



Introduction

Research Question

This poster presents my analysis of personal and national wellbeing among Muslim Australians, based on the Australian Unity Wellbeing Index [1]. In particular, it deals with the question: What is the state of subjective wellbeing among a sample of Muslim Australians living in New South Wales and Victoria in comparison to the general population.

What is Wellbeing?

Previous researchers have assessed the wellbeing of individuals and populations either objectively or subjectively. Objective wellbeing, sometimes called "quality of life," is based on quantifiable external variables [2, p.3]. Subjective wellbeing, on the other hand, is how people perceive their life circumstances, which researchers can measure as a whole, or in different domains of life, such as health and personal safety [3, p.401]. I have measured subjective wellbeing in the current research.

Much research has established that when measuring this form of wellbeing among Western populations, life satisfaction averages at 75% of scale maximum (SM) with a standard deviation of 2.5% SM. Consequently, Cummins theorised that wellbeing is held under homeostatic control. That is, each individual has a "set-point" of wellbeing, actively maintained by psychological devices, supported by external factors (e.g. money and relationships) and internal factors (e.g. adaption and cognitive restructuring). People can suffer homeostatic defeat when stressors become too overwhelming for an individual to maintain control, which leads to depression [4, pp. 5-6].

Headley has challenged earlier researchers' assumption that an individual's wellbeing set-point is genetically or early environmentally determined. He analysed a longitudinal German study and Australian data to demonstrate that wellbeing is impacted by personality factors, and that the wellbeing of a significant minority of the population can change long-term [5, p.2].

Lastly, homeostasis is not as influential in life areas more distant to the self, such as when we look at perceptions of national wellbeing [4, p.5].

Personal and National Wellbeing in Australia

Cummins and researchers at the Australian Centre on Quality of Life, Deakin University developed the Australian Unity Wellbeing Index (AUWI) to study the subjective wellbeing of Australians, beginning with the first survey conducted in April 2001; the twentieth survey was run in February 2008.

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 an individual Australian's set-point may lie somewhere between 60 and 90 points [1, pp.1-2].

As well as studying wellbeing at individual and national population levels, researchers have also examined the wellbeing of different groups within national populations, albeit reporting variable results.

Why Study Muslim Australians' Wellbeing?

I am interested in studying Muslim Australians' wellbeing, because they are a heavily scrutinised but largely misunderstood group. Muslims have been at the receiving end of an intensive "Othering" discourse [7], fashioned by social commentators and politicians, spurred on by spectacular global crisis events involving Muslim actors overseas, not to mention the still-hovering ghosts of the White Australia policy [8].

This leads us to the question: does empirical evidence support the perception that Muslim Australians are truly different from the wider population? I argue that understanding Muslim Australians' wellbeing can contribute one part of the answer to this complex question. It can help us identify areas where Muslims are vulnerable to loss of wellbeing, and because higher rates of wellbeing are generally associated with positive social capital and lower rates of crime [9], promoting wellbeing among Muslim Australians may mitigate against some of the implications of homeostatic defeat, including the risk of some seeking maladapted solutions through violence and militancy.

Methodology

Data Collection

As part of a research team, I developed and distributed a questionnaire to Muslims living in New South Wales and Victoria. 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 sixteen 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 questionnaires online.

Research assistants entered the questionnaire responses into a database and I performed a quality control check, yielding a dataset based on six hundred 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.

Study Population

The convenience sample of Muslim Australians who participated in this research have the following demographic characteristics. Of those who nominated their place of birth, 201 (37.1%) were Australian-born versus 341 (62.9%) immigrants, which is roughly comparable with the national distribution. There were also representatives from fifty-eight different countries, who comprised the Muslims born outside of Australia. The top ten countries of birth listed were: Australia; Turkey; Lebanon; Iraq; Pakistan; Bangladesh; Afghanistan; India; Egypt; and Somalia.

Top 10 Countries of Birth	No. (n=500)	%
Australia	201	33.5
Turkey	34	5.7
Lebanon	33	5.5
Iraq	26	4.3
Pakistan	25	4.2
Bangladesh	24	4.0
Afghanistan	16	2.7
India	13	2.2
Egypt	10	1.7
Somalia	7	1.2
Other (incl. unknown)	211	35.2

There were 328 females (55.8%) and 260 males (44.2%), although 12 people did not specify their gender. 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.

The Indices

The questionnaire included questions from the AUWI survey [1]. The Personal Wellbeing Index (PWI) looks at satisfaction with life across seven proximal domains, whilst the National Wellbeing Index (NWI) deals with national satisfaction across six distal domains.

The PWI asks, how satisfied are you with:

- Your standard of living?
- Your health?
- What you are achieving in life?
- Your personal relationships?
- How safe you feel?
- Feeling part of your community?
- Your future security?

The NWI asks, how satisfied are you with:

- The economic situation in Australia?
- The state of the natural environment in Australia?
- The social conditions in Australia?
- Government in Australia?
- Business in Australia?
- National security in Australia?

Respondents indicate their satisfaction to each question on a scale of 0 (completely dissatisfied) to 10 (completely satisfied). Following the AUWI methodology, I screened data to remove those who had left any incomplete items or who had consistently given maximum (10) or minimum (0) scores for all of the domains.

Wellbeing of MUSLIM AUSTRALIANS

by Rachel Woodlock, Centre for Islam & the Modern World, School of Political and Social Inquiry (PSI) supervised by Prof. Greg Barton,^a Prof. Gary D. Bouma^b and Dr Pete Lentini^c

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)" [10, p.17]. Then, I averaged specific domains, as well as aggregated them to form the PWI score and the NWI score, the mean of which gives measures of subjective wellbeing.

Because data for this research were collected over approximately a year, the data collection period did not match with that collected for any individual AUWI report. Thus, I have compared Muslim Australians 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.

Analysis

Personal Wellbeing

Figure 1 shows personal wellbeing for Australians generally in comparison with Muslim Australians. The first is the Personal Wellbeing Index score followed by specific domains. 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) [10, p.18]. It is when we look at satisfaction with specific domains that we see some variation.

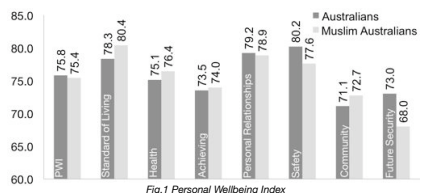


Fig.1 Personal Wellbeing Index

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 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.

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.



Fig.2 Satisfaction with Safety: means of 18 Australian surveys compared with Muslim Australians in current survey.

Although it is not possible to surmise how levels of satisfaction with Safety and Future Security have risen or fallen amongst Muslims since 2001, some of the hypothesised reasons given by Cummins 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. "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" [1, p.12]. 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 been accompanied by rises in incidences of racial and religious vilification [11].

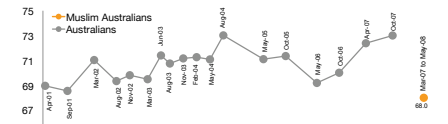


Fig.3 Satisfaction with Future Security: means of 18 Australian surveys compared with Muslim Australians in current survey.

National Wellbeing

Figure 4 shows national wellbeing for Australians generally in comparison with Muslim Australians. 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 [1, p.7].

Of particular interest is the specific domain of satisfaction with Government. Muslim satisfaction is a huge 8.01 points below the mean of the general population.

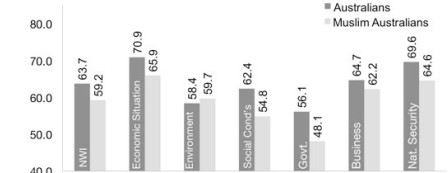


Fig.4 National Wellbeing Index

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.

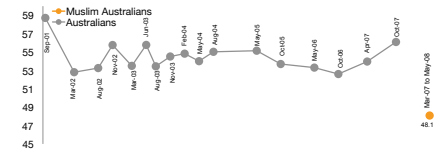


Fig.5 Satisfaction with Government: means of 17 Australian surveys compared with Muslim Australians in current survey.

Cummins points out that for the general Australian population, satisfaction with the Government rises in times of national threat (such as after the Bali bombings) [1, p.24]. 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, compounded by the phenomenon of dogwhistle politics employed against Muslim Australians by various politicians across the party divide, but most notably by former Prime Minister John Howard during his decade-long stewardship [12].

Conclusion

The findings presented here confirm that average Muslim Australian personal wellbeing is comparable to that of the general Australian population, and that national wellbeing of Muslims averages lower than the general population, but still within normative ranges. Nevertheless, there are differences between the general population and Muslim Australians in some of the specific domains used to assess personal and national wellbeing, namely that of safety, future security and satisfaction with Government.

One possible explanation for these findings may be that some of the very factors that promote high satisfaction of these specific domains in the general population are ones that contribute to feelings of vulnerability amongst Muslims domestically. In other words, 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 and maintain homeostasis, Muslims are boosting their satisfaction with the other domains contributing to personal wellbeing.

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