



Social Sciences & Humanity Research Review



Understanding Subjective Well-Being Among Afghan Refugees and Religious Minorities in Balochistan

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords: Subjective Well-Being, Satisfaction With Life, Positive Emotion, Negative Emotion, Religious Minorities, Afghan Migrants, Balochistan

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ABSTRACT

The study explored subjective well-being in Afghan migrants and religious minorities residing in Balochistan. In Positive psychology, subjective well-being is a dimension of flourishing individuals. Exploring it in Pakistani Afghan community and religious minorities is of more value in the context of their experiences of political marginalization, social exclusion, and legal insecurity. The study focused on three core dimensions of subjective well-being: a. Satisfaction with life, b. frequent experience of positive affect, and c. infrequent experience of negative affect. Level of the three aspects of subjective well-being was assessed. However the primary goal of the current research was to identify these psychological outcomes varied by gender, religious identity, and national affiliation in these two populations. The study was part of pilot testing of MPhil research work. It was cross-sectional survey with comparative research design. Data was collected on self-report measures of Satisfaction with Life (SWL) and Scale of Positive and Negative Experience (SPANE). Results showed statistically no prominent variance amongst components of subjective well-being in males and females. However, notable distinction was observed amongst Muslims and those who are not Muslims, as non-Muslims reported higher satisfaction towards life meanwhile with presence of negative affect; though there was no significant difference in positive affect. Significant differences were found between Afghan and Pakistani participants in satisfaction towards life and negative emotion. Pakistanis reported higher contentment in life comparable to Afghans. Pessimism was significantly higher among Pakistanis than Afghans. Major dissimilarity was not seen in positive affect. These findings support theoretical frameworks such as Minority Stress Theory and Conservation of Resources Theory, emphasizing the interplay between structural disadvantage, emotional complexity, and adaptive functioning.

INTRODUCTION

Flourishing individuals undergo greater levels of subjectivity towards their well-being. They report immense satisfaction with in their lives, and have tendency to experience positive emotions more frequently, and negative emotions less frequently (Seligman et al., 2000). Balochistan, Pakistan's largest and least developed province (McAuliffe et.al. 2018). Quetta, the capital, being a multicultural metropolis is home to many Afghan migrants and religious minorities as first citizens (Changezi et.al. 2017). The UNHCR has recorded that as of 2023, over 1.3 million Afghan refugees are living in Pakistan, plus approximately 1.5 million undocumented Afghans, mainly in the province of Baluchistan (UNHCR, 2023). M. Fuchs et.al (2020) reported that, Pakistan, being a Muslim country, had 4% of its people from different religions. Baluchistan, which shares borders with Afghanistan and Iran, has number of minority religions approximately 5% of the total population (Bureau of Statistics, 1998). Majority of Sikh, Hindu, Christian and Parsi particularly are found in provincial capital (Bureau of Statistics, 1998). The minorities in Baluchistan have shared significant socio-cultural and economic contribution (Minority Rights Group International, 2022). However, issues pertaining to unequal treatment and discrimination cannot be ignored altogether (Changezi et.al. 2017).

Subjective Wellbeing

According to Diener (1984), subjective well-being describes what a person thinks and feels about their life, including both their emotions and how happy they are with their circumstances. This simple definition points out that there are both emotional (positivity and negativity) and mental (how content we feel with life) elements to SWB (Diener, 1984). Subjective well-being involves people's views of their lives which can be reflected in their judgments and feelings. SWB is related to feelings of autonomy, strength and togetherness which are basic needs in psychology (Ryan & Deci, 2001).

An OECD (2013) study suggested that subjective well-being includes various elements like contentment with life, emotions and eudaimonic wellness, and feeling of meaning in life. According to Diener, Oishi and Tay (2018), SWB means people's assessments of their lives and the various activities and events in it. For Lyubomirsky et al. (2005), subjective well-being consists of positive emotions, being content and believing your life has value.

Components of Subjective Well-Being

Aspects of subjective well-being are: satisfaction with life, positive emotion, and negative emotion (Diener et al., 1999; Ryan & Deci, 2001). All three dimensions intersect but each have distinction, and each contributes uniquely to an individual's altogether wellness.

1. Life Satisfaction

Contentment in one's life which deals with Thought aspect of subjectivity of well-being. It defines a person's overall judgment about their life quality based on personal standards and criteria (Diener et al., 1999). According to Kammann (1983) this evaluation is relatively stable over time and is not necessarily dependent on moment-to-moment emotions. People assess their life satisfaction by considering whether their life circumstances align with their values, goals, and expectations Kashdan (2004).

2. Positive Affect

Subjective well-being's emotional aspect addresses positive affect which means experiencing of pleasurable state such as joy, interest, enthusiasm, and contentment. Frequent and intense experiences of positive affect are considered indicative of high subjective well-being (Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988). Individuals with high levels of positive affect are generally more optimistic, socially engaged, and resilient. Positive emotions not only enhance personal

well-being but also broaden an individual's thought-action repertoire, contributing to greater creativity, problem-solving, and interpersonal effectiveness (Fredrickson, 2001).

3. Negative Affect

Negative affect, by contrast, explains undergoing unhappy state such as furiousness, fear, anxiety, guilt, or sadness. While all individuals experience negative emotions at times, high levels or frequent occurrences of negative affect can significantly reduce overall SWB (Diener et al., 1999). Hence it's noteworthy here to state that the non-appearance of unpleasant emotion does not spontaneously state the effect of pleasant state being there, or the other way round. The balance between pleasant and unpleasant feelings play a crucial charter to form one's overall well-being (Watson et al. 1988).

Literature Review

Refugees all across the world have a number of challenges to cope with (Wadood et.al. 2020), similar is the case of minorities. Studies suggests that religious minorities in Pakistan—such as Christians, Hindus, Sikhs, and Ahmadis report lower life satisfaction due to systemic discrimination and persistent social exclusion (Bhatti et al., 2020; Jamil, 2021). Denial of access to education, government employment, and political participation reduces their perceived control over life circumstances and opportunities for personal growth (Ali, 2022). For women in these communities, intersectional oppression is particularly pronounced. Cultural restrictions combined with patriarchal norms exacerbate their exclusion, resulting in diminished life satisfaction and reduced agency (Amjad & Rafique, 2020).

Afghan migrants living in Balochistan, many of whom have resided in Pakistan for decades without legal recognition, face similar challenges. Studies show that lack of citizenship, economic insecurity, and disrupted community structures contribute to a deep sense of instability and dissatisfaction with life (Khan & Rasheed, 2020; UNHCR, 2021). For ethnic minorities within this group, such as the Hazara Shia, the burden is further intensified due to sectarian discrimination and physical insecurity, leading to compounded experiences of disempowerment (Yousaf & Hassan, 2022).

While emotional expression plays a crucial role in well-being, many individuals within these groups encounter restrictions on positive emotional experiences. Women from religious minorities, for instance, often report feeling unable to express joy or pride in public due to fear of surveillance or social condemnation (Amjad & Rafique, 2020). Celebrating cultural identity openly is sometimes viewed as unsafe, thereby reducing access to collective sources of happiness. Among Afghan migrant women, particularly those from non-dominant sects, gender norms and trauma histories further suppress emotional expression, limiting their engagement in positive social experiences (Khattab et al., 2020).

In conservative settings, men both Pakistani and Afghan are often discouraged from expressing emotions openly, especially those associated with vulnerability or affection. Cultural expectations of stoicism and emotional restraint create barriers to the experience and expression of positive affect (Shah & Tariq, 2020). At the same time, dominant Muslim groups often find emotional fulfillment through religious rituals and communal worship, but these practices are not always accessible to minority groups due to fear of discrimination or violence (Jamal & Haider, 2019).

On the other hand, negative emotional experiences are significantly more common in populations facing structural adversity. Religious minorities in Pakistan frequently experience legal exclusion, social hostility, and threats of violence—factors strongly associated with chronic emotional distress (Human Rights Watch, 2021; Bhatti et al., 2020). The inability to access

justice or express grievances intensifies feelings of helplessness and fear. Among Afghan migrants, the long-standing effects of forced displacement, poverty, and intergenerational trauma increase the prevalence of anxiety, depression, and emotional exhaustion (Sweileh, 2018; UNHCR, 2021). These emotional burdens are especially heavy among children and adolescents, who often struggle with disrupted schooling, identity confusion, and poor social integration.

Cultural and gendered norms further complicate the emotional landscape. Men may be socialized to internalize distress, which can result in unacknowledged or untreated psychological symptoms (Yousaf & Hassan, 2022). Women, particularly those from minority groups, often lack access to safe mental health resources and may fear being stigmatized if they disclose emotional difficulties (Amjad & Rafique, 2020). In both groups, stigma around mental health inhibits emotional expression, thereby reinforcing the persistence and intensity of negative affect.

Rationale

Subjective well-being (SWB) is a relevant and valuable phenomenon to be explored among afghan communities and religious minorities in Balochistan as happy and flourished life had been a critical concern for them due to their prolonged exposure to displacement, discrimination, and marginalization. Afghan refugees faced legal insecurity and limited access to education, healthcare, and employment, which negatively affected their emotional and psychological well-being (UNHCR, 2023; Khan & Ahmad, 2021). Similarly, religious minorities experienced social exclusion and threats to their identity, which reduced their sense of belonging and life satisfaction (Yousaf, 2020). Both groups had also suffered from economic hardship and lack of political representation, further lowering their SWB (Diener et al., 1999). Studying SWB among these populations helped to understand impressions of structural inequalities psychologically while highlighting requirement of inclusive social policies.

Research Design and Participants

The study employed a cross-sectional, comparative research design. Using a purposive sampling strategy, an account of 190 participants were studied. The study collected demographical data across categories such as age, gender, nationality, religion, religious minority status, mother language, education, and employment. Most participants were aged between 19 and 40 years (approximately 70%), with a nearly equal distribution of males (around 51%) and females (49%). The sample included both Afghan (about 52%) and Pakistani (48%) nationals, with equal representation of Muslims and non-Muslims (50% each). Among religious minorities, Christians, Hindus, Sikhs, Parsis, and others were represented, with individual groups ranging between 3% and 17%. Ethnic backgrounds included Pashtun, Uzbek, Hazara, and others, each contributing between 15% to 49% of the sample. Educational levels ranged from illiterate to postgraduate, with most participants having middle to bachelor's level education (13%–17%). Employment status showed a higher proportion of employed individuals (around 56%) compared to unemployed (44%).

Objectives

- To explore differences in level of satisfaction with life, negative emotion and positive emotion amongst Muslim as well as in non-Muslim participants.
- To investigate gender differences found in aspects of subjective well-being i.e. satisfaction with life, feeling of positivity and feeling of negativity.
- To compare the level of satisfaction towards life, negative emotions and positive emotions in Afghan and Pakistani nationals.

Hypotheses

H1: There would be significant difference in satisfaction towards life and negative emotions between Muslim as well as in non-Muslim participants

H2: Afghan migrants would report significantly lower life satisfaction and higher negative affect compared to Pakistani participants.

H3: There would be significant gender differences in satisfaction with life, feeling of positivity and feeling of negativity among participants.

Assessment tools

Sociodemographic information

Participants filled out a brief sociodemographic form that gathered information on age, gender, nationality (Afghan or Pakistani), religion, religious minority status (e.g., Christian, Hindu, Sikh, Parsi), mother language, educational background, and employment status.

Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS)

Diener, and his colleagues in 1985 developed The Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS) to assess the thought process of individuals subjectively impacting their well-being. This self-report questionnaire includes five items, each is scored on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree). This scale had shown good internal consistency in past research ($\alpha = .82-.87$). The Urdu version translated by Saleem (2016) was used in this study, with a reliability coefficient of $\alpha = .71$.

Scale of Positive and Negative Experience (SPANE)

To evaluate the emotions of an individual effecting their SWB, the Scale of Positive and Negative Experience (SPANE) was utilized. The affective component of subjective well-being was assessed using the Scale of Positive and Negative Experience (SPANE), developed by Diener et al. (2009). This scale is based on 12 items containing two subscales: Positive Affect and Negative Affect, each comprising of six items scoring upon 5-point Likert scale (1 = not at all to 5 = extremely). Subscale scores range from 6 to 30, with higher scores demonstrating stronger emotional tendencies. The Urdu version used in this study showed acceptable reliability, with $\alpha = .70$ for both subscales.

Procedure

Following the acquisition of informed consent, the participators were provided with standardized measure along with a demographic information sheet. Data were collected from both Afghan migrants and Pakistani religious minorities across various urban and semi-urban areas. Details regarding the purpose of the current research was informed to the volunteers thus guiding them on completion of the questionnaires. Some respondents filled out the questionnaires on the spot, while others returned them later. Confidentiality and voluntary participation were assured throughout the process.

Results

Table 1. Descriptive statistics, score range, alpha reliability of study variables (N = 190)

Range									
Variable	Items	M	SD	α	potential	actual	Skew (SE)	Kurt(SE)	
SWLS	5	27.1	5.9	.71	5-35	9-39	-0.29 (0.1)	-0.24 (0.3)	
SPANE_P	6	28.2	4.7	.70	6-30	14-39	-0.45 (0.1)	0.40 (0.3)	
SPANE-N	6	17.9	4.7	.70	6-30	7-37	-0.15 (0.1)	-0.87 (0.3)	

Note: SWLS = Satisfaction with Life Scale; SPANE-P = Scale of Positive and Negative Experience (Positive feelings); SPANE-N= Scale of Positive and Negative Experience (Negative

feelings); M = mean; SD = Standard Deviation; α = Cronbach's Alpha (reliability coefficient); SE = Standard Error.

Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics as well as reliability coefficients of study. The mean of SWLS is 27.1 (SD = 5.91) with a reliability coefficient of .71, indicating good reliability. High levels of life satisfaction in this context may be attributed to strong community bonds, religious faith, and the capacity for meaning-making in the face of adversity. The SPANE-P scores, with a mean of 28.2 (SD = 4.76) and α = .70, suggest that participants reported frequent positive emotional experiences. This finding may reflect culturally embedded optimism, religious hope, or emotional regulation strategies common in communities that prioritize endurance and faith. SPANE-N, measuring negative affect, showed a moderate mean of 17.9 (SD = 4.74), also with α = .70. While this indicates the presence of negative emotions, the levels are not as elevated as might be expected in such a high-risk group. This could be due to cultural or religious norms discouraging the expression of distress, or adaptive coping strategies that mitigate emotional strain. Overall, skewness and kurtosis values suggest that responses were reasonably normally distributed, with slight skews toward higher well-being.

Table 2. Pearson Product Moment Correlation of the study variables (N=190)

Variable	1	2	3
SWLS	-	.62**	.22**
SPANE-P		-	.02
SPANE-N			-

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Table 2 indicated strong, positive correlation amongst SWLS & SPANE-P ($r = .62$, $p < .01$), suggesting that individuals who report greater life satisfaction also tend to experience more frequent positive emotions. A weaker but still positive correlation identified amongst SWLS & SPANE-N ($r = .22$, $p < .01$), implying a modest and somewhat unexpected association between life satisfaction and negative affect. Lastly, the correlation between SPANE-P and SPANE-N minor though insignificant ($r = .02$, $p > .05$), indicating no meaningful linear relationship between the frequency of positive and negative emotions.

Table 3. Independent Samples t-Test for Mean Scores Differences across Gender of the Participants (N = 190)

Variable	Men (n = 97)		Women (93)		t(188)	p	95% CI		Cohen's d
	M	SD	M	SD			LL	UL	
SWLS	27.7	5.9	27.7	5.9	-1.4	.47	-2.9	.51	0.1
SPANE-P	28	5.2	28.5	4.3	-.70	.07	-1.9	.90	0.1
SPANE-N	17.7	4.5	18.2	4.8	-.70	.48	-1.8	.90	0.1

Note: CI=Confidence interval, LL: Lower limit, UL: Upper limit, * $p < .01$, ** $p < .001$

Table 3 illustrates that across gender none showed any dissimilarity towards any variable. For satisfaction with life, both men as well as women had identical mean scores (M = 27.7, SD =

5.9), $t(188) = -1.4$, $p = .47$, minute effect ($d = 0.1$). Similarly, showing insignificant dissimilarity with positive affect amongst male ($M = 28$, $SD = 5.2$) as well as female ($M = 28.5$, $SD = 4.3$), $t(188) = -0.70$, $p = .07$. Negative affect scores were also comparable between men ($M = 17.7$, $SD = 4.5$) and women ($M = 18.2$, $SD = 4.8$), $t(188) = -0.70$, $p = .48$. All 95% confidence intervals for the mean differences included zero, and the effect sizes were minimal across all variables ($d = 0.1$), indicating that gender did not perform a meaningful part towards reported levels of satisfaction with life or emotional experiences in this sample.

Table 4. Independent Sample t-Test Results by Religious Identity (N = 190)

Muslims(n = 99)		Non-Muslim (91)		95%CI					
Variable	M	SD	M	SD	t(188)	p	LL	UL	Cohen's d
SWLS	25.7	5.1	28.7	6.3	-3.6	.006	-4.6	-1.4	0.5
SPANE-P	28.6	2.8	27.8	6.1	1.0	.000	-.65	2.1	0.1
SPANE-N	16.4	3.8	19.6	4.9	-4.9	.002	-4.4	-1.8	0.7

Note: CI=Confidence interval, LL: Lower limit, UL: Upper limit, * $p < .01$, ** $p < .001$

Table 4 shows significant differences between Muslims and Non-Muslims in life satisfaction and negative affect. Non-Muslims reported higher life satisfaction ($M = 28.7$) than Muslims ($M = 25.7$), $t(188) = -3.6$, $p = .006$, indicating small effect ($d = 0.5$). Similarly, negative affect was significantly higher among Non-Muslims ($M = 19.6$) compared to Muslims ($M = 16.4$), $t(188) = -4.9$, $p = .002$, indicating huge effect ($d = 0.7$). Insignificant dissimilarity was observed with positive affect amongst the two groups, $p = .000$

Table 5. Independent Sample t-Test Results by Nationality (N = 190)

Afghan (n=99)		Pakistani (n = 91)		95%CI					
Variable	M	SD	M	SD	t(188)	p	LL	UL	Cohen's d
SWLS	25.7	5.1	28.7	6.3	-3.6	.006	-4.6	-1.4	0.5
SPANE-P	28.6	2.8	27.8	6.1	1.0	.000	-.65	2.1	0.1
SPANE-N	16.4	3.8	19.6	4.9	-4.9	.002	-4.4	-1.8	0.7

Note: CI=Confidence interval, LL: Lower limit, UL: Upper limit, * $p < .01$, ** $p < .001$

Table 5 shows Significant differences were found between Afghan and Pakistani participants in life satisfaction and negative affect. Pakistanis reported higher life satisfaction ($M = 28.7$) than

Afghans ($M = 25.7$), $t(188) = -3.6$, $p = .006$, indicating small effect ($d = 0.5$). Similarly, negative affect was significantly higher among Pakistanis ($M = 19.6$) than Afghans ($M = 16.4$), $t(188) = -4.9$, $p = .002$, showing huge effect ($d = 0.7$). Insignificant dissimilarity was observed with positive affect amongst the two groups, $p = .000$

Discussion

The study explored satisfaction towards life, feelings of positivity, and feelings of negativity among Afghan migrants and religious minorities in Baluchistan, revealing resilience and emotional strain in these communities. As per the hypothesis, significant differences emerged between Muslim and non-Muslim participants in both life satisfaction and negative affect. Non-Muslims reported greater life satisfaction, which may reflect the development of internal coping mechanisms, strong community ties, or religious resilience (Pargament et al., 2005). However, they also experienced higher levels of negative affect, likely due to continuous exposure to social hostility, legal exclusion, and restricted freedom of religious expression factors consistent with the predictions of Minority Stress Theory (Meyer, 2003). This duality supports the idea that resilience and emotional burden can coexist in minority communities.

In line with another hypothesis, Afghan migrants reported lower life satisfaction and higher negative affect compared to Pakistani nationals. These findings align with literature highlighting the psychological vulnerability of displaced populations living under legal and social precarity. Afghan participants, many of whom lack citizenship or long-term stability, are frequently exposed to insecurity, poverty, and disrupted identity development (Sweileh, 2018; UNHCR, 2021). These stressors align with framework explained by Conservation of Resources Theory (Hobfoll, 1989), which suggests that emotional distress results when individuals are unable to retain, restore, or protect essential life resources such as safety, belonging, and recognition.

Furthermore, as anticipated in the hypothesis, no significant gender differences were observed in satisfaction with life, feelings of positivity, or feelings of negativity. Although previous research often suggests that women report greater emotional intensity or vulnerability (Nolen-Hoeksema, 2001), the uniformity across genders in this study may be attributed to the shared social environment of hardship and exclusion. In highly marginalized contexts like Balochistan, both men and women may experience similar systemic pressures that shape emotional outcomes more powerfully than gender norms.

The association between higher life satisfaction and more frequent positive emotional experiences confirms the established connection between these components of well-being (Lim & Putnam, 2010). However, the co-occurrence of life satisfaction with negative emotions in some participants points to an emotionally complex reality. It suggests that individuals may evaluate their lives positively in general, yet still experience distress due to unresolved external challenges, such as discrimination or displacement. This duality aligns with positive psychology perspectives that frame well-being not as the absence of negative emotions, but as the ability to cultivate meaning and emotional richness even under adversity (Seligman, 2011).

Additionally, the absence of group differences in positive affect across gender, religious, and national lines suggests that some emotional resources such as joy, hope, or spiritual connection may be universally maintained, regardless of background. These emotions may be nurtured through communal practices, religious rituals, or interpersonal support systems, reinforcing the role of protective cultural mechanisms in sustaining affective resilience.

Conclusion

This study explored the subjective well-being of religious minorities and Afghan migrants in Balochistan by examining satisfaction with life, positive emotions, negative affect in relation to gender, national identity, and religious affiliation. The findings revealed significant differences based on national and religious identity, while gender showed no notable impact. Despite facing systemic marginalization, certain groups demonstrated emotional resilience, underscoring the complexity of well-being in disadvantaged contexts. These results highlight the coexistence of psychological adaptation and emotional distress, shaped by intersecting social, cultural, and legal factors.

Limitations

There are a few limits to be aware of. Firstly, self-report questionnaires were used in the study, which might lead to bias in respondent's response or underreporting, particularly in cultures where emotional expression is stigmatized. Second, the cross-sectional design restricts causal interpretations of the relationships between variables. Third, while the sample included diverse religious and national groups, it may not fully represent the broader population of marginalized communities in Balochistan. Finally, the absence of qualitative data limits deeper insight into the lived experiences behind the quantitative scores.

Recommendations

Future research should adopt longitudinal designs to explore changes in subjective well-being over time. Expanding the sample across more geographic and ethnic regions would enhance generalizability. Incorporating qualitative methods could provide deeper insights into lived experiences.

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