

Detached Childhood: Overall life Satisfaction among Child and Young-Adult Immigrants in Europe

Immigration across international borders and adjustment to a new country is a long and stressful process that involves shifts in many domains of life including the social, the economic, and the cultural. Coping with the new environment affects all immigrants, not omitting children and youth (Aronowitz 1984; Magdol 2002; Rumbaut 1997). Immigration is often perceived as a means to improve subjective well-being (hereinafter: SWB) (Nowok et al. 2013). SWB is often assessed using a survey question about overall life satisfaction (OLS), which may be seen as an aggregate of satisfaction in different domains of life (Schimmack 2008; van Praag et al. 2003).

Previous studies have proposed that immigrants in Europe have significantly lower levels of life satisfaction than do natives and that the gap does not disappear among younger generations or with age (Arpino and de Valk 2018; Kirmanoglu and Baslevent 2014; Safi 2010). Children and young people, like their parents, take an active part and are involved in the migration process, as in decision-making (Hunner-Kreisel and Bohne 2016). The immigration process may include displacement against the children's wishes, loss of support systems, changes in perception of parents, and demands for absorption into a new culture.

This issue has been studied to a lesser extent among children than among adults (Burton and Phipps 2010; Park and Huebner 2005) and little attention has been paid to effects of immigration across different ethnic groups (Coll and Magnuson 1997).

Beyond immigration and the subsequent assimilation process in the host society, immigrants' SWB may succumb to another factor: discrimination (Bălțătescu 2005; Safi 2010; Verkuyten 2008). Immigrants meet increasingly with intolerance and hostility (Androff et al. 2011) that diminish their life satisfaction (Safi 2010; Verkuyten 2008), including children, who

are much more likely to be members of ethnic or racial minority groups today than in the past (Hernandez 2004).

Several characteristics have especially strong effects on life satisfaction. Haidt (2006) finds a positive association between religiosity and higher life satisfaction. Environment, family, and friends have an impact on children's subjective well-being (Huebner et al. 2000; Lee and Yoo 2015; Proctor et al. 2009).

Guided by the literature on immigrant children's and young adults' OLS and that on discrimination against immigrants, three main hypotheses are proposed: (1) OLS is likely to be lower among immigrant children and young adults than among native peers, with particular salience among young-adult immigrants (age 15–25). (2) Immigrants' OLS is influenced by their continent of origin. (3) High levels of discrimination in the host country are negatively associated with immigrants' OLS.

METHOD

The data for this study are harvested from the European Social Survey (ESS). The ESS is a repeated cross-sectional survey implemented every other year since 2002. For the current study, rounds 1–8, covering a sample of 32 countries and 374,729 individuals, were used. With the focus on children and young adults aged 15 to 25, an initial sample of 48,496 individuals was extracted: 3,129 immigrants and 45,367 natives born in thirty European countries.

Dependent Variable

The question used to measure OLS is: “All things considered, how satisfied are you with your life as a whole nowadays?” This variable is measured on an 11-point scale ranging from 0 (extremely dissatisfied) to 10 (extremely satisfied).

Independent Variables

The explanatory variables were clustered into three major blocs: immigration factors, socio-demographic characteristics, and discrimination. Age at immigration is aggregated into two categories: 0–14 (children) and 15–25 (young adults). The continent-of-origin variable sorts immigrants into three categories: Africa, Asia, and Other, the last-mentioned including Europe, North America, South America, the Caribbean, and Australia.

FINDINGS

Main Findings

Findings from ordinary least squares linear regression models predict OLS as a function of nativity status and age of migration, controlling for other covariates. Among immigrants, being a young adult (15–25) decreases OLS even more than it does among immigrant children (0–14) as compared with natives. Immigrants up to their first year have the highest level of life satisfaction in the host country. As time in the new country passes, life satisfaction decreases. With the exception of gender, father's and mother's educational attainment, household size, and level of religiosity are positively and significantly associated with OLS.

Next, using linear regression models, only child and young-adult immigrants are analyzed and examined for differences in their OLS by continent of origin and age at immigration.

All young-adult immigrants (15–25) are found to be less satisfied with life than the omitted category of immigrant children (0–14) from Other continents. Young-adult immigrants from Africa, followed by those from Asia, are the least satisfied with life. Child immigrants from Asia are found to be less satisfied with life than immigrant children from Other continents.

Although immigrants up to their first year appear to be the most satisfied with life, OLS decreases as veterancy increases.

To what extent do different levels of discrimination against immigrant children and young adults affect their OLS? Findings shows that the impact of level of discrimination on immigrants' life satisfaction is significantly negative (beta coefficient -3.683, $p < .001$).