

FAMILY, COMMUNITY-RELATED FACTORS AND SUBJECTIVE
WELL-BEING AMONG VIETNAMESE REFUGEES

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INTRODUCTION

Family and community have always been the most important elements in a Vietnamese person's life.¹ However, these two social institutions play even larger role for Vietnamese refugees in the U.S. As Bar-Yosef asserts, there is nothing better than an ethnic community which can provide social supports to a new immigrant or refugee in a host society.² There is no question about how hard it is for a new immigrant or refugee to start a new life in a strange environment. Vietnamese refugees, as other groups of immigrants or refugees in America, have experienced tremendous psychological disfunction and distress.³ In the last decade, almost a half million Vietnamese refugees have arrived and lived in every territory and state of the United States.⁴ Many of these refugees were not able to bring their family and their loved ones with them to their new homeland--America. Also many of them did not have the opportunity to choose to live in their own ethnic communities as they wished. Thus, the major question of this study is: do Vietnamese families and communities have any effect upon Vietnamese refugees' sense of well-being in American society?

Family and Community Among Immigrants and Refugees

Rogg has studied the effect of community and family upon the economic adjustment of Cuban refugees.⁵ He found that the ethnic refugee community plays a crucial role in the process of adjustment of refugees into the mainstream of American society. A strong ethnic community can provide its members with a sense of psychological support and satisfaction. For example, Russo notes that a strong sense of community is the factor that helps Italian immigrants adjust to American culture.⁶ In regard to the nature of the adjustment of immigrants in Canadian society, Allen finds that ethnic organizations significantly facilitate the immigrants' process of adjustment into Canadian society.⁷ Hurn et al., studied the sociocultural adaptation of Korean immigrants in the United States. The study showed that 89.79 percent of the Korean immigrants in their sample agreed that they would give higher priority to family needs than their own personal needs.⁸ In the Vietnamese refugee community in America, family is the central focus of an individual's life. As Hains et al., observes, "even when the individual refugee sees his ultimate economic success as an independent endeavor, there remain both the memory of his initial dependence of kin and the continuing obligations to furnish general support."⁹ As a matter of fact, every year millions of dollars in gifts and money are sent to relatives in Vietnam by Vietnamese in the U.S. The United States government has developed programs to help Vietnamese refugees bring their family members here. There is no doubt that one's family has a very special meaning for each individual Vietnamese.

The Meanings and The Sources of Subjective Well-Being

Subjective well-being has been conceptualized as a multi-dimensional concept which includes morale, life satisfaction, satisfaction with major domains in life, or the difference between positive and negative affects of a person's psychological being. ^{1 0} Subjective well-being also has been described as a person's intra-psychic state of being satisfied with his/her whole life.

Researchers in the last three decades have developed dozens of scales to measure happiness or subjective well-being. In general there are two approaches for measuring subjective well-being; 1) subjective well-being as measured by single item scale; and 2) subjective well-being as measured by multi-item scale. The advantages of using one type scale over the other has been discussed, but no one has developed any finite measurement for subjective well-being. Recently, Larsen, Diener, Emmons studied the reliability and validity of five single item scales and six multi-item scales of subjective well-being. ^{1 2} They found that with respect to the issue of test-retest reliability, single item scales tended to have lower reliability, and multi-item scales tended to have moderate reliability. Generally, in regard to the matter of validity, both single item scales and multi-item scales adequately measured the subjective well-being construct. They agreed that the decision to use a single item scale or a multi-item scale for measuring subjective well-being depended on the researchers' needs and the research feasibility.

Larson who reviewed thirty years of the literature on subjective well-being among older Americans noted that, generally, there are ten life-situation variables which were found to have significant correlation with subjective well-being. ^{1 3} These variables are: health, physical disability, age, socioeconomic factors, race, sex, employment, marital status, transportation, housing and social activity. Among these variables, health, socioeconomic factors, marital status, transportation, housing, and social activity tend to explain well-being among older Americans. Diener, in an extensive review of the literature of subjective well-being, also noted that several similar factors have been found having significant correlation with subjective well-being. ^{1 4}

Cumming and Henry proposed a theory that explains the life satisfaction of older people as the result of their disengagement from their pre-retired social activities. ^{1 5} This theory has not been supported by a substantial number of studies. The alternative theory postulated that the life satisfaction of older people is the result of their engagement in different social activities. Another theoretical framework for the explanation of subjective well-being is the resources theory. ^{1 6} This theory postulated

that people are happy because they are satisfied with their available resources such as income, education, health, and marital status.

For many, if not most, newer immigrants or refugees, having one's family and one's ethnic community seems to be the crucial factors for their well-being. As Caplan asserts, in time of psychological need, social supports from family or friends are important for one's sense of well-being.¹⁷ Thus, the purpose of this study is to examine the influences of family and community-related factors on the sense of subjective well-being among Vietnamese refugees.

METHOD

Sample

The sample for this study was fathered in the Vietnamese communities in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, and in the Dallas/Fort Worth metroplex in 1985. Three hundred questionnaires were distributed with 180 returned. There are 75 females and 105 males in this sample. Only 167 respondents completed all items used in this study.

Measurement

All items on this questionnaire were written in both English and Vietnamese. Family-related factors were represented by three variables: marital status, family income, and attempted family reunification. Community-related factors were represented by three variables: attitude toward people nearby, memberships in ethnic social organizations, and having a confidant. Marital status was coded 1 for married and 0 for single. Family income was coded from 1 for \$0.00 to 15,999 to 7 for \$80,000 and more. Attempted family reunification coded 1 for yes and 0 for no. Attitude toward people nearby was measured by a single item coded from 1 for bad to 4 for very good. Memberships in ethnic social organizations. Having a confidant was coded from 1 for strongly disagree to 4 for strongly agree. Finally, subjective well-being was measured by a single item scale used frequently in the last three decades.¹⁸ Respondents were asked: "Thinking of your life as a whole, how happy would you say you are these days?" The answer for this question was coded 1 for unhappy, 2 for pretty happy, and 3 for very happy. Single item scales seem to be the best method for measuring both sociological and psychological phenomena among populations such as Vietnamese refugees who have not been exposed to survey research and who are afraid to give too much information to the interviewers.

RESULTS

Multiple regression analysis was used to analyze the relationships among variables in this study. A prediction model was constructed with six predictors or independent variables and one criterion or dependent variable. Variables were entered into the regression equation based on their simple correlation with the dependent variable. Variables with higher correlation were entered into the equation before the others. In this study, the order of entry of variables was: marital status, having a confidant, family income, memberships in ethnic social organizations, attitude toward people nearby, and attempted family reunification.

Table 1 presents the means, standard deviations and inter-correlation among variables used in this study.

Table 2 presents a summary of the multiple regression analysis of the hypothetical prediction model.

The entire regression model explained about 36 percent of variance accounted for subjective well-being among Vietnamese refugees. The adjusted R square of the entire model was .33. Marital status is the strongest predictor ($\beta = .28$, $p < .001$), and explained 17 percent of the variance in subjective well-being. Having a confidant is the second most significant predictor of well-being ($\beta = .23$, $p < .001$); this variable explained about 6 percent of variance in subjective well-being. Family income predicted subjective well-being significantly ($\beta = .18$, $p < .001$), and explained about 4 percent of variance in subjective well-being. Memberships in ethnic social organizations predicted subjective well-being significantly ($\beta = .22$, $p < .001$), and explained about 6 percent of variance in subjective well-being. Attitude toward people nearby predicted subjective well-being significantly ($\beta = .15$, $p < .05$), and explained about 2 percent of variance in subjective well-being. Finally, attempted family reunification explained about 1 percent of variance in subjective well-being ($\beta = .11$, $p < .05$). All six variables seemed to explain a significantly high proportion of variance in subjective well-being among Vietnamese refugees. Three family-related variables explained a total of 22 percent of variance in subjective

TABLE 1

Means, Standard Deviations, and Intercorrelation
of Variables for the Study
(N=167)

| Variables | M | SD | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
|---------------------------------------|------|------|-----|------|-----|------|-----|-----|
| 1. Marital Status | .47 | .50 | | | | | | |
| 2. Family Income | .22 | 1.38 | .20 | | | | | |
| 3. Attempted Family Reunification | .26 | .44 | .02 | -.03 | | | | |
| 4. Having a Confidant | 2.67 | .83 | .23 | .15 | .03 | | | |
| 5. Membership in Ethnic Organizations | 1.60 | .69 | .14 | .04 | .15 | -.07 | | |
| 6. Attitude Toward People Nearby | 2.66 | .64 | .08 | .21 | .00 | .11 | .08 | |
| 7. Subjective Well-Being | 2.13 | .71 | .41 | .30 | .15 | .32 | .27 | .25 |

TABLE 2

Multiple Linear Regression Analysis of Subjective
on Predictor Variables

| Predictor Variables | R ² total | R ² change | Beta in the Equation |
|--|----------------------|-----------------------|----------------------|
| Marital Status | .17 | .17* | .29 |
| Having a Confidant | .23 | .06* | .23 |
| Family Income | .27 | .04** | .17* |
| Memberships in Ethnic Social Organizations | .32 | .06* | .22* |
| Attitude Toward People Nearby | .34 | .02** | .15** |
| Attempted Family Reunification | .36 | .01** | .11** |

Adjusted R ² = .33

*p < .001

**p < .05

well-being, compared to 14 percent of variance which accounted for subjective well-being by three community-related variables.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this study indicate that family and community factors are important for Vietnamese refugees' psychological well-being in American society. These significant relationships of family and community related factors and subjective well-being among Vietnamese refugees tend to support the theory advocated by some students of immigration studies which emphasize the importance of ethnic family and community in the psychological well-being of new immigrants and refugees in a host society. ¹⁹ For Vietnamese refugees, the family provides them both physical and emotional support for maintaining and promoting their psychological well-being. The important in-

fluence of the family upon an individual Vietnamese's psychological well-being found in this study indicates that Vietnamese refugees who have a spouse for companionship in their new environment, who have a comfortable family income, and who still plan to bring their loved ones to this country with them, are much happier than those who lack these essential elements. Community is another important aspect of the psychological well-being of Vietnamese refugees. For new immigrants and refugees, participation in activities outside their family is the means of successful adaptation into their host society. The ethnic community provides the kinds of support that family members cannot. Ethnic community support requires community interaction. The findings of this study indicate that Vietnamese refugees who were involved in their ethnic social organizations, had friends in the community to reach out when lonely, and who had a positive attitude toward people nearby, tend to be more satisfied with their new life in America than others.

Family and community are important aspects of any plan of social work intervention. If the focus of the social work profession is "the interface between or the meeting place of person and environment" as Gordon defined it, ²⁰ social workers should take into consideration the relationship of an individual person with his/her family and community before making or suggesting any intervention actions. For Vietnamese refugees, all attempts at resettlement and other social work intervention must focus upon the effects of the family and community upon an individual refugee's life.

Micro social work intervention among Vietnamese refugees in the U.S. should attempt to prevent possible family breakdown as the result of multi-stressful factors from the new environment and new culture. Members of refugee families very often have to confront the problems of communication breakdown and the role conflicts amongst themselves. Since marital status was so important for the well-being of Vietnamese refugees, the preservation of family tradition in helping to avoid divorce seems to be crucial. Family income among Vietnamese refugees means the cumulative contribution of every person living in a family. One possible problem for a Vietnamese family related to the family income issue is that more and more younger Vietnamese are becoming independent from their family for economic support. With the influences of American culture, these young persons may one day demand independence from their parents. If this happens, many Vietnamese parents will confront one of the most stressful life events for Vietnamese parents in terms of losing control and authority over their children. Another family issue among Vietnamese is reunification with family members left behind in Vietnam. Social workers working with refugee populations should keep in mind that helping these people bring their families here

is legal and every refugee should have the right to know that he/she can apply to bring remaining family members here through proper government agencies.

From the macro social work perspective, refugee policy-makers should know that any policy related to refugee problems should not ignore the important effect of the family and community upon the refugees' psychological well-being. For example, any attempt for refugee resettlement should not create more disruption of family and community relationships among refugees. Refugees should be allowed to resettle with their families including the extended family and with their ethnic community.

In conclusion, this study seems to provide some important explanations for the effects of family and community factors upon the psychological well-being of Vietnamese refugees in America. Future research should focus on the effect of subjective well-being upon the process of acculturation of Vietnamese refugees into the mainstream of American society.

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