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The bright side of migration: Hedonic, psychological, and social well-being in immigrants in Spain



Magdalena Bobowik*, Nekane Basabe, Darío Páez

Department of Social Psychology and Methodology of Behavior Sciences, University of the Basque Country, Avenida Tolosa 70, 20018 San Sebastián, Spain

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to examine the multi-dimensional structure of well-being in immigrant population, as well as to explore the complexity of well-being disparities between immigrants and host nationals. We analyzed hedonic, psychological, and social well-being in a sample of 1250 immigrants from Bolivia, Colombia, Morocco, Romania and Sub-Saharan Africa, together with that of 500 matched host nationals from Spain. Participants were selected by means of probability sampling with stratification by age and sex. Confirmatory factor analyses revealed that the re-specified tripartite model of well-being, including hedonic, psychological, and social components of the individual's functioning, was the best fitting model, as compared to alternative models. Importantly, after adjustment for perceived friendship and support, marital status, income, sex and age, immigrants presented higher levels of well-being than host nationals. Compared to host nationals, immigrants reported especially higher eudaimonic well-being: social contribution and actualization, personal growth, self-acceptance, and purpose in life, and lower levels of well-being only in terms of positive relations with others and negative affect. These results are discussed in the context of positive psychology.

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“Emigration is pain, loneliness, nostalgia, and a lot of work; however, it is also joy, reinvention, desire for the future, and flexibility”

[Edmundo Paz Soldan (El País 28, 11, 2009, p. 18)]

1. Introduction

Research on mental health has shifted its focus from the absence of illness toward the presence of well-being in its diverse forms (Keyes, 2006). A rich debate on hedonia and eudaimonia as two components of happiness (Delle Fave et al., 2011; Huta and Ryan, 2010; Kashdan et al., 2008; Ryan and Deci, 2001; Ryff and Singer, 2008; Waterman, 2008) suggests that people not only constantly seek to rectify deficiencies of pleasure and comfort (hedonic approach) for self-regulation, but also try to spread their wings so as to live a fuller life than one which merely maintains the *status quo* (eudaimonic approach).

However, little research in positive psychology has contextualized well-being. In turn, studies of minorities have usually taken into account social context but neglected the contributions of positive psychology, stress and coping being common starting points for perspectives on minorities' health (Delle Fave and Bassi, 2009a, 2009b). In particular, no research has been

* Corresponding author. Fax: +34 943015670.

E-mail addresses: magdalena.bobowik@ehu.es (M. Bobowik), nekane.basabe@ehu.es (N. Basabe), dario.paez@ehu.es (D. Páez).

reported that examines both hedonic (affect balance and satisfaction with life) and eudaimonic (concerning human potential and the art of living) aspects of well-being in foreign-born immigrants.

Although the health of such risk populations as immigrants or ethnic minorities has frequently been measured in terms of negative symptoms, such as depressive mood (Finch et al., 2000; Fenta et al., 2004; Kiang et al., 2010; Mesch et al., 2008; Walsemann et al., 2009), poorer mental and physical health (Williams et al., 2008), emotional problems (Beiser et al., 2009), distress (Huynh and Fuligni, 2010; Moradi and Risco, 2006), alienation and loneliness (Tartakovsky and Schwartz, 2001) or substance use (Kulis et al., 2009; Myers et al., 2009), increasingly more studies address positive aspects of adaptation. As regards hedonia, more and more research explores immigrants' and minorities' well-being in terms of its "traditional" components, such as life satisfaction (e.g., Roccas et al., 2000; Sam, 2000) or affectivity (e.g., Bobowik et al., 2011). Research on physical and mental health in risk populations has also been expanding rapidly (Baron-Epel and Kaplan, 2009; Gee et al., 2006; Wiking et al., 2004). Eudaimonia, in turn, would be predominantly reflected in research with minorities on such classic psychological phenomena as self-esteem (Bourguignon et al., 2006; Moradi and Risco, 2006; Sam, 2000; Williams et al., 2008), self-efficacy (Mesch et al., 2008) and perceived control (Moradi and Risco, 2006). Also, coping literature emphasized that ethnic minorities, including immigrants, develop cultural resiliency because they are equipped with diverse coping and emotional regulation resources (Miller and Kaiser, 2001). Yet only a few scholars have explored ethnic minorities' well-being in terms of psychological or social well-being (Abu-Rayya and Abu-Rayya, 2009; Iwamoto and Liu, 2010; Ryff et al., 2003; Keyes, 2009a). By breaking the mold of the traditional focus on negative symptoms and hedonic well-being (HWB), the present study makes room for the consideration of eudaimonia in the context of immigration.

1.1. Immigration and a shift toward positivity: do immigrants always show disadvantaged well-being compared to host nationals?

Recent qualitative research has shown that lay beliefs about happiness across cultures coincide with our emphasis on the need for combining hedonia with eudaimonia (Delle Fave et al., 2011). People tend to define happiness as a psychological balance and harmony – they describe happiness primarily from the eudaimonic approach, according to which happiness is attained when one lives in harmony with one's "true self" or *daimon* (for a review, see Waterman, 2011). Therefore, although the experience of discrimination can impair emotional well-being, it does not necessarily perturb a person's psychological well-being (PWB) in terms of his or her feelings of autonomy, control, growth, or resilience. Consequently, whereas immigrants might be at a disadvantage compared to the native-born population in terms of HWB, there is not necessarily a disparity between the two populations in terms of other aspects of psychological functioning.

At the first glance, empirical evidence suggests that immigrant status is associated with lower levels of mental or emotional health (Baron-Epel and Kaplan, 2009; García-Gómez and Oliva, 2009) and life satisfaction (Bartram, 2011; Safi, 2009) in diverse cultural contexts. However, other studies show that, for instance, immigrants present lower risk of psychiatric disorders (Alegría et al., 2008). Another study based on representative European Social Survey samples demonstrated that immigrants have lower subjective well-being (overall happiness) but higher satisfaction with societal conditions than host nationals (Baltatescu, 2005). In turn, a cross-cultural study by Beirens and Fontaine (2010) revealed that although Turkish immigrants report fewer positive emotions than the Belgian majority, they express more positive affect than Turks living in Turkey.

Such nuances in the levels of functioning of immigrants may be especially evident in relation to their PWB (Ryff, 1989; Ryff and Keyes, 1995), which would include such concepts as self-esteem and self-acceptance, a perception of life with meaning and purpose, a sense of control over the environment (mastery), autonomy and personal fulfilment, sustaining positive relationships with others, and a satisfactory level of integration and social support. Such aspects of well-being as perceived control, positive relationships with others (especially members of the host society), or feelings of personal progress are substantial elements in a successful migratory process. For instance, Ryff et al. (2003) showed that, controlling for age, employment, and marital status, minority status was linked to higher levels of humanistic and existential well-being, in terms of self-acceptance, positive relations with others, personal growth, and environmental mastery. In the same vein, Keyes (2009) found that although minority status led to poorer mental health, it was related to higher flourishing. On controlling for perceived discrimination, Blacks exhibited even greater PWB, especially in terms of self-acceptance, autonomy, and environmental mastery.

Similarly, few studies have focused on social well-being (SWB) among migrants (Keyes, 2006). SWB, a public facet of eudaimonic well-being, is the appraisal of one's circumstances and functioning in the society (Keyes, 1998, 2006), and embraces five domains. Social integration refers to feeling of belongingness and being accepted; social acceptance includes an accepting view of human nature, trust in others, and the belief in their kindness; social contribution concerns one's social value and belief in having something to contribute to society; social actualization means being hopeful about the future of the society or believing in its potential and growth; finally, social coherence implies concern for knowledge about and an understanding of social life (Keyes, 1998, 2006). These aspects of the individual's functioning are crucial ones in the examination of immigrant populations because they refer to those social tasks that could be particularly challenging for an immigrant person in a new community. As in the case of PWB, empirical evidence suggests that Blacks show a great advantage over Whites in social coherence, actualization and integration, after adjustment for perceived discrimination (Keyes, 2009). Blacks also showed a more subtle advantage over the majority group in terms of social contribution, though not in terms of social acceptance.

One explanation of the resilience found among minority groups in previously-reported research might be that in most of these studies, variables related to material and personal resources, necessary for a successful migratory process (Massey and Sánchez, 2009), were controlled for. For example, Ryff et al. (2003) found that well-being was especially higher among well-

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