18-26 yrs)		Not concerned at all	-0.392***
Q ₂ (27-32 yrs)	0.057	Post-migration family factors	
Q ₃ (33-40 yrs)	0.092**	Family arrangements	
Q ₄ of age (>40 yrs)	0.024	Household size	-0.031***
Nation group (ref. Syria)		Partner or Spouse (ref. none)	
Afghan	-0.158***	... cohabiting partner/spouse	-0.138***
Africa	-0.063	... not cohab. partner/spouse	0.027
Balkans	-0.118	Accommodation	
Former USSR	-0.144	Private apartment	0.081**
Iraq	-0.061	Post-migration subjective well-being	
Other nations	-0.020	Satisfaction with privacy	-0.023***
Education (ref. low)		Satisfaction with health	-0.068***
Middle school	0.029	Satisf. w. living arrangements	-0.088***
High school	0.148***	Satisfaction with safety	-0.013*
Post-migration personal factors		Satisfaction with food	-0.017**
Legal permit	-0.071**	Constant	2.776***
Years since arrival in Germany	-0.036*		
AIC	12939.68	N=3,408	* p<0.10 ** p<0.05 *** p<0.01
BIC	13099.16		

4 Discussion and conclusions

Studies on living conditions of refugees usually focus on objective characteristics, such as education, language skills, or performances in the labour market. On the contrary, this study focuses on a subjective trait, indirectly related to the refugees' integration in the new hosting countries: their satisfaction with current (new) life.

Using the results from the first wave of the German survey of refugees, we provide preliminary analyses of the determinant of refugees and asylum seekers life satisfaction. Our estimates pointed out how higher life satisfaction is associated with the condition of being woman, Afghans, in cohabitation with a partner or with a large family, poorly educated, with having a legal permit to stay in Germany, and with the duration of their permanence in Germany.

Interestingly, those factors addressing a greater stability in people lives (e.g., the status of refugee or the international protection, having had enough time to satisfactorily settle in the new country, as well as living as a couple and without financial concerns) appear to be correlated with greater life satisfaction (consistently with [4]). Hence, to foster social integration and increase LS of refugees and asylum seekers, it stands out as crucial to shorten the process for the issue of the status of refugees or of the international and humanitarian permits (which are also related to the possibility of family reunification) and promote opportunities for economic independence (pre-requisite for the formation of new family unions). We believe that LS would deserve to be more extensively studied, not only since it is an indirect measure of the success of integration policies adopted by hosting states, but *per se*, as a measure of individual well-being.

Among the limitations of this contribution, we acknowledge the lack of a deeper analysis of the migratory history. Indeed, since immigrants, and refugees in particular, are a heterogeneous group with a great variety of immigration-related experiences, their past experiences can affect current evaluation of life satisfaction both in terms of *inertia* of negative feelings accumulated during the travel phase of their migration, and in terms of resilience.

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