**Muslim wellbeing in Australia: An analysis of personal and national wellbeing among a sample of Muslims living in NSW and Victoria**

This paper examines the subjective personal and national wellbeing of a purpose-selected sample of Muslims (n=509 for PW and n=544 for NW) living in New South Wales and Victoria over 2007 and 2008, using the Personal Wellbeing and National Wellbeing indices from the Australian Unity Wellbeing Index survey. The PWI looks at satisfaction with life across seven proximal domains: health, personal relationships, safety, standard of living, achieving, community connectedness, and future security, whereas the NWI deals with national satisfaction across six distal domains: the economy, the environment, social conditions, governance, business, and national security. Thus, this paper asks: What is the state of subjective wellbeing among Muslims in Australia, particularly in comparison to the general population? It confirms that average Muslim personal wellbeing is comparable to the general Australian population, and that national wellbeing of Muslims averages lower than the general population, but still within normative ranges. It nevertheless finds there are differences between the general population and Muslims in some of the specific domains used to assess personal and national wellbeing, namely that of safety, future security, and satisfaction with Government.

Keywords: subjective wellbeing; life satisfaction; quality of life; Muslim Australians

**Introduction**

The wellbeing of individuals and populations can be assessed subjectively and objectively. Objective measurements of wellbeing, sometimes referred to as 'quality of life', are based on quantifiable external variables such as living conditions, social arrangements, and other environmental factors (Trewin 2001). Alternatively subjective wellbeing (SWB), sometimes referred to as 'life satisfaction', deals with how people perceive their life circumstances (Cummins and Nistico 2002). 'Subjective well-being is an umbrella term for the different valuations people make regarding their lives, the events happening to them, their bodies and minds, and the circumstances in which they

live' (Diener 2006, 400). It can be measured in regard to life as a whole, or in different domains of life. Objective and subjective measures of wellbeing do not correlate well, hence are measuring different things (Cummins et al. 2003).

The concern of this paper is in the realm of subjective wellbeing (hereafter also referred to simply as wellbeing) and features an analysis of data arising from a questionnaire conducted among a sample of Muslims living in New South Wales and Victoria as to their perceptions of personal and national wellbeing, based on the Australian Unity Wellbeing Index (Cummins et al. 2003; Cummins 2007a). This paper asks: What is the state of subjective wellbeing among these Muslims, particularly in comparison to the general Australian population?

*Muslims in Australia*

Muslim contact with Australia predates European settlement. At the very earliest, parts of the northern coast of Australia can be seen in the maps of ninth and tenth century Muslim cartographers. Definitive contact with Australia and the Indigenous peoples in the north occurred with the annual voyages of the Macassan Muslim fisherman to the northern Australian coast from at least the mid-eighteenth century onwards, and possibly earlier. In the convict period, names of Muslim sailors and settlers can be found listed in various records, however evidence of their continuing settlement in Australia is absent, most likely due to the need to assimilate as a survival tactic, or their leaving the colonies after earning passage home (Cleland 2002; Ganter 2008).

The next period of Muslim settlement was with the arrival of the 'Afghan' cameleers who helped open up Australia's vast interior; Malays who worked in the pearling industry in the west; and small-scale migration of Muslims from other parts of the world, however this early Muslim settlement was severely impeded with the introduction of legislation designed to exclude non-whites from immigrating and

settling in Australia (Kabir 2004). Regina Ganter (2008, 486) notes, for instance, that the cameleers came from a range of different ethnic backgrounds including parts of what was then British India (making them British subjects), but were classified as Afghans in order to exclude them as 'alien Asiatics'.

After the Second World War, Australians began debating their racially-exclusive immigration policies. Reforms in the 1950s and '60s saw increased immigration from a variety of hitherto excluded nationalities, although notions of a 'White Australia' were still strong. Such an approach was doomed to failure, however, with its negative impact on Australian trade and position on the international stage. Expectations of the assimilation of migrants shifted to integration, and then in 1973 an official policy of Australian multiculturalism was introduced by the Whitlam government, reflecting the increasing cultural, linguistic, and religious diversity of the population even if its acceptance was not universal (Jupp 2002).

The third period of Muslim settlement occurred with these changes in immigration policies and waves of mainly Lebanese and Turkish immigrants settled in Australia as well as smaller numbers of Muslims from Indonesia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Iran, Fiji, Albania, Sudan, Egypt, Palestine, Iraq, Afghanistan, the Indian subcontinent and more (Saeed and Akbarzadeh 2001). Muslim immigrants began establishing permanent mosques as places of worship, and schools for their children. Through the development of these community institutions as well as building social networks, Muslims began developing an Australian 'flavour' of Islam (Bouma 1994).

As of the 2006 census there were at least 340,394 Muslims in Australia, constituting 1.7% of the general population. Of these, roughly 40% were born in Australia, although most are children of immigrants (ABS 2006a). Thus, the Muslim community is in transition: from being characterised largely by immigration, to

becoming an established and indigenised part of the Australian religious landscape. Despite this, Muslims continue to face scrutiny and questions about their ability to navigate inclusion in Australian society, due to a number of causes not the least of which are the existence of racism and xenophobia among some in the wider community; the involvement of Australian forces in conflicts located in Muslim-majority countries; and acts of violence against Westerners and Western interests overseas committed by some Muslims.

Questions about Muslim settlement in Australia are framed by a larger concern over the place and role of religion in twenty-first century Australian society. Although in the twentieth-century, the academe largely prophesied that secularisation would spell the death of religion this was more the product of wishful thinking than empirical evidence. 'For nearly three centuries, social scientists and assorted western intellectuals have been promising the end of religion. Each generation has been confident that within another few decades, or possibly a bit longer, humans will "outgrow" belief in the supernatural' (Stark 1999, 249). Although there have been seismic shifts in the relationship between religions and states in the development of modern secular democracies, this has not meant the death of religion, but rather the evolution of the social forms in which religion manifests itself. It is precisely because the state is increasingly concerning itself with matters that were traditionally the preserve of religion that has invited a response from religious actors (Robertson 1985, 225). Thus, as the politicising of religion and salience of religious identity are growing ever stronger, scholars in different disciplines are beginning to take a belated interest in the study of religion and its influences on social phenomena.

As Bouma (2006) has shown through analysis of census data, Australian religion is evolving away from its (post--European settlement) British Protestant origins to

increased religious and ethnic diversity. This shift has generated questions over the impact of religious diversity on the functioning of Australian society (Bouma and Ling 2007). Concern with 'social cohesion' because of ethnic, cultural, linguistic and religious diversity in Australian society animated much of the political rhetoric in the Howard years (Jupp, Nieuwenhuysen and Dawson 2007; Kuhn 2007; Maddox 2004). Australia's concept of social cohesion and policies of immigration are based on engineering expansion for economic prosperity, but they also raise questions about national identity and culture (Markus and Kirpitchenko 2007). In particular, Muslim religiosity is seen as particularly problematic.

For many, Muslim settlement contributes to the multicultural and multi-religious nature of Australian society. The official policy of Australian multiculturalism 'recognises, accepts, respects and celebrates cultural diversity' (DIMIA 2003, 6). Muslims, along with Buddhists, Hindus, Sikhs, Jews, and other minorities, are peaceably pursuing the same life-goals as the Anglo-Australian, mostly Christian majority (jobs, housing, future opportunities for their children etc.) but adding new cultural flavourings to the population mix. For some, however, the immigration of Muslims—who spring mostly from West, South and South-East Asia as well as North Africa, and South-East Europe—coupled with recent global crisis events involving Muslims, has re-ignited questions over Australian identity and values (Maddox 2004). In some quarters, Muslim settlement is cause for alarm: a threat to Anglo-Australian and Christian dominance, with dire security implications connecting Muslims inordinately with religious violence (see Durie 2010, for example). A number of authors (Barton and Mansouri 2006; Brasted 2001; Dunn 2001; Jakubowicz 2007; Hage 2002; Kabir 2004, 2006; Saniotis 2004) have written about the historical and contemporary discourse representing Muslims as the problem Other. They discuss how Muslims have

been (and continue to be) represented as un-Australian; belonging to foreign and inferior races; as threatening (both physically and demographically); exhibiting an inferior morality; and possessing an incompatibly alien and unwelcome religion.

Because of the concern about Islam and Muslims in Australia expressed by some politicians and social commentators, research assessing the experiences of ordinary Muslim Australians can help assess whether that concern is justified. As well, in the 'Old World' countries of Europe, concern with Muslim immigration and the cohesion of European societies has ratcheted up in the face of globalisation impacting the nature of European identity. Even in other 'New World' countries such as the United States and Canada, Muslims are the target of political stigmatising and the continuing aftershocks of the War on Terror. An understanding of the Australian example of Muslim experiences—in this case subjective wellbeing—may assist those further afield in assessing the nature of Muslim settlement in other Western nations.

### *Understanding wellbeing*

A great deal of research has established that subjective wellbeing normally falls in the positive half of measurement scales, usually at the midpoint. This finding applies not only for general populations in western as well as non-western countries, but also for minority groups, and those with disabilities and disadvantageous life circumstances (Foroughi, Misajon and Cummins 2001). In particular, in Western nations the population life satisfaction is on average 75% of scale maximum (SM) with a standard deviation of 2.5% SM (Cummins et al. 2003). Consequently, the maintenance of subjective wellbeing is theorised as being held under homeostatic control—that is, constantly, internally adjusted to maintain a stable state—by psychological devices (Cummins 1998; Cummins and Nistico 2002). This theory of Subjective Wellbeing Homeostasis (Cummins et al. 2003), proposes that each person has a 'set-point' of

wellbeing. Personal wellbeing is held under homeostatic control and supported by external factors (such as money and relationships) and internal factors (such as adaption and cognitive restructuring). However, homeostasis does not play as an important a role in areas of life more distant to the self, such as when considering perceptions of national wellbeing, so these are more likely to fall into lower percentages (Cummins et al. 2003).

It is possible for individuals to suffer homeostatic defeat—that is, the inability for normal adjustments to maintain the stable state—when stressors become too overwhelming for an individual to maintain control, which leads to depression. 'A sufficiently adverse environment can defeat the homeostatic system and, when this occurs, the level of subjective wellbeing falls below its homeostatic range. This phenomenon has been recorded at both the personal and at the population level of measurement' (Cummins et al. 2003; Cummins 2007b). When people suffer homeostatic defeat, their wellbeing is more susceptible to the effect of external events (positive or negative) than when wellbeing is being held under homeostatic control (Cummins et al. 2003).

It has been suggested that the set-point of wellbeing is genetically or early environmentally determined; that fluctuations in wellbeing affected by external circumstances are only temporary. However, this has been challenged by Bruce Headey (2008a,b) whose analyses of a longitudinal German study and Australian data demonstrate that wellbeing is impacted by personality factors, and that the wellbeing of a significant minority of the population can change long-term. Furthermore, differences in cultural approaches to wellbeing have been described by William Tov and Ed Diener (2009), although there are some universal correlates. "Because culture is dynamic, what makes people happy may change across generations, as well as within the individual as different aspects of a culture become salient" (Tov and Diener 2009, 30).

There is a growing body of research on religiosity and spirituality and their impact on wellbeing, however the topics are under-studied and the relationships are complicated. Although Peter Kaldor et al. (2004) found in their survey of Christian Australians that there is a positive relationship between religious beliefs, active religious involvement and wellbeing, nevertheless the type of religiosity influenced the relationship. That is, those with "unreflective religiosity"—defined as "affirming that it is wrong to question the authority of the church or the Bible" and that believers "should not question just believe" (2004, 8) —had lower levels of self-esteem and personal growth than the other types of religiosity identified in their research (2004, 11). Similarly, Mark Peterson and Dave Webb (2006) surveyed research on religion, spirituality and wellbeing, finding that a distinction needs to be made between extrinsic and intrinsic forms of religiosity as there is a negative relationship between the former and quality of life, in contrast to intrinsic religiosity, which has a positive relationship (2006, 112). In their suggestions for further research, they recommend assessing possible moderating variables including age, gender, ethnicity, religious affiliation among others (2006, 114–15).

As mentioned previously, internal resources also help support homeostatic control of wellbeing. Positive emotions contribute to building physical, social, intellectual and psychological resources that help fortify individuals' homeostatic control (Cummins 2007a). As well, self-esteem correlates with subjective wellbeing, as does the perception of social support (Foroughi, Misajon and Cummins 2001). Perceived control, the ability to affect outcomes in one's life, also works as internal cognitive buffers: 'A belief in self-efficacy is associated with positive affective states' (Kennedy and Cummins 2007, 110).

Although it is outside the realm of the present paper, the role that Islam plays for Muslims in locating a sense of control may be important in assessing individual wellbeing. It is important to be cautious, however, in treating Islamic religious beliefs and their influence on perceptions of the locus of control, as homogenous. As mentioned previously, different forms of religiosity may have different relationships with wellbeing. Islam, as with the other great world religions, contains many different expressions of theology, philosophy, and sacred law. These have developed over many centuries and reflect the huge diversity that characterises Islamic civilisations over time and geography. For example, one early Muslim debate was on the question of predestination versus free will. Some took an extreme fatalist position, whilst others asserted the primacy of human free will. Furthermore, a variety of different Sufi spiritualties (both Sunni- and Shi'i-oriented) sprung up over the centuries. Thus, even today an individual's phenomenological approach to God is more informative than the single fact that they are a Muslim. A believer could alternatively interpret Islam as teaching that God is a capricious overlord, a benevolent personality, or a panentheistic life-force. Each of these theological approaches would produce different views of the locus of individual control in a believer.

Furthermore, environmental factors may complicate assessing the influence of religiosity and spirituality on wellbeing. Habib Tiliouine, Cummins and Melanie Davern (2009) used a scale for measuring Islamic religiosity and found in a study of 2,909 Muslims in Algeria that religiosity (ubiquitous in the sample) did not contribute to wellbeing as they measured it. This result may have been influenced by societal factors in Algeria. Subjective wellbeing "is challenged by daily life pressures in a postconflict situation in which the main concern is on ways in regaining normal life" (Tiliouine, Cummins and Davern 2009, 71).

It is outside the scope of this paper to compare various types of Muslim religiosity and its influence on subjective wellbeing. Instead, this paper compares Muslims as a religious minority against the broader population of Australians. Further research would need to be undertaken to assess extrinsic versus intrinsic (for example) forms of Islamic religiosity and their relationship with wellbeing.

### *Personal and national wellbeing in Australia*

The Australian Unity Wellbeing Index (AUWI) was designed to study the subjective wellbeing of Australians at both the personal and national levels (Cummins et al. 2003). It is run by researchers at the Australian Centre on Quality of Life and was first conducted in April 2001. The AUWI survey samples two thousand Australians controlled for gender and geographic distribution. They are asked a range of questions about personal and national wellbeing as well as a number of demographic and survey-specific questions. The AUWI research has found that personal wellbeing in Australia is very stable. It sits, on average, at 75 points out of 100, although individual Australians' set-points may lie somewhere between 60 and 90 points (Cummins 2007a).

### *Wellbeing in Different Groups*

As well as studying wellbeing at individual and national population levels, researchers have also analysed the wellbeing of different groups within national populations. This includes age groups, gender, immigrants, income-levels and other variables.

On the question of the influence of gender on wellbeing there is conflicting evidence. Until recently, in the general Australian population, females consistently rated higher than males (Cummins et al. 2003). This has changed in more recent surveys, however, and may be due to external environmental influences (Cummins 2007a). Annette Svanberg-Miller (2004) found that gender differences in wellbeing do exist, but

vary from country to country: 'The direction of these [gender] differences appears to be affected by the social circumstances and the culture in which the measurement takes place. Therefore, there does not appear to be an inherent difference in subjective wellbeing between the genders, but rather a social and cultural effect on how subjective wellbeing is perceived by the genders' (Svanberg-Miller 2004, 22).

The vast majority of Muslims in Australia are immigrants or children of immigrants, thus we might ask: what is the wellbeing of immigrants like? As with gender, research on the subjective wellbeing of immigrants is inconsistent. Some researchers have found that immigrants' wellbeing (particularly those who are refugees) is lower than the general population, whereas other researchers have found that immigrants and native-born populations are comparable. Elham Foroughi, RoseAnne Misajon and Robert A. Cummins (2001) suggest this may be related to the acceptance and size of population of immigrants in different countries. In their 2001 research, they found that the length of residence in Australia, level of social integration—defined as 'the level of participation in a variety of activities outside the home, including shopping, leisure activities, and visiting friends,' as well as 'use of language and degree of interaction with people within the ethnic community group, as well as in the wider community' (Foroughi, Misajon, and Cummins 2001, 157)—and social support did not significantly impact subjective wellbeing of their sample of Persian-Australians. Reciprocity of support was important for wellbeing, as was spirituality; however age at migration had a negative impact for older immigrants. They argued that receiving countries affect subjective wellbeing differently, depending on the overall level of wellbeing in the nation generally.

Ethnicity is another area that produces variable data. Wendy L. Kennedy and Cummins (2007) researched the impact of ethnic identity on wellbeing. They found that

where ethnic identity is important to an individual, developing relationships within the context of ethnic groupings could assist in supporting subjective wellbeing. Consequently, we might similarly hypothesise that where religious identity is important to an individual, nurturing connections with others through the medium of religious commitment may likewise support wellbeing.

Comparatively little research has focused on the role of religion and/or spirituality in wellbeing, particularly within the Australian context. Possibly because religion is heavily infused into Persian culture, Foroughi, Misajon and Cummins (2001) found that spirituality was important for their sample of Persians in Australia, although it should be pointed out they make up only a small part of the Muslim Australian population. An earlier study by Kerry Chamberlain and Sheryl Zika (1988) looking at religiosity among a sample of (presumably Australian and/or New Zealand) women found that the relationship between religiosity and subjective wellbeing, where it occurs, is small and depends greatly on how 'religiosity' and 'wellbeing' are defined and assessed. Of interest to the present paper is the inclusion of a specific question on satisfaction with spiritual/religious beliefs in the AUWI surveys. Cummins (2007a) reported that wellbeing fell in normal levels for two groups of people: those who had high levels of satisfaction with their spiritual/religious experience and those who had no spiritual/religious experience. Those in the middle—people who have some, albeit not very satisfactory, experiences of spirituality and/or religion—have levels of wellbeing that fall below the normal range. Further research on this finding would need to discover whether low satisfaction with spiritual/religious experience is the result or cause of lower wellbeing (Cummins 2007a), and to discriminate between types of spiritual and religious experience, both within and across religious groupings.

*Why study the wellbeing of Muslims in Australia?*

This brings us to the question: why study the wellbeing of Muslims? Apart from the general interest in how religious belief and commitment might impact subjective wellbeing, Muslims in Australia are a highly scrutinised but largely misunderstood group, particularly during the last decade (Humphrey 2007; Kabir 2006; Poynting and Noble 2004; Yasmeen 2008). The Lebanese rape-gangs crisis (1998-2002), the Children Overboard scandal (2001), the September 11 terrorist attacks; the Bali bombings in 2002 and 2005; the 7 July 2005 London bombings, and other recent events such as the Cronulla riots (2005), the arrest and convictions of Abdul Nacer Benbrika and some of his followers on terrorism charges (2005-08), outrage over inflammatory statements made by Australian Sunni leader and imam, Sheikh Taj El-Din al-Hilaly (2006) and some politicians' and journalists' ongoing questioning of Muslims' ability to integrate successfully into Australian life have fixed the spotlight on Muslims in Australia, and make understanding their well-being an issue that is relevant in respect to national, as well as human security.

Understanding the state of wellbeing of this minority can assist in recognising and promoting successful inclusion of Muslims in Australian society, and help identify areas where Muslims are vulnerable to loss of wellbeing and possible homeostatic defeat. Because generally higher rates of wellbeing are associated with positive social capital and lower rates of crime, and can provide a variety of benefits including psychological resilience (Cummins 2007b), we might ask: what are the implications of Muslims (particularly young men) suffering homeostatic defeat? Although it is well outside the purview of the present paper, we might ask: is it possible that low wellbeing and/or homeostatic defeat due to social exclusion and experiences of racism might increase the risk of seeking maladapted solutions through violence and militancy?

Tantalising as the question is, it will not be addressed in this particular paper, which is only a first step in the attempt to fill the gap in understanding the wellbeing of a specific population: Muslims in Australia.

As mentioned previously, the research question addressed in this paper is: What is the state of subjective wellbeing among a sample of Muslims in New South Wales and Victoria, particularly in comparison to the general population?

**Methods**

*Data collection*

The data used for analysis in this paper are part of a larger dataset combined from two research projects using the same survey.[1] Along with a research assistant and the two research-team supervisors, I developed a questionnaire that included questions the Personal Wellbeing Index (PWI) and National Wellbeing Index (NWI) from the Australian Unity Wellbeing Index survey. The PWI looks at satisfaction with life across seven proximal domains: health, personal relationships, safety, standard of living, achieving, community connectedness, and future security, whereas the NWI deals with national satisfaction across six distal domains: the economy, the environment, social conditions, governance, business and national security (Cummins 2007a). The AUWI survey also asks two further abstracted questions on personal and national satisfaction, however these were not included in the data collection for the present study.

[Tables 1 and 2 near here]

Satisfaction with each of these domains is indicated on a scale of 0 (completely dissatisfied) to 10 (completely satisfied). A further question on satisfaction with spiritual/religious experience was not included in the present study, as this was not included in the 15th AUWI survey upon which this questionnaire was based. Further

questions were included, based on the themes of living in Australia; relationship with country of origin; values and characteristics; relationships and leisure; religion and spirituality; work and employment; education; economics; and background demographic information.

Data collection took place over two time periods, through meetings organised with representatives from mosques, Muslim organisations and through the snowballing technique, as well as via an online survey. Participants had to be 16 years or older to participate, and questionnaires were completed anonymously. Between March and August 2007, 290 questionnaires were returned from residents living in New South Wales (mostly around the suburbs of Sydney). Between September 2007 and May 2008, 380 questionnaires were returned from residents living in Victoria (Melbourne, Shepparton and Mildura). A handful of participants living elsewhere than Victoria or New South Wales returned their questionnaires online. Because random sampling was impractical to implement, the results are not strictly generalisable. Nevertheless, the dataset obtained is large enough to be able to make some tentative predictions about the wider population of Muslims and provide directions for future research.

Research assistants entered the questionnaire responses into a database and I performed a quality control check, yielding a dataset based on 600 questionnaires. For this paper I drew two samples out of this dataset based on participants having declared their gender, and answered all the relevant questions: these were 509 participants for the PWI section, and 544 participants for the NWI section.

*Sample characteristics*

The population of 600 Muslims living mostly in New South Wales and Victoria have the following demographic characteristics. Of those who nominated their place of birth, 201 (37.1%) were Australian-born versus 341 (62.9%) migrants, which is roughly

comparable with the national distribution. There were also representatives from 58

different countries, who comprised the Muslims born outside of Australia. The top ten

countries of birth listed are: Australia; Turkey; Lebanon; Iraq; Pakistan; Bangladesh;

Afghanistan; India; Egypt; and Somalia.

[Table 3 near here]

Although 12 people did not specify their gender, of those who did 328 (55.8%)

are female, 260 (44.2%) are male. Age distribution tended towards the younger end,

with nearly half of the population, 279 participants, born between 1980 and 1989 and

nearly a quarter, 139 participants, born between 1970 and 1979.

[Table 4 near here]

There are 240 (40%) New South Wales residents in the survey population, 345

(57.5%) are Victorian residents, and the remaining fifteen participants either did not

state their location, or live somewhere other than New South Wales or Victoria. This is

unlike the general population of Muslims, where there is a 1.5:1 ratio of New South

Wales Muslims to Victorian Muslims (ABS 2006b,c).

Among the 555 participants who specified their employment status, two thirds

(66.3%) are employed, and nearly two thirds (63.7%) of these are in full-time paid

employment. Of the 479 participants who specified their personal annual gross income,

198 (41.3%) earn between $25,000 and $75,000, whilst 135 (28.2%) earn $10,000 or

less. The group earning between $10,001 and $25,000 accounts for just over 15%, as

does those earning over $75,000. It should be remembered that these figures will be

affected by the sizeable proportion of younger participants, a number of whom are still

undertaking some form of education.

*Analysis*

Following the methodology of the AUWI survey, I screened data to remove those

participants who had left any incomplete items (including the demographic question on gender) or who had consistently given maximum (10) or minimum (0) scores for all of the domains.  I standardised the data into units of 0 to 100 point distribution by shifting the decimal point one step to the right. This means that values are calculated as being 'percentage of scale maximum (SM)' (IWG 2006, 17). Then, I averaged specific domains, as well as aggregated them to form the Personal Wellbeing Index (PWI) score and the National Wellbeing Index (NWI) score, the mean of which gives measures of subjective wellbeing. For individuals, the Australian normative range for personal wellbeing is between 50 and 100 points. The normative range for means of groups in Western countries in regard to personal wellbeing is between 70 and 80 points, and in Australia specifically it is between 73.4 and 76.4 points (IWG 2006). Because national wellbeing is more removed than personal wellbeing (and hence less under the control of homeostasis), it is more volatile. The normative range for national wellbeing is lower than personal wellbeing, and in Australia the mean range is between 55 and 65 points (Cummins 2007a).

Because data for the present paper were collected over approximately a year, the data collection period did not match with that collected for any individual AUWI reports. Thus, I will compare Muslims with the general Australian population described in the 18th AUWI survey, which roughly corresponds with the middle of data collection for the Muslim sample. In specifically comparing Muslims to the Australian population generally, I controlled the data for gender and location.

**Wellbeing of Muslims in Australia**

***Personal wellbeing***

*Overview*

This section of the paper will examine the wellbeing of Muslims in Australia, particularly in comparison to the general population as surveyed in the Australian Unity Wellbeing Index. Table 5 shows the personal wellbeing (means and standard deviations) of the Australian population from the 18th AUWI survey, in comparison with the Muslim population (n=509) of the present study adjusted for gender and location. Figure 1 presents a graph of the mean figures.

[Table 5 near here]

[Figure 1 near here]

Consistent with the theory of Subjective Wellbeing Homeostasis and the normative values for people living in Australia, the Personal Wellbeing Index for Muslims score (75.42 points or percentage of scale maximum) is indistinguishable from the general Australian population (75.81 points in Survey 18 and normatively between 73.4 and 76.4 points). It is when we look at satisfaction with specific domains that we see some variation.

*Specific domains*

It is noteworthy that safety and future security are the two domains in which there is a substantial negative difference in satisfaction amongst Muslims in comparison to the general Australian population. These are also the two domains that for Australians generally are at their highest recorded levels at the time of collection (Cummins 2007a). Figure 2 shows the recorded mean levels of satisfaction with the domain of safety among the general Australian population over the 18 surveys, beginning in April 2001

until October 2007 in comparison to the level of satisfaction with safety among the

Muslim sample. Similarly, Figure 3 shows mean satisfaction with the domain of future

security among the general population over 18 surveys in comparison to the Muslim

sample.

[Figures 2 and 3 near here]

Although it is not possible to surmise how satisfaction with safety and future

security has risen or fallen amongst Muslims since 2001, some of the hypothesised

reasons given by Cummins (2007a) for high levels of satisfaction with safety and future

security among Australians generally are ones that might negatively impact Muslims

feeling vulnerable due to world crisis events involving Muslim actors overseas.

Reflecting on Australia's involvement in the Iraq war, Cummins (2007a, 12) writes:

'This sustained rise [in Australians generally] may have been linked to the positive

feelings of relief following the defeat of Hussein without unleashing weapons of mass

destruction, and subsequently our increasingly strong American alliance.' For Muslims,

however, Australia's alliance with the United States and involvement in the war in Iraq,

as well as the increased public scrutiny of the religious minority due to world crisis

events and political rhetoric, has accompanied rises in incidences of racial and religious

vilification (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission 2004; see also Lentini,

Halafoff and Ogru 2009). The only other domain that is lower—and by a negligible

amount—is relationships:  the Australian general mean is 79.22 and the Muslim sample

mean is 78.85. Therefore, Muslims are boosting their overall personal sense of

wellbeing and maintaining homeostasis through the other domains of standard of living,

health, achieving and community.

***National wellbeing***

*Overview*

Table 6 shows the national wellbeing (means and standard deviations) of the Australian population from the 18th AUWI survey, in comparison with the Muslim population (n=544) of the present study adjusted for gender and location. Figure 4 presents a graph of the mean figures.

[Table 6 near here]

[Figure 4 near here]

As with the general Australian population, national wellbeing is less under the control of homeostasis, and influenced by cognitive perceptions of the various domains. Hence it consistently falls lower than personal wellbeing. It is at the level of national wellbeing we can see Muslims, at 59.23 points, are not faring quite as well as the rest of the Australian population. Nevertheless, they are still within the normative range for Australians, which is between 55 and 65 points (Cummins 2007a). In every domain except satisfaction with the state of the natural environment in Australia, where Muslims were negligibly more satisfied, every domain in national wellbeing is lower for Muslims than for the Australian general population.

*Specific domains*

Of particular interest is the domain of government. Muslim satisfaction is a huge 8.01 points below the mean of the general population (Cummins 2007a). Figure 5 shows the recorded mean levels of satisfaction with the domain of government among the general Australian population over 17 surveys (data are not available for the first AUWI survey), from September 2001 until October 2007 in comparison to the level of satisfaction with government among the Muslim sample.

[Figure 5 near here]

Cummins (2007a) points out that for the general Australian population, satisfaction with the government rises in times of national threat (such as after the Bali bombings). This is not the case for the Muslims in this sample, most likely because the crisis events that raised the satisfaction levels for the general Australian population, involved Muslim actors overseas. Also, it is important to mention fallout, not just the fact that these events involved Muslims. Consequently, feelings of vulnerability (due to belonging to the same religion as claimed by criminals and terrorists) interfere with satisfaction levels for the local Muslim population.

*The Impact of Change of Government and Location*

The data for the Muslim sample were collected over approximately a year in two batches. The first batch of questionnaires was collected in New South Wales, whilst the former Howard Coalition government was at the end of its term. The second batch of questionnaires was collected in Victoria in the lead-up to the federal election and in the post-Rudd Labor victory period. Consequently, it is possible to compare satisfaction levels between those Muslims living in Sydney under the Howard Coalition government, and Muslims living in Melbourne during the change over to the Rudd Labor government.

Table 7 and Figure 6 show the means (the table also contains the standard deviations) of personal wellbeing for Muslims living in New South Wales between March and August 2007, and Victoria between September 2007 and May 2008, all controlled for gender. Likewise, Table 8 and Figure 7 show the means (and standard deviations in the table) of national wellbeing for Muslims in NSW and Victoria during the two time periods, controlled for gender as well.

[Tables 7 and 8 and Figures 6 and 7 near here]

Because the samples were gathered in two different states over two different time periods, it is not possible to distinguish whether it is the variable of location, or time (i.e. during which the change of government occurred) that results in the differences in values. We can suggest, however, that being a Muslim in Victoria with the prospect and reality of the Rudd Labor government is associated with higher wellbeing, on average, than being a Muslim in NSW under the Howard Coalition government.

It should also be pointed out that state politics might well have an impact on wellbeing and satisfaction with the domains of safety, future security, national security and satisfaction with government. The NSW Labor state government has long been criticised for dabbling in dog-whistle tactics targeting non-Anglo ethnic communities including Lebanese Muslims (Tabar, Noble, and Poynting 2003).

**Conclusion**

Subjective wellbeing, how individuals perceive their life circumstances, appears to be controlled by homeostasis when it involves domains proximal to the self. Much research has established that in Western nations, including Australia, personal wellbeing falls, on average, at 75% of scale maximum. The present paper confirms this theory holds true for the Muslim Australians surveyed in this research. Their average Personal Wellbeing Index score, from data gathered during 2007 and 2008 was 75.42 points, comparable with the average Australian mean of 75.81 from the Australian Unity Wellbeing Index survey 18 conducted during October 2007.

A noteworthy difference between the general Australian population and the Muslim sample was discovered when examining the various domains that make up the Personal Wellbeing Index. The two domains with which the general population experienced record highs, were satisfaction with safety and future security. However,

these were the two domains where there was a substantial drop in satisfaction among Muslims. One possible explanation may be that some of the very factors that promote high satisfaction of these domains in the general population (namely, responses to threats involving Muslim actors overseas) are ones that contribute to feelings of vulnerability amongst Muslims domestically.

The utility of positioning Muslims, and in particular Muslims in Australia, as a potential threat in political rhetoric since the 11 September 2001 bombings cannot be overstated. As Rick Kuhn (2007) has pointed out, the sustained anti-Muslim dog-whistling that Australian politicians and social commentators have engaged in, has served a number of purposes, such as shifting attention away from public relations problems for the governments of the day; boosting patriotic nationalism (at least, for non-Muslims); providing an identifiable enemy for the culture wars; as a tool for undermining multiculturalism; to change immigration policies; as an opposition wedge; to tap into and benefit from racism where it exists in marginal seats; and to sell newspapers.

Sadly, the safety and future security of Australians generally appears to be bought at the cost of the safety and future security of the Muslim minority. Thus, to counter the effect of lowering these domains but maintaining homeostasis, Muslims are boosting their satisfaction with the other domains contributing to personal wellbeing. Further research would need to be undertaken to compare Muslim samples over time and whether the marked differences with the specific domains of safety and future security are merely a temporary problem, or reflective of areas where substantial work needs to be undertaken to reassure a vulnerable minority that their place in Australia is assured. This is because the potential cost to having two permanently lowered domains is that homeostasis becomes harder to maintain, leaving Muslims more at risk of suffering homeostatic

defeat. As mentioned previously, higher rates of wellbeing are generally associated with positive social capital and lower rates of crime (Cummins 2007b).

Turning to national wellbeing, homeostasis plays less of a role given the distal nature of the domains, and thus the scores are more volatile and fall in a lower range than personal wellbeing.  Here, the differences between the Australian general population and Muslims specifically are greater. The average National Wellbeing Index score for Muslims is 59.23 points, some 4.49 points lower than the general population, although this is still within the normative range for Australia.

The biggest difference lies in the domain of satisfaction with government. This is unsurprising, given the widely held perception that politicians have used Muslims (at both federal and state levels) as part of a dog-whistle tactic to scare the electorate, intimating that Muslims have difficulty integrating into Australian society.  This is particularly noticeable when looking at the difference between Muslims living in New South Wales and Victoria over the time period that included a change of government.

Figure 1. Means of personal wellbeing of Australian general population from the 18th AUWI survey, compared with Muslims in current sample, adjusted for gender and location.
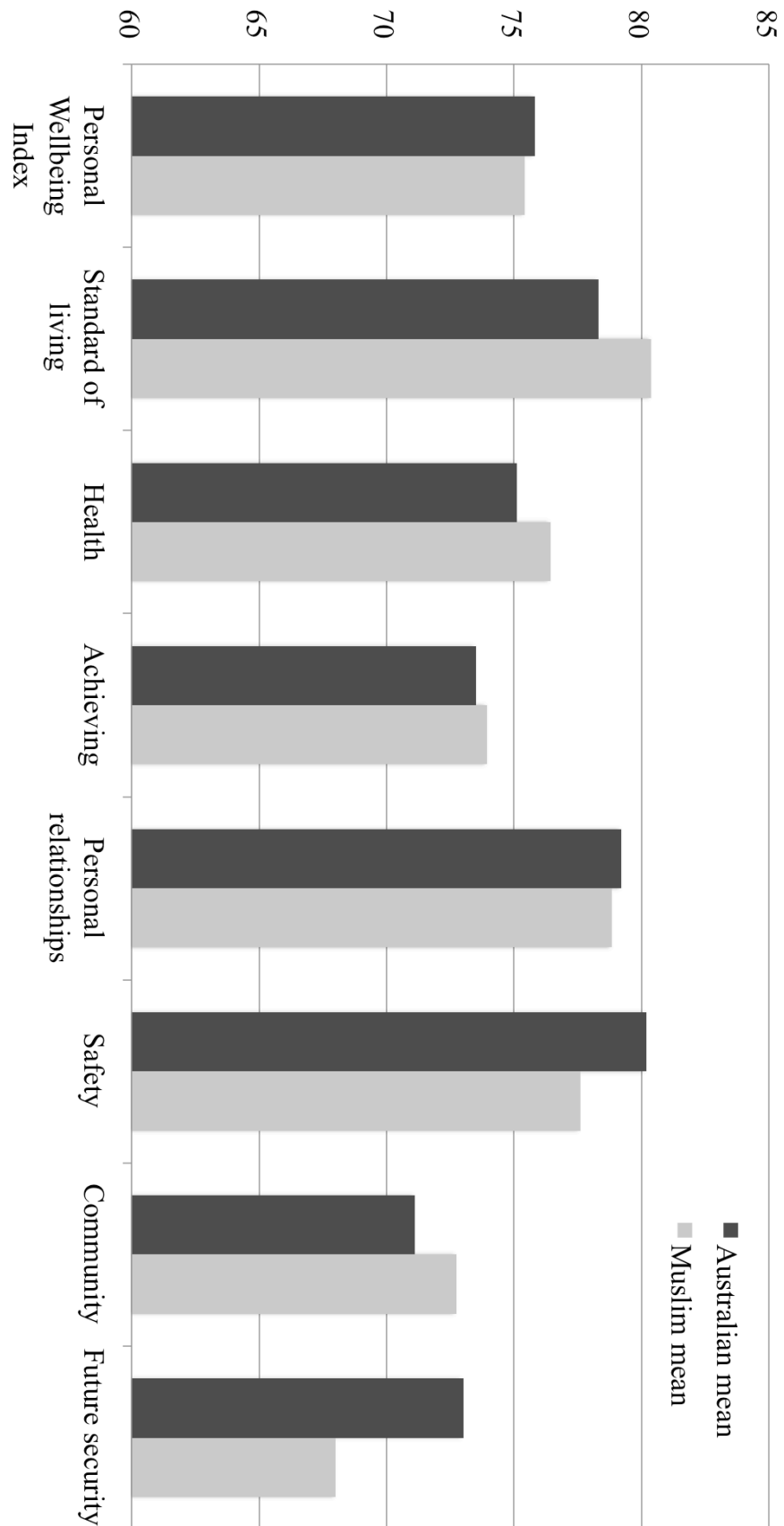
Figure 2. Means of satisfaction with safety among general Australian population over 18 surveys, and the present Muslim sample, adjusted for gender and location.
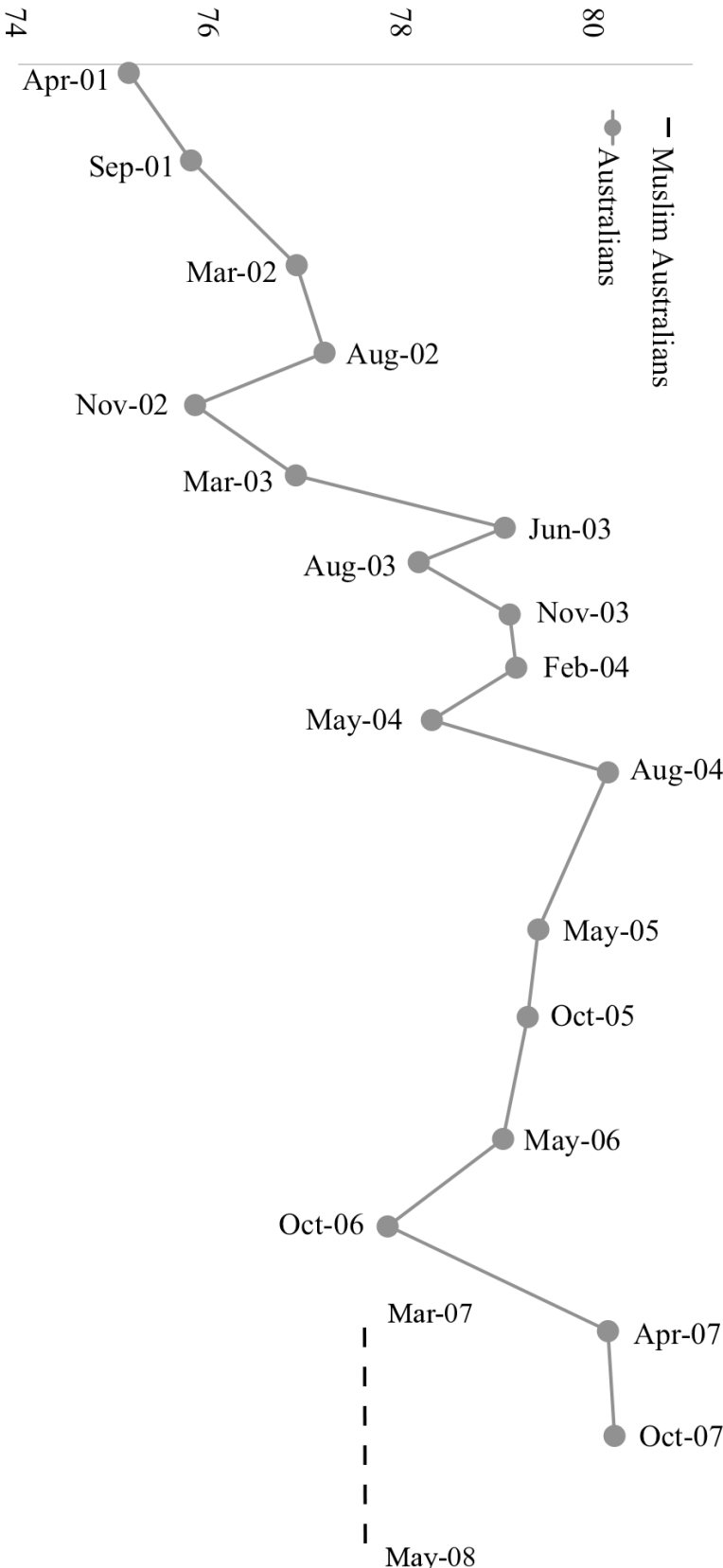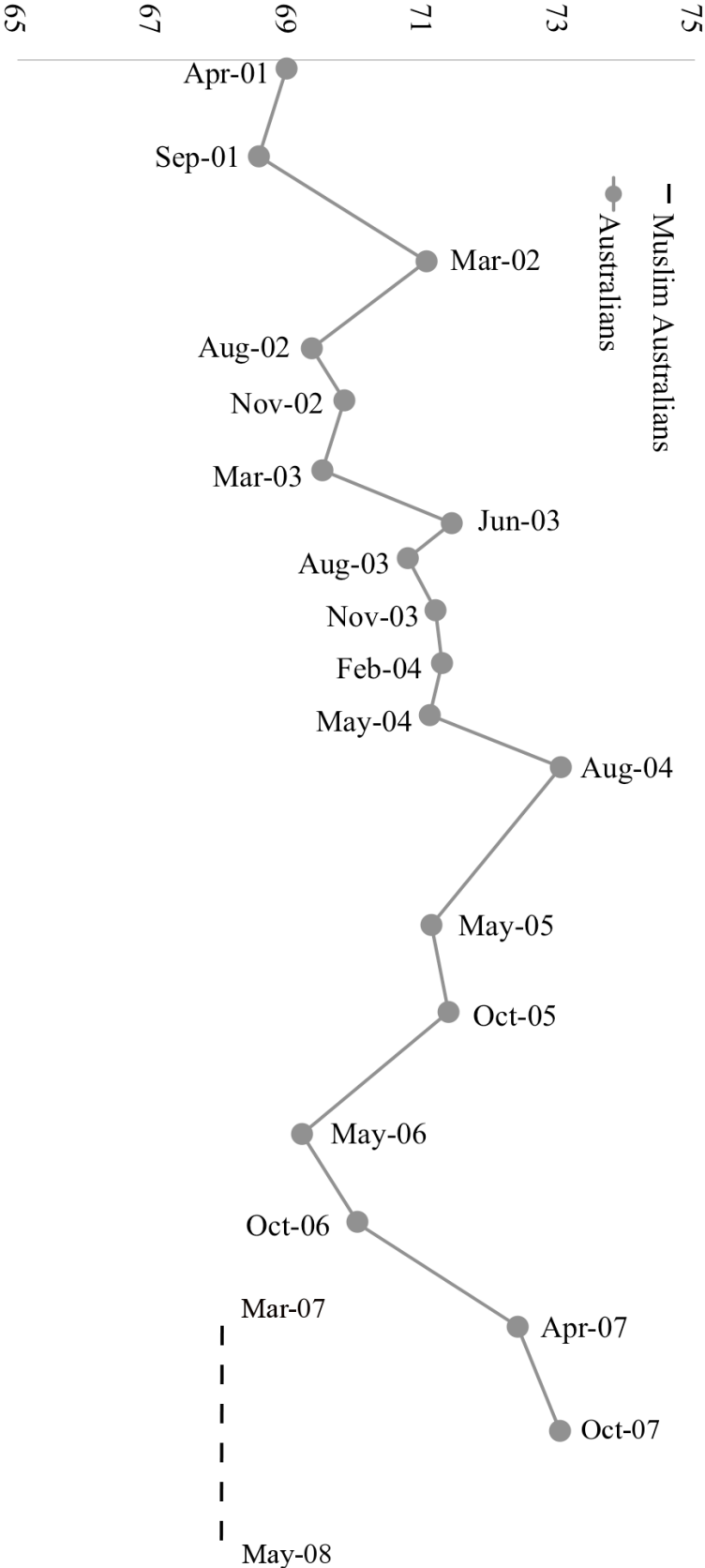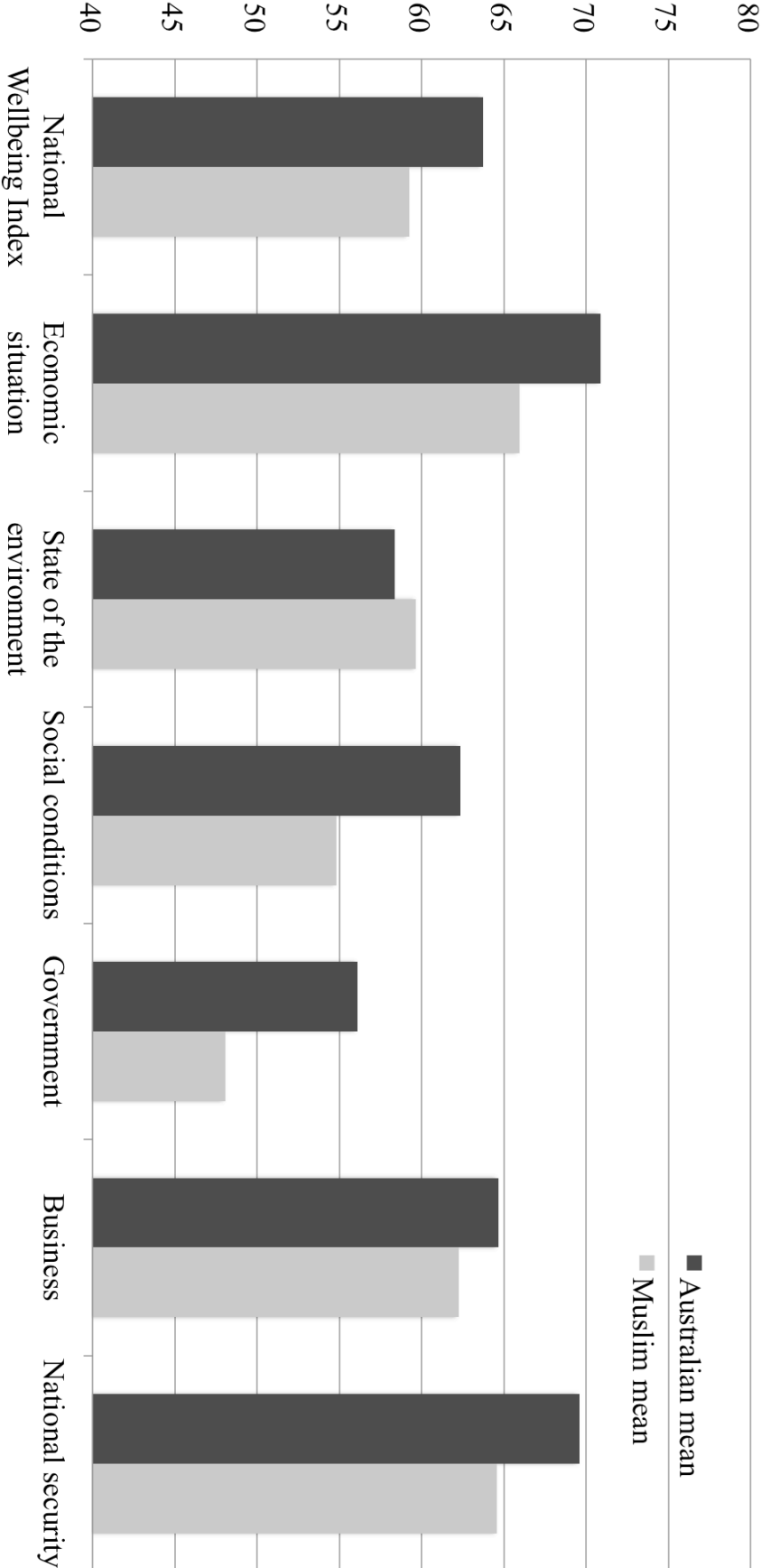
Figure 3. Means of satisfaction with future security among general Australian population over 18 surveys, and the present Muslim sample, adjusted for gender and location.

Figure 4. Means of national wellbeing of Australian general population from the 18th AUWI survey, compared with Muslims in current sample, adjusted for gender and location.

Figure 5. Means of satisfaction with government among general Australian population over 17 surveys, and the present Muslim sample, adjusted for gender and location.
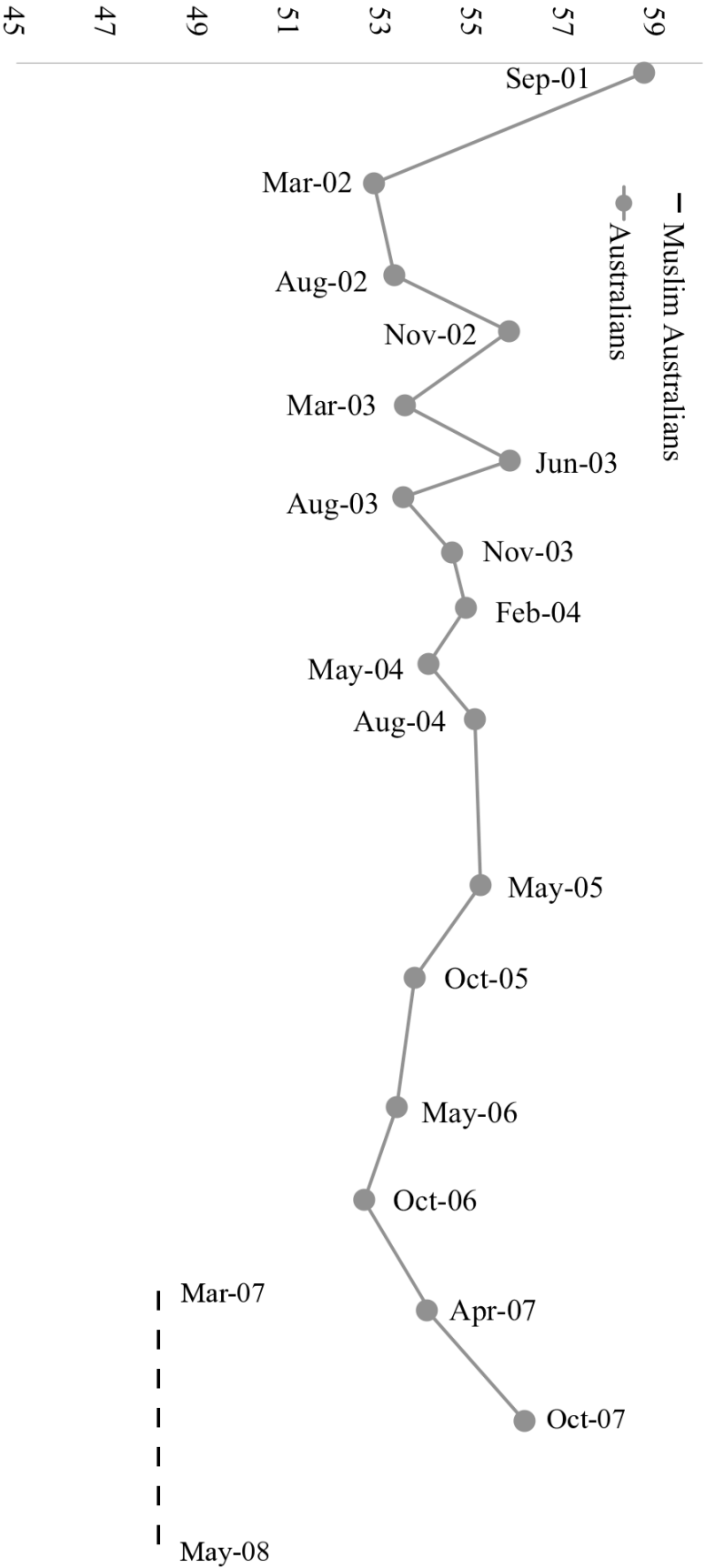
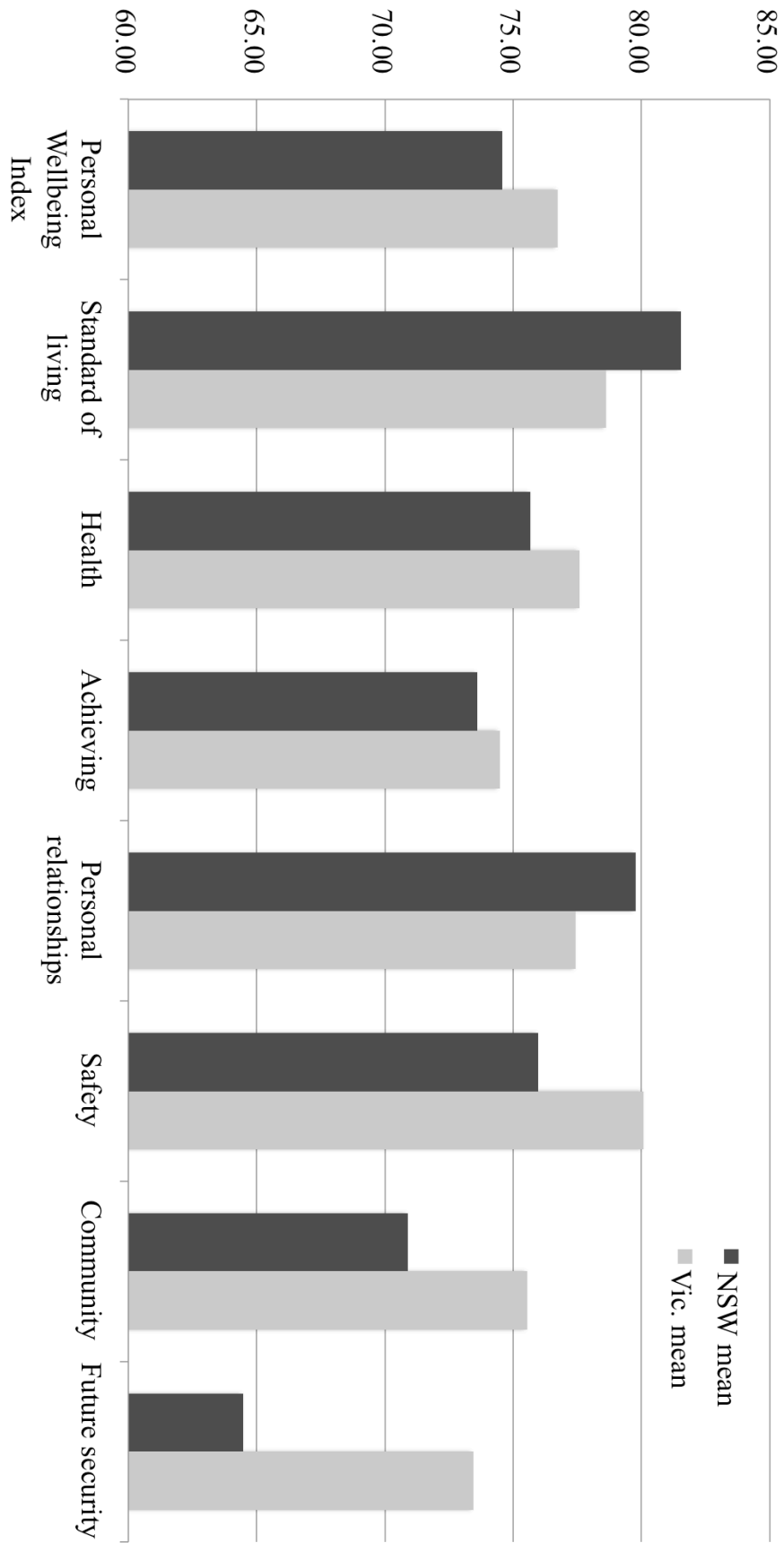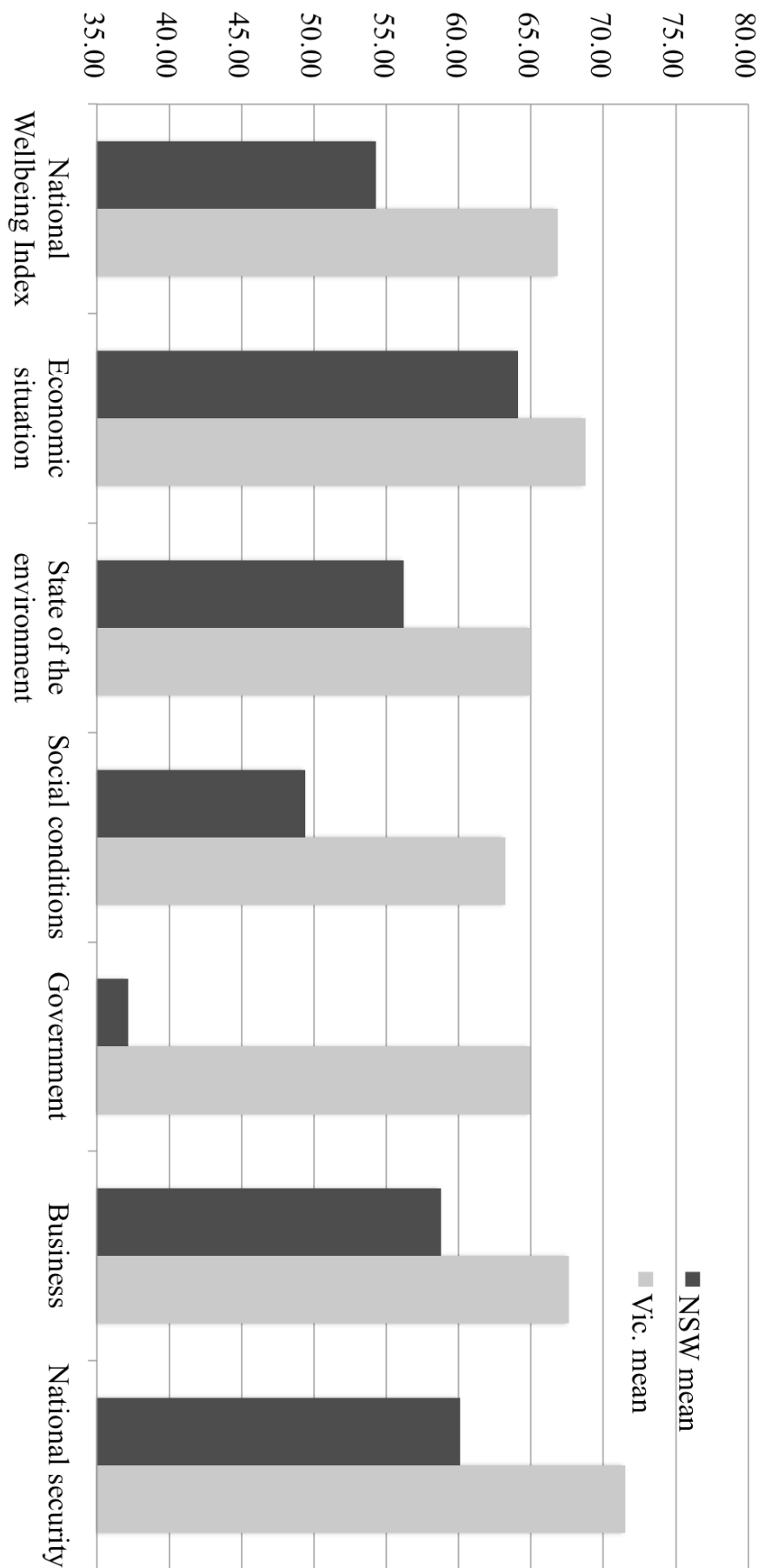Figure 6. Means of personal wellbeing of NSW and Victorian Muslims, adjusted for gender.

Figure 7. Means of national wellbeing of NSW and Victorian Muslims, adjusted for gender.

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Notes

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