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'Between heaven and hell': Subjective well-being of asylum seekers

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Wiley

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‘Between heaven and hell’: Subjective well-being of asylum seekers

Hartonen V., Väisänen P., Karlsson L., Pöllänen S. ‘Between heaven and hell’: Subjective well-being of asylum seekers

Nearly 1.4 million asylum seekers arrived in Europe in 2015. With an unprecedented 822% increase in the number of asylum applicants, Finland experienced the largest increase in applicants than any other European country that year. In this study, we investigated asylum seekers’ experienced subjective well-being (ExSWB) construct in comparison with their evaluated subjective well-being (EvSWB) construct. A mixed methods approach with convergent design was adopted for the study, which combined quantitative data on asylum seekers’ (n = 181) ExSWB and EvSWB with qualitative data on the elements of ExSWB and EvSWB. The findings point at a limbus phase in asylum seekers’ livelihood transition between the borders for international protection in Finland. The Cantril self-anchoring striving scale was used by the participants to describe this passage ritual of ambiguity. Furthermore, we also found gender differences related to coping and subjective well-being, which supports previous findings on asylum seekers’ well-being.

Key Practitioner Message: • The concept of the limbus phase of the asylum seeker livelihood transition is useful for describing asylum seekers’ experiences while waiting for an asylum decision; • Asylum seeker SWB is closely related to status dissonance, separation and capitals, causing anxiety, worry and fear, and inflicting cognitive disruption; • Equal, institutional-level functions should be organised in the reception centre for easing the anxiety related to the asylum-seeking process.

Our world is facing the highest levels of displacement in the history of humankind. Based on UNHCR (2019), this means that in our world nearly every two seconds someone is being forcibly displaced. Due to the Arab Spring phenomenon, which evolved into situations of civil war, most notably in Iraq, Syria, Yemen and Libya (Buber-Ennser et al., 2016, p. 1), nearly 1.4 million asylum seekers arrived in Europe in 2015 (European Asylum Support Office, 2016, p. 8). With an unprecedented 822% increase in asylum applicants, Finland had the largest increase in applicants than any other European country that year (Eurostat, 2016). A total of 184 new reception centres had to be established to place all 32,476 asylum seekers (Finnish Immigration Service, 2016a, 2016b).

Finland is supporting the European Union’s efforts to manage migration better and is actively participating in developing common migration and asylum policies. According to the Ministry of the Interior Finland (n.d.), Finnish migration policy promotes the immigration that Finland needs to offset its ageing population, taking into account the needs of employers and companies. In terms of favourable migration, Sivanandan and Gonzalez (2001) referred to ‘ready-made’ immigrants, i.e., highly skilled professionals and businessmen. In Finland, in the middle of the ongoing ‘refugee crisis’, the former Finnish prime minister Esko Aho, speaking on Finland’s national public service broadcasting company (YLE, 2017), said: ‘I don’t want to undermine the refugee debate, but we have a very big challenge in finding ways to make Finland an attractive country for a well-educated labour force who want to work in Finland.’

The concept of asylum seeker refers to a legal status. This places asylum seekers in a subordinate position around the world – legally, culturally, socially and politically (e.g., Bloch, 2007). As defined by the Ministry of the Interior Finland (2020), an asylum seeker is a person who seeks asylum and the right to reside in a foreign nation, whereas a refugee is a person.
who has been granted asylum in one national state or another. Hadjiyanni (2002, pp. 3–4) calls this a **title paradigm**, which views refugees as being in a state between displacement and resettlement. According to Hadjiyanni, the title paradigm transforms into a source of controversial treatment, legitimising the dominance of the receiving countries and devaluing the retention/creation/production and re-production of a refugee identity. In Finland, for example, there are seven steps (see Figure 1) to being granted international protection (see Asylum in Finland, 2020). Asylum seekers, who generally have high hopes for the future (Yako & Biswas, 2014) after fleeing from threatening life conditions (e.g., Li, 2015), usually undergo a long and difficult period of waiting in uncertainty and under unfavourable living conditions in the country of arrival (Laban, Kompore, Gernaert, & de Jong, 2008). In this limbus-phase (Jonzon, Lindkvist, & Johansson, 2015; see also Hocking, 2018) of asylum seekers’ livelihood transition (Department for International Development [DFID], 1999), it seems that the fundamental values of Scandinavian well-being (see Alladrt, 1993) are called into question when ‘flesh becomes a mirror of politics’ (Puumala, 2012) and ‘refugee’ is a title earned upon displacement (Hadjiyanni, 2002).

Despite the large body of literature on the mental health of asylum seekers and refugees (see, e.g., Fazel, Wheeler, & Danesh, 2005), the subjective well-being (SWB) perspective is still relatively unknown, especially in the Finnish context. It has been shown that the personal history of asylum seekers often includes kidnapping, torture, the death of loved ones and sexual exploitation (Li, Liddel, & Nickerson, 2016; United Nations General Assembly, 2002; Wright et al., 2017). Skogberg and colleagues (2019) reported that after arriving in Finland, 83% of adult asylum seekers had experienced at least one shocking event, such as being subjected to violence, either in their former home country or during their flight. Furthermore, almost half of the adult asylum seekers had an injury caused by an accident or violence, 40% reported having significant depression and anxiety symptoms and 25% had concentration and memory problems (i.e., cognitive disruptions) (Skogberg et al., 2019).

In addition to post-traumatic stress, depression and anxiety, Gerritsen et al. (2006) showed that the asylum seekers in that study experienced their health as being worse than that of refugees. These, along with mediating the role of adult separation anxiety disorder (Tay, Rees, Chen, Kareth, & Silove, 2015) and the experience of multiple loss (Hengst, Smid, & Laban, 2018), might lead to vulnerability to psychopathological development (Laban et al., 2008). Sulaiman-Hill and Thompson (2012) showed that refugees were still experiencing psychological distress and challenges to their well-being even 20 years after resettlement.

Based on Diener (2006), subjective well-being (SWB) measures can be an input in discussions about national policies in many domains. By assessing asylum seekers’ SWB, it might be possible to move

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**Figure 1.** Seven steps to international protection in Finland. Adapted from: Finnish Immigration Service (2019).
towards a resource-based model of post-migration adaptation (Ryan, Dooley, & Benson, 2008), in order to shed light on the conditions necessary for individual development and existence (Allardt, 1993), and to transform social and institutional environments in order to reduce the stressful demands of the transitional phase (Laban et al., 2008) of the asylum-seeking process. Throughout SWB measures, it is also possible, for example, to develop educational services to promote asylum seekers’ opportunities for societal participation and belonging (Hartonen, 2018) and two-way integration (Strang & Ager, 2010). Thus, in this study we aimed to understand how asylum seekers aged 17 years and older experience SWB (ExSWB) in comparison with their evaluated future SWB (EvSWB) construct. We approached this through two research questions:

1. What are the differences between asylum seekers’ experienced SWB and their evaluated SWB on the Cantril Self-Anchoraging Striving Scale (CSASS) (Cantril, 1965)?
2. What are the elements of the asylum seekers’ experienced SWB construct and their evaluated SWB construct?

Theory of subjective well-being

Overall, there are two traditions that contribute to our knowledge of well-being. The subjective well-being perspective focuses on the hedonic aspect, whereas the psychological well-being (PWB) perspective focuses on the eudaemonic aspect (Chen, Jing, Hayes, & Lee, 2013, p. 2). SWB attempts to understand people’s evaluations of their life, including cognitive judgements of life satisfaction and affective evaluations of moods and emotions (Diener, Suh, & Oishi, 1999). It refers to the person’s subjective belief that his or her life is desirable, pleasant and good (Diener, 2006).

PWB involves people’s sense of whether their life has purpose, whether they are realising their given potential, the quality of their ties to others and if they feel in charge of their own life (Ryff, 1989; Ryff & Keyes, 1995; Ryff & Singer, 2008). Although SWB and PWB represent different approaches, they belong to the wider general well-being construct (Chen et al., 2013).

In this study, we focused on the SWB aspect of asylum seekers’ well-being, which includes two conceptually distinct concepts: ExSWB and EvSWB (Stone & Mackie, 2013, p. 31). ExSWB, in its narrowest and most traditionally measured state, is the series of momentary affective states that occur through time (Stone & Mackie, 2013, p. 29). EvSWB comprises the elicitation of a respondent’s global-subjective evaluation of their life (Kapteyn, Lee, Tassot, Vonkova, & Zamarro, 2015).

The asylum-seeking process itself might provoke an important tenet of norm theory called emotional amplification – the emotional response to abnormal events is enhanced, relative to the response to the same events when they are normal and expected (Kahneman, 1999, p. 12). Whereas the asylum seeker’s ExSWB has been found to be related to a long asylum procedure, loss of status, loneliness and boredom, lack of language proficiency, lack of work opportunities, lack of social support and differing religious beliefs and traditions (see, e.g., Hunt, 2008; Laban et al., 2008; Litner & Elsen, 2017; Oppdal & Idsoe, 2015), there appears to be a lack of information on asylum seekers’ EvSWB, or it appears to be related to uncertainty about the future.

Overall gender differences in SWB have been explained through biology (e.g., hormones, genetics), personality (e.g., affect intensity, dispositional empathy, attributional styles, coping styles) and social context (e.g., balance of power relationships, gender roles, stereotypes) (Nolen-Hoeksema & Rusting, 1999). Renner and Salem (2009) found differences between the genders with respect to both symptomology and coping under exile conditions. Feeling secure, concentrating on children’s well-being along with social support, language learning and improved living conditions would help female asylum seekers to cope.

Methods

Study design

A mixed methods approach was adopted in this convergent study design (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2018). We combined qualitative (QUAL) data analysis from open-ended questions with quantitative (QUAN) assessments of asylum seekers’ SWB (see Figure 2). Preliminary information about the participants’ language and literacy skills or their educational level was not available, which led to our choosing the research interview rather than a survey as a strategy for data collection. A series of structured interviews (see Bryman, 2004, p. 109), including quantitative assessment of asylum seekers’ SWB and qualitative data from open-ended questions on factors affecting it, were conducted with 181 asylum seekers from one Finnish reception centre, between 25 April and 9 August 2016.

Participants

All 241 asylum seekers, 17 years and older, from the reception centre were invited to participate in the study (see Table 1). The participants were contacted personally in the reception centre by the researcher.
and the interpreters. Snowball sampling (see, e.g., Faugier & Sargeant, 1997) was also used to reach participants. The level of education affects the well-being and health of individuals and communities along many paths (Skogberg et al., 2019). According to the Finnish Red Cross (n.d.), in Finland there are some challenges in providing equal educational services to enhance asylum seekers’ independence and integration in the Finnish society. In this study, we included 17-year-old asylum seekers in the study population, since they are in danger of dropping out from the Finnish formal schooling system (Perusopetuslaki [Finnish basic education act], 628/1998).

The sample covered 75% of all 17 years and older asylum seekers from the reception centre. Those with Arabic as their mother tongue accounted for 66.3% of the sample, Kurdish as the mother tongue 18.2%, Turkmen as the mother tongue 2.8%, Persian (Dari, Farsi, Pashtun) as the mother tongue 11% and Somali as the mother tongue 1.7% of the sample. The Somali participants spoke Arabic as well.

Parents’ years of schooling and educational attainment play an important role in children’s educational and behavioural outcomes (e.g., Davis-Kean, 2005). It is also important to break the intergenerational social and societal chains of deprivation. Driessen and Smit (2007) showed that there is a connection between immigrant parents’ societal participation and cognitive outcome measures, such as the children’s language and mathematics skills. It also seems that having only a basic education is more harmful for those have a disadvantaged social background (Ilmakunnas, 2018). Therefore, it is essential to determine adult asylum seekers’ educational needs. In this study, socio-economic groups were based on Statistics Finland’s (n.d.) official categorisation and were classified by comparing self-reported level of education, years of schooling and occupation. The category No education includes persons with 0–4 years of schooling. The SEG category Others includes pensioners, stay-at-home mothers, bazaar employees or other employees that we were unable to categorise under other labels.

Instrument and measures

Over time, many different measurement approaches have been used to capture subjective well-being (see, e.g., Kahneman & Krueger, 2006). The instrument used in this research as the basis for structured interviews was constructed together with a cultural advisor (an Iraqi female PhD with refugee experience, and fluent in Arabic and in English), with sensitive issues taken under consideration. The instrument was translated into Arabic (e.g., Khosravani & Dastjerdi, 2013) by a bilingual Arabic language-oriented instructor from the reception centre, in collaboration together with the cultural advisor.

The demographic factors included gender, age, geographic background, mother tongue, education, years of schooling, language, literacy skills, and occupation and years practicing it. SWB included completing CSASS, including the quantitative assessment of asylum seekers’ SBW, and qualitative data from the open-ended questions on the elements of the asylum seekers’ SBW constructs.

CSASS is a simple visual scale that makes it possible to evaluate general satisfaction with life (Mazur, Szkultecka-Dębek, Dzielska, Drozd & Małkowska-Szkutnik, 2018). Over time, it has been used to measure a wide range of constructions, from teaching effectiveness (Chiu, 1972) to the psychosocial health of adolescents (Mazur et al., 2018). CSASS has been included in many research endeavours, including the World Happiness Report (Helliwell, Layard, & Sachs, 2018) and the Gallup World Poll of more than 150 countries, representing 98% of the world’s population (Gallup, 2019). CSASS has been validated with, for example, American Life Panel respondents (n = 5,500 respondents, 18 years and older), and the reliability of the instrument was calculated for ExSWB at 0.71 and for EvSWB at 0.66, with the factor loads of 0.83 and 0.64, respectively (Kapteyn et al., 2015). Instrument validation on asylum-seeking or refugee populations was not available since Gallup, for example, does not survey refugee camps (Helliwell et al., 2018).

Based on Hofmans, Theuns and Acker (2008), the major advantage of using the self-anchoring scale is the additional qualitative information provided by analysing the contents of the end anchors. However, according to Kahneman (1999), people do not generally know how happy they are, and complex questions that must be answered quickly are likely to apply simplifying heuristics to the questions. Measurement quality can also be challenging, especially because of its subjectivity (Zmijewska-Tomczak et al., 2014). Even for adult participants, it can be difficult to maintain objectivity in responding to quality-of-life questions, and the results may depend on the health of the respondents, for example, or on other circumstances under which the research is being conducted (Mazur et al., 2018).

As a procedure, the participants were asked to visualise a ladder with steps numbering from 0 at the bottom to 10 at the top. Then they were asked to describe on which step of the ladder they felt they were personally standing at present, if the top of the ladder represented the best possible life for them and the bottom of the ladder represented the worst possible life for them. The participants were then asked to give, in their own words, the reasons why they were standing on that particular step of the ladder. Detailed answers were written down as the interpreter described them.
The procedure continued by asking the participants again to visualise a ladder, with steps numbering from 0 at the bottom to 10 at the top, and to evaluate on which step of the ladder they personally think they would be standing five years from now, if the number zero represented the worst possible life and 10 the best possible life for them. Then the participants were asked again to give, in their own words, the reasons why they would be standing on that particular step of the ladder in the future. Detailed answers were written down as the interpreter described them (Gallup World Poll, 2008, p. 24).

The instrument was tested in a pilot study \( (n = 8) \) and the data acquired were integrated into the full data analysis. The pilot study included asylum seekers from Iraq (Arabic, Kurdish and Turkmen ethnicities) and Afghanistan. Due to translation issues, especially concerning the Kurdish and Turkmen participants, it was decided to use family members or other participants as interpreters, fully aware of the possible limitations (e.g., Jacobs, Chen, Karliner, Agger-Gupta, & Mutha, 2006). Since some participants with a lower level of education had difficulty understanding the meaning of some of the questions, it was decided that the interpreter could help participants to understand the questions if any difficulty arose. Prior to the interviews, a reception centre language-orientated instructor received instruction from the researcher and the cultural advisor about the purpose and goals of the study, research ethics and the interview situation.

**Data analysis**

In this convergent parallel mixed methods study (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2018), we followed primary
data analysis integration procedures (see Figure 2), described by Creswell and Plano-Clark (2018, p. 224). Both qualitative and quantitative data sets were analysed separately to obtain separate results. After analysis, we merged the results of both data sets (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 220).

Quantitative data were analysed using SPSS version 25. The Thriving, Struggling and Suffering indexes were adapted (Gallup World Poll, 2008). However, we found it a complicated process to apply the Gallup categorisation straightforwardly to the asylum seeker data, especially in the case of the ‘Struggling’ index, since asylum seekers had a tendency to use CSASS to describe the ambiguity related to their present life situation. Therefore, the ExSWB and EvSWB data were analysed separately. Individuals who rated their current life as 7 or higher were categorised as ‘thriving’, those who rated their current life over 5 and below 7 were categorised as ‘struggling’, and those who reported their subjective well-being as 4 or lower were categorised as ‘suffering’ (Gallup World Poll, 2008). The differences between ExSWB and EvSWB were analysed using the Wilcoxon Signed-Ranks test. Cohen’s $r$ was used as an effect size index in a non-parametric test.

To see whether the findings of gender differences in SWB (e.g., Renner & Salem, 2009) would occur in our sample, we conducted the Mixed Repeated Measures ANOVA to analyse the relation between gender and ExSWB and between gender and EvSWB. A Chi-square test with the Monte Carlo method was used to examine the relation between gender and the ‘Thriving’, ‘Struggling’ and ‘Suffering’ indexes, as well as the relation between gender and the elements of the ExSWB and EvSWB constructs.

The qualitative data analysis followed the data analysis spiral represented by Creswell (2007, pp. 150–155). First, the data, which consisted of the participants’ answers (written down during the interviews), were organised in files and read through several times, writing down the impressions and notions that emerged from it. To increase the level of clarity, quotes were slightly edited to improve grammar while maintaining their meaning. A word, sentence or thematic entity was chosen as a meaning unit. Second, focused coding was administered. Data were first imported to Atlas.ti software version 8.2.2(554) and coded (Saldaña, 2015) inductively with computer assistance to identify the most frequent and significant codes to form a preliminary code list, which was followed by an evaluation phase. In the third phase, literature was added to the analysis to understand the patterns and to find deeper meanings of the phenomena emerging from the qualitative data. The material was then re-coded, followed by a second evaluation phase. After this second evaluation, the material was again re-coded manually by analysing, interpreting and comparing it to research literature to construct the actual code list, which was then reviewed by the other authors.

To minimise errors in the analysis and to increase reliability and consistency, the analysis proceeded with an intercoding phase (Campbell, Quincy, Osserman, & Pedersen, 2013) in which an independent researcher coded the qualitative material. A percentage agreement (McHugh, 2012) of 94% was calculated and the first author and the independent researcher revised and discussed the remaining 6% of the data to gain consensus. In the final phase, the code list was reviewed by the other authors, and with
Ethical and language considerations

In this study, the processing of personal data was subject to a data protection impact assessment, since the legislation on the processing of personal data changed between the time the data were collected and the time they were analysed (see European Commission, 2016; Tietosuojalaki, 1050/2018). The aims and the ethics of the study and the voluntary nature of participation were explained personally when participants were contacted and were repeated at the beginning of the interviews. Oral informed consent was obtained to counteract possible distrust or illiteracy. For participants under 18 years of age (n = 1), informed consent was also asked from their parents.

It was also not seen as necessary to ask questions concerning religion, sexuality, or to approach other sensitive issues that might cause anxiety for the participants or harm their daily life in the reception centre. No direct identifiers (e.g., full names, signatures or foreign register numbers) were collected, to ensure the anonymity of the participants and to ensure that no one outside the reception centre would be able to trace the participants or their relatives. For the same reason, no audio or video recordings were made during the interviews.

Interviews were conducted in Arabic and in Persian by the first author, the cultural advisor and the language-oriented instructor. The cultural advisor translated the participants’ replies from Arabic into English, which were then translated into Finnish. Most of the Kurdish, Turkmen, Syrian, Somali, Iranian and Yemeni participants understood Arabic. If they did not, other participants or family members were asked to help with the translation from Arabic to their own language (Butow et al., 2011). The language-oriented instructor interpreted the Persian answers directly into Finnish.

Interviews were carried out at the reception centre in a separate interview room where there was no possibility of outsiders entering unexpectedly during the interviews. In some cases, the interviews were carried out in the participants’ homes. The interview room had a table and chairs for the researcher, interpreter and interviewee. When interviews were carried out in the participant’s home, the children and spouse of the female participant were present. The researcher wrote down the participants’ answers as accurately as possible during the interview, as given by the translator.

Results

From the participants’ replies, it was determined that 58% were suffering, 33.1% were struggling and 9% were thriving. With respect to future scores on TSS, only 5% were evaluated as suffering, 20% as struggling and 72% as thriving. Confirming the findings, the Wilcoxon Signed-Ranks Test showed that, statistically, EvSWB (n = 176, M = 8.09, SD = 2.32) scores were significantly higher than ExSWB (n = 181, M = 3.20, SD = 2.92) scores, with a large effect size (z = –11.034, p<0.000, r = 0.58) (see Figures 3, 4 and Table 2).

The female participants’ ExSWB score was slightly higher (n = 39, M = 3.67, SD = 3.41) than that of the male participants (n = 137, M = 3.09, SD = 2.77), while the male participants’ EvSWB score was slightly higher (n = 137, M = 8.23, SD = 1.96) than that of the female participants (n = 39, M = 7.59, SD = 3.26). A Mixed Repeated Measures ANOVA test indicated a statistically significant main within-subject effect, with a large effect size (F1,174 = 298.578, p=0.000, η2 = 0.63), but an insignificant main effect between gender and ExSWB and EvSWB (F1,174 = 0.007.

![Figure 3. SWB change on CSASS.](image-url)
The interaction of the within-subject and between-subject effect was statistically significant, with a small effect size ($F_{1,174} = 5.317$, $p=0.02$, $\eta^2_p = 0.03$). The relation between gender, the ‘Thriving’, ‘Struggling’ and ‘Suffering’ indexes and EvSWB was statistically significant, with a moderate effect size ($\chi^2 (2) = 10.929$, $p=0.004$, Cramer’s $V = 0.249$) (see Table 2 and Figure 5).

A Chi-square test of independence with the Monte Carlo method showed that the relation between gender and EvSWB was significant, with a large effect size ($\chi^2 (8) = 23,540$, $p=0.003$, Cramer’s $V = 0.37$). More male participants (74%) evaluated standing on the highest level of the ladder compared with female participants (26%). A Chi-square test with the Monte Carlo method showed that the relation between gender and coping mechanisms ($\chi^2 (1) = 4.166$, $p=0.041$, Cramer’s $V = 0.15$), and Cannot answer ($\chi^2 (1) = 8.186$, $p=0.004$, Cramer’s $V = 0.21$) on ExSWB were statistically significant, with small effect sizes (see Tables 2 and 3).

The elements of asylum seekers’ ExSWB construct

Eight categories emerged from the qualitative data analysis of the asylum seekers’ ExSWB construct. Contents of the categories are presented below (see Table 4 and Figure 6). Foreseeably, status dissonance coloured the qualitative data. Loss of permanence affected the participants’ ExSWB, causing tension and anxiety. A dichotomy which, on the one hand, posited a forced return to the country of origin and, on the other, salvation in the ‘promised land’, emerged as

Table 2. SWB contrasts by gender.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>p</th>
<th>V</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>137</td>
<td>3.09</td>
<td>2.77</td>
<td>0.231</td>
<td>0.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>3.67</td>
<td>3.41</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>176</td>
<td>3.22</td>
<td>2.92</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. SWB contrasts by gender.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Index</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Adjusted residuals</th>
<th>p</th>
<th>V</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Suffering</td>
<td>59.2</td>
<td>53.8</td>
<td>0.075</td>
<td>0.16</td>
<td>2.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Struggling</td>
<td>34.5</td>
<td>28.2</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>–0.7</td>
<td>31.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thriving</td>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>17.9</td>
<td>–2.3</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>66.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

$z = –11.034$, $p<0.000$, $r = 0.58$ (calculated for whole data); $\chi^2$ (1) = 298.578, $p<0.000$, Cramer’s $V = 0.63$; between-subject effect ($F_{1,174} = 0.007$, $p=0.936$, $\eta^2_p = 0.00$); interaction of within-subject and between-subject effect ($F_{1,174} = 5.317$, $p=0.02$, $\eta^2_p = 0.03$).
evidenced in such comments as ‘I’m between heaven and hell. When we left, I didn’t touch anything other than my child. I left everything, because I was persecuted.’ (Male, 37, Iraq). Status dissonance affected also participants’ self-perception. Answers such as ‘I’m here as a refugee.’ (Male, 26, Iraq), ‘Because I’m an asylum seeker’ (Male, 22, Iraq) reflected not only the confusion related to puzzling procedures, but also the loss of a symbolic self. In some cases, loss of a symbolic self emerged from the interviews in the form of a change in the family’s power structure, causing strong acculturative stress and decreasing asylum seekers’ ExSWB. A conflict between individual and collective culture emerged, for example as being worried of losing one’s children to the ideology of freedom.

We came a long way to arrive here. Now it may be that my children start their new life alone. And when we arrived, I had six children, but it may be that soon I have only three. That’s why we have decided with our father that maybe we will go back to death, because then we will have a family together. But now our son better understands what freedom is and then leaves his home, which is most difficult for me. (Female, 45, Iraq)

One of the central issues revealed from qualitative data analysis was anxiety and depression related to separation from the family. Mothers and fathers longed for their children, and in some cases grief for those left behind caused such a strong yearning that it led to the...
asylum seeker being unable to concentrate on anything and in some cases to be withdrawn. ‘When I left, the wife didn’t come along. She has given birth to a child but won’t come here. I’m so broken, that I can’t focus on anything.’ (Male, 38, Iraq).

Many of the participants also reported feeling overwhelmed by the prospect of having to reconstruct their embodied state of cultural capital all over again. Capital gained in their previous life made some of the participants (primarily highly educated persons such as an interviewee who had a law degree) feel pride, whereas loss of capital made others feel envious: ‘I wonder why the Iraqis come here because they have everything, and I have nothing. They could move to the south.’ (Male, 46, Iran).

Constant thinking about the present situation and worrying about the future, residence permit or homeland issues affected asylum seekers’ ExSWB, inflicting lack of prospects for the future and lack of concentration, thereby causing considerable stress. Those participants who were separated from their families were afraid for their family’s safety in their country of origin. Receiving a negative decision for their asylum application made many participants turn to introspection. Participants who had sold all of their property to get to Finland felt overwhelmed when confronting the prospect of losing everything for nothing. Others were under great stress because of heart-breaking news of the death of relatives. Even voluntary returnees felt insecurity and fear about returning home.

I have received a negative decision and heard that many others have also received such a decision. And hearing about it makes you feel really bad. Everything was sold, to get here, and if we have to go back, everything starts from the beginning. (Male, 26, Afghanistan)

For many other participants, being in Finland, far away from the insecurity of their homeland, gave a sense of hope and security. Some participants expressed gratitude for the social and beneficiary support they received, and felt relieved that their families were safe from the war. The opportunity for a new life gave these participants an opportunity to

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Main categorya (incidence % in data)</th>
<th>Subcategory</th>
<th>Illustrative quotes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Status dissonance (34.8)</td>
<td>Permanence, symbolic self, discrimination, qualification possibilities, RC life</td>
<td>‘I’m between heaven and hell, and there is no certainty what will happen.’ (IM, 31.) ‘Because I am a refugee. (SM, 44.) ‘Because I don’t have a residence permit, I don’t belong to this life.’ (IM, 28.) ‘They teach freedom at the school and children speak at home that they are free. And how young boys and girls are together raises anxiety in us parents. I’m less than zero.’ (IM, 39.) ‘I’m at camp, I do not have a residence permit, so I can’t do what I want.’ (SoF, 21.)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Separation (12.2)</td>
<td>Relationships, divorce, death of family members, leaving home country, losing home ownership</td>
<td>‘I’m depressed and I think about my family all the time.’ (IM, 22.) ‘When I left, my wife didn’t come along. Now she has given birth to a child, but she is not coming here. I’m so devastated that I can’t concentrate on anything.’ (IM, 38.) ‘Because I had to flee my country.’ (IM, 31.) ‘I’m so sad all the time. My daughter died three days ago.’ (IM, 25.)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Capitals (8.8)</td>
<td>Feeling overwhelmed of losing livelihood capital, jealousy, pride</td>
<td>‘Because our whole family has started from the zero. We don’t yet know the language, how to act, or how to handle our own things.’ (AF, 21.) ‘I wonder why the Iraqis come here because they have everything, but I have nothing. They could move to the south.’ (IM, 46.) ‘I am proud, since I have finished my studies.’ (IM, 24.)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Worry (6.6)</td>
<td>Worry about the future, prospects, home country, getting residence permit, a negative residence decision</td>
<td>‘I try to study a lot, but my thoughts revolve around if I will get permission to stay or not. And even if I study hard and write everything down, I don’t learn, because all the time my thoughts are circling around the permission.’ (AM, 25.) ‘If you would have asked earlier, I would have said 10, but now I say 5 because they are going to send us back. I feel great stress because the news in Iraq is so desperate.’ (IM, 41.)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fear (3.9)</td>
<td>Safety, repatriation &amp; returning to home country</td>
<td>‘I’m afraid that I will be repatriated.’ (IM, 38.) ‘I have a family at home, and I am afraid for their safety.’ (IM, 27.) ‘I’ve received a negative decision, but at least at the moment I’m safe, and it is safe to move around.’ (AF, 21.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aspirations (1.7)</td>
<td>Self-development, family, lifespan, livelihood</td>
<td>‘I want to develop myself more than in Iraq.’ (IM, 25.) ‘I have a lot of dreams that require a lot of time, and I don’t know how it takes time.’ (SF, 23.) ‘I just want a family and a car and to live in peace.’ (SM, 30.)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Coping mechanisms (12.7)</td>
<td>A sense of security, survival, social support, family well-being, backgrounds, new beginning, time &amp; integration</td>
<td>‘I feel safe here now.’ (IF, 22.) ‘Life is good here. It is quiet, and I am safe.’ (AM, 36.) ‘We feel comfortable because our whole family is here.’ (IM, 68.) ‘Because I reached a safe place and Finns treat us so well.’ (IM, 34.) ‘I give 10, because now God has written a new life for me.’ (IM, 27.) ‘When we came to Finland, we got a new chance for life.’ (FF, 33.)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other (1.1)</td>
<td>No reason, shame, self-accusation, loss of trust in people, Finnish nature</td>
<td>‘I’ve lost my trust in all people, and I can’t go on anymore, I’m so tired.’ (IF, 25.) ‘I can’t say why, but everything is fine and that’s why I say ten.’ (AM, 31.) ‘Sometimes I think that I’m not succeeding in life and this bothers my mind.’ (IM, 35.)</td>
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</table>

Notes: 1 = Iraqi, A = Afghan, Ir = Iran, S = Syria, So = Somalia, St = stateless, M = Male, F = Female; aMany participants mentioned more than one of the existing themes; bCalculated by multiplying the number of meaning units by 100 and then dividing by all meaning units.
have aspirations and plan for the future. Many participants, for example, had interrupted their studies or otherwise hampered their self-development in the past, and now they wanted to focus on that. On the other hand, overlapping aspirations were found, especially in connection with separation. Family reunification aspirations made it difficult to manage in daily life. ‘Because I reached a safe place and the Finns treat us so well. Finland has such a beautiful nature and, most importantly, how Finns have treated me and my wife and family.’ (Male, 34, Iraq).

Elements of asylum seekers’ EvSWB construct

Overall, six categories emerged from the qualitative data analysis of the asylum seekers’ EvSWB construct. Contents of the categories are presented below (see Table 5 and Figure 6). The participants described the residence permit as a major factor related to their future SWB. They said that gaining a residence permit would be a lifesaver for themselves and their families, especially for their children. They also commented that gaining a residence permit would be a first step in their personal development and would subsequently slowly increase their sense of well-being. ‘If we must leave, you can say that life is over. But if we can stay, then I can say that life continues.’ (Female, 20, Afghanistan).

Many of the participants understood the importance of achieving various capacities in socialisation and integration processes. In addition to acquiring these capacities some participants compared their present life in the reception centre and independency as factors affecting their EvSWB. From some comments, it was possible to sense high, even unrealistic, hopes for the future.

If I get permission to stay, after five years I will own a store and do the same job as before. I am hopeful, because my uncles received a residence permit 10 and 30 years ago and today are Finnish citizens, and also they have a factory in Finland. (Man, 25, Iraq)

Aspirations overlapped to some extent with feelings of separation, especially separation from the family. In these cases, the asylum seekers saw their future as being desperate if they could not share it with their family. The participants wanted their life to improve in some way and to be happier. Some were optimistic about their future and believed that in a few years they would be living the best possible life. Others were more realistic in their evaluation and believed that their SWB would slowly increase. Some felt that after five years all would be better because they had the ability to enjoy life. One participant mentioned having become enlightened about Western virtues and had aspirations for transformational growth for himself and his family:

Before I came here, I didn’t know anything about European culture, but now I know that they are hard-working. In my home country we were able to buy our diploma, but here they are actually studying to get one and are really good people and they are really active too. I want to learn that as well, and I want my children and my family learn it too. (Male, 27, Afghanistan)

Figure 6. Limbus phase of the asylum seekers’ livelihood transition. *Mean and standard deviation on CSASS. **The shape of the graph does not represent the size of the SWB constructs, although the contrast between the two measurement points is shown. The arrows represent the asylum seekers’ ideas flowing between the present, the past and the future.
The results show a statistically significant distinction between ExSWB and EvSWB. Over half of the asylum seekers were found to be suffering, a third were struggling while 10% were thriving at the time of the interview. In contrast, 63% expected to be still thriving, a third still struggling and only 5% still suffering in the future. These findings are not surprising. The torment of the present situation and high hopes for the future formulate a borderline of ‘in-betweenness’, a limbus phase of asylum seekers’ livelihood transition which many participants addressed as ‘living in between heaven and hell’ – a life more of survival, not of living (see also Ingvarsson, Egilsson, & Skaptadottir, 2016; Jonzon et al., 2015; Puumala, 2012; Skogberg et al., 2019; Yako & Biswas, 2014). The oxymoron of being safe in uncertainty creates a bipolarity, where the residence permit constructs a dichotomy between, on the one hand, the asylum seekers’ possibilities to constitute themselves as beings, and, on the other hand, the loss of the concept of individual liberty (Puumala, 2012). This ambiguity was so pervasive that many asylum seekers even used the CSASS to describe their precarious present situation; this raises methodological questions concerning methodological problems when using CSASS with an asylum seeker population, the relation between demographics and factors affecting asylum seekers’ SWB, and how the asylum-seeking process affects the selfhood construction of their children.

Longing for their left-behind children, close relatives and home country made some of the participants feel so distressed that they saw no hope for the future if they stayed in Finland. They saw their homeland as a paradise that they lost because of the war, and wanted to return home regardless of any danger they might face there.

I just want to see my daughter and my mother, and I just want to go back home to die. Iraq is like paradise without this war. If I stay here, I’m at zero, but if I return to Iraq, I will be on the 10th level of the ladder. (Female, 56, Iraq)

Fear of the future led some of the participants to think that they had no future prospects, which led them to feel anxiety and despair. The inability to foresee the future was related, not only to repatriation (whether or voluntary or involuntary), but also to the residence permit. Some participants were already waiting for something unwanted to happen. ‘Although I would get permission to stay, I don’t know what’s coming. I’m sad; this is my state of mind.’ (Male, 28, Iraq).

The label lack of prospects included those responses in which the participants said they could not answer a question or referred to other issues such as sadness, age, health, or where they said that the answer is in God’s hands, ‘In sha’Allah’.

Discussion

This study investigated how asylum seekers’ experience of subjective well-being is constructed in contrast to their evaluated subjective well-being construct. Overall, the findings show the complexity and multiple facets of asylum seekers’ subjective well-being, and emphasise the importance of social support, participation and empowerment. In addition, the findings also raises questions concerning methodological problems when using CSASS with an asylum seeker population, the relation between demographics and factors affecting asylum seekers’ SWB, and how the asylum-seeking process affects the selfhood construction of their children.

Notes: I = Iraqi, A = Afghan, Ir = Iran, S = Syria, So = Somalia, St = stateless, M = Male, F = Female; *Many participants mentioned more than one of the existing themes; calculated by multiplying the number of meaning units by 100 and then dividing by all meaning units.

Table 5. The elements of asylum seekers’ EvSWB construct.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Main categorya (incidence % in data)</th>
<th>Subcategories</th>
<th>Illustrative quotes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Residence permit (38.1)</td>
<td>Wish to claim it, permanence, safety of family &amp; children, improvement in life</td>
<td>‘If I can stay in Finland.’ (IM, 27.), ‘I hope for the sake of my children that I get a residence permit to guarantee them safety.’ (IF, 38.) ‘If I can stay here, everything will change and gradually rise up and reach 10’ [on the ladder]. (IF, 19.).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Aspirations (18.2)</td>
<td>Socialization/integration, family reunification, occupational opportunities, lifestyle</td>
<td>‘Language learning. When you know it, you can better understand this society and it’s easier to live and be here.’ (AM, 27.), ‘Maybe I am part of Finnish society, doing the same job and helping Finnish society, as well as Iraq.’ (IM, 34.), ‘My wish is to be a paediatrician in the future. If this is possible, then I will be at 10.’ (SoF, 21.). ‘Before I came here, I didn’t know anything about European culture. There are really good people here and a desire to be active. I want that, and that my children and my family also learn this.’ (AM, 27.)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Separation (1.1)</td>
<td>Home &amp; family</td>
<td>‘If I get back home.’ (IM, 20.), ‘I want to see my daughter and mother and I want to go back to death. Iraq is like a paradise without this war. If I stay here, so I’m at zero; if I go back to Iraq, I go to 10.’ (IF, 56.).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fear (2.2)</td>
<td>Repatriation &amp; returning home, decreased well-being, uncertain future</td>
<td>‘Because they send us back.’ (IM, 41.), ‘Because I will return to Iraq, although I do not know my destiny.’ (IM, 30.), ‘Even if I would get permission to stay, I don’t know what’s coming. I am sad, and this is my state of mind.’ (IM, 28.)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lack of prospects (3.9)</td>
<td>Inability to answer, sadness, ‘In sha Allah’, health &amp; age</td>
<td>‘I can’t answer because I didn’t even know that I was coming to Finland.’ (IM, 30.), ‘I am sad, and I have something inside.’ (IM, 27.), ‘In sha Allah’ (IM, 37.), ‘It depends on the situation. I can’t know what God has written for me.’ (SM, 29.), ‘I’m getting old and it has begun to be difficult to walk.’ (IM, 69.)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
By focusing on the fact that asylum seekers’ daily life is filled mainly with waiting, ruminating and worrying (Van Dijk, Bala, Ory, & Kramer, 2001), it is easy to see that the lack of permanence creates a self-perpetuating ‘thinking too much’ effect (Sulaiman-Hill & Thompson, 2012), where a collectively experienced loss of status amplifies the experienced anxiety of the present situation (Kahneman, 1999; see also Hadijyanni, 2002). Asylum seekers’ livelihood transition is coloured by multi-faceted experiences of loss (see also Hadijyanni, 2002; Hengst et al., 2018) which reshape one’s self-concept; ‘Who/what am I?’ (see Hadijyanni, 2002; Hunt, 2008). Overall, loss of permanence, a symbolic self, interpersonal dependency, merits, autonomy, loved ones, a home or, for example, social capital related to status dissonance limits asylum seekers’ ability to plan for the future, inflicting a loss of prospects and an inability to attach to society. Hocking (2018, p. 1,162) described this toxicity as ‘an empty interlude, with time considered passive, empty and wasted’. Spending too much time on introspection, being detached from familiar cultural contexts and being confronted with a completely new cultural language affect asylum seekers’ self-perception and causes anxiety, distress and cognitive disruption.

The results indicate that male participants generally have brighter future expectations, but that female participants generally have more coping mechanisms (Renner & Salem, 2009). Female participants also reported their present situation as being brighter than what the male participants reported, although this finding was not statistically significant. The female participants felt secure in in Finland, concentrated on their children’s well-being and were happy about having social support from the Finns (see also Ekblad, Linander, & Asplund, 2012; Renner & Salem, 2009). Overall, coping was related to those participants who had their families with them. In the reconstruction of a meaningful life and rehabilitation in an unfamiliar cultural context, the family functions as a protective factor (Renner, Laireiter, & Maier, 2012). In contrast, separation from one’s close relationships is a stressor, inflicting psychosocial and cognitive difficulties such as depression, anxiety and an inability to concentrate (see also Tay et al., 2015). More in-depth study of female participants’ statistically significant ability to give the reasons that affect their ExSWB should be undertaken for a better understanding of this phenomenon.

The sample population was drawn from only one reception centre in Finland and at a specific time of crisis, which might affect both the generalisability and transferability of the results. The instrument used in this study had not been validated with refugee or asylum seeker populations, which in itself requires further investigation. Inducing depressed people to focus on their depressed moods and the meanings and consequences of these moods has been found to worsen these moods (Nolen-Hoeksema, 1991, p. 575). In this sense, the topic selected for the study might have already influenced the results. It might also be that the asylum seekers participating in the study might have accentuated their difficulties in order to attract public sympathy (Silove, Sinnebrink, Field, Manicavasagar & Steel, 1997). Asylum seekers’ previous experiences of interrogation or interview situations (e.g., border guards, soldiers, militia, police officers, journalists, NGOs, humanitarian assistants) might have affected how they participated in this study. The language issues might have increased the risk of misinterpretation, and using other asylum seekers and family members as interpreters might have affected the results.

**Conclusion**

From the findings, it can be seen that a theoretical articulation of the limbus phase of asylum seekers’ livelihood transition (LPLT) is essential if we are to better understand the social and political implications. The overall implications of our findings are that rather than merely regarding asylum seekers as suffering passive bystanders, there should (and can) be institutionally organised measures already at the reception centre to support asylum seekers in their livelihood transition, so that they can, as Litner and Elsen (2017, p. 2) noted, become healthy and productive, both at an individual and a societal level. Such measures could create conditions that would enable a two-way integration (Strang & Ager, 2010) and help asylum seekers to gain independence, have opportunities for participation and, overall, help asylum seekers understand the holistic nature of their livelihood transition. By having hope, together with the necessary infrastructural support, it is possible to generate a feeling of reassurance and make it easier to feel more welcome. Services and activities, such as language and culture training and information programmes, increase asylum seekers’ knowledge about society and help them interact with people both inside and outside the reception centre. These institutional-level services help people gain independence in the host country (Valenta & Berg, 2010). Activities such as sport, arts or skills training, can provide, as Stone (2017, p. 180) described, ‘a temporary substitute for aspects of a previous life that may have been lost or a continuation of one particular aspect that helped define a previously more solid identity’. Social support provided by sponsors could, in time, reduce refugees’ and asylum seekers’ anxiety, depression and psychosocial problems, moderate acculturative stress and improve psychological health and adaptation (Renner et al., 2012). Membership in local associations,
groups and networks provides an important source of comfort, support and a sense of belonging (Boateng, 2010), helping asylum seekers and refugees to feel stronger and more resilient (Sherwood & Liebling-Kalifani, 2012). Being met with and receiving professional knowledge of useful health information related to them could generate a sense of gratitude and help them to understand the health issues related to a life in limbo (Ekblad et al., 2012; Jonzon et al., 2015). These measures could be institutionally promoted, with the cooperation of stakeholders (Hartonen, 2018). Despite its limitations, this study nevertheless draws international attention to, and stimulates the scientific discussion of, essential issues concerning the well-being of asylum seekers.

Data availability statement

Research data are not shared for the security of all the participants of this study.

References


