

Everyday Well-Being in Connection with Health in Immigrant Families with Children—A Study on the Everyday Life of Families with Russian Background in Finland

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Abstract

The study discusses the everyday well-being and health in families with children with Russian background in Finland from the presumption that the everyday well-being is reflective of how families express their satisfaction with their current life situation. The focus is on immigrants and how they experience Finnish society and their everyday life in Finland. Everyday well-being is analysed from the perspective of families with children: *How do Finnish families with Russian background experience their everyday well-being and its connection to health?*

Five hundred (500) structured questionnaires were sent to families in spring 2007 in Finland and 207 replies (42 %) were received. These results show that approximately 2 out of 3 respondents are quite satisfied, satisfied or very satisfied with their everyday well-being in Finland. The results show that immigrant families with children with Russian background in Finland are in an unequal position, some of them are better off than others. A prolonged difficult situation may reinforce long term inequality between immigrant families. Polarisation among respondents seems to be connected to gender and life situation with small children.

Introduction

This study discusses the everyday well-being and health in families with children with Russian background from the presumption that the everyday well-being is reflective of how families express their satisfaction with their current life situation. The framework is based on the understanding that poverty is reflected in the well-being and has a negative impact on parenthood, home atmosphere, family structure, and the resources available. In the family, well-being is based on intimate human relationships and individual needs, whereas government support is based on citizenship and political decision-making. (Moisio 2005, 6.)

This social work study has a multidisciplinary approach. It has links to preventive family work and service system, but it also pertains to sociological family research - especially the areas of everyday life and family research - and to social political welfare research that connects working life and welfare state research. Life satisfaction research is close to the *quality of life* research, not in relation to happiness but in relation to satisfaction with the immigrants' current life situation.

The Framework of the Study

Finland was suffering from economic recession in the 1990s. At the end of 1980s the average unemployment rate was only 3 % and people had unrealistic expectations of continuous economic growth. Their dreams were suddenly killed and the unemployment rate went up to almost 20 % in a few years. Many companies went bankrupt. Until then Finland had been a

homogenous society leaning on the principles of equality of citizens. Like other Nordic countries, Finland has been called a welfare state that provides all Finnish citizens with a health insurance. The Finnish insurance system also guarantees subsistence after having children. Maternity or parental allowance give parents the possibility to take care of the child at home for one year. Finland places a strong emphasis on ensuring equal services for all people. So there have been difficulties to understand differences and give the right to different services (Anis 2007, 31).

Although the preconditions for Finnish well-being have improved even further since the early days of the welfare state, the first decade of the 21st century saw the diversification and polarisation of population. It is connected to the backlash of recession and also to the new liberal thinking of constructing Finnish society. Earlier left-wing parties had more power in Finnish politics, but now there are more right-wing parties in leading positions in the government. To use a dramatic metaphor, polarisation divides people into poor and rich, into those who are well off and those who are badly off. However, most Finnish people belong to the middle class. A new development in Finland is that there is an increasing number of people who are getting very rich and another group that is getting very poor. In other countries there are already sad examples of this kind of development (see Scarr 1994, 90) which is not completely new in Finnish history. At the end of 1980s, the question of social classes was rarely discussed, but now it has been brought up again. The divide between social classes is more sophisticated than in the earlier days, taking into account such aspects as a person's life style in addition to their position in working life and finances.

At the same time with the increasing polarisation, Finland's economic situation is globally seen as being very strong. Therefore it is confusing to see how poor and sick people are queuing up for free food from such charities as the Salvation Army. That this should happened in Helsinki, the capital of Finland, is very disquieting. One reason for this is unemployment and the other is the low level of different allowances. The third reason is that food is very expensive in Finland. Polarisation is usually connected to the social division of the labour force according to salaries and the unemployment rate (Taimio 2004, 1). Polarisation is not happening only in relation to working life, but also between generations and life situations. The elderly who are retired with low pensions are not in as good economic position as employed middle-aged people. Also single parent and low-income households have more difficulties in subsistence than high-income households with one or two wage

earners. Also families with many small children are among those with most difficulties in buying the necessary food, clothing and securing accommodation. Finland has been regarded as a homogeneous society in many ways, but now it is not moving only towards pluralism but transculturalism (see Hall et al. 2003, Juhila 2006, 108). Simultaneously with recession Finland witnessed a growing wave of immigration.

Stable working career, family and good health are usually considered to be the most important preconditions for well-being. In contrast, lack of a family unit, long term unemployment and health risk factors are regarded as preconditions for ill-being. Some of the health risk factors are intoxicant abuse and mental health problems. The majority of Finnish children are well off, but there is concern about 10 % of the children. The risks for children's well-being, which are usually connected to child welfare, are the problems of the head of the family, child neglect and social and/or financial problems. The most common difficulties that the head of the family has are intoxicant abuse or/and mental health problems or/and unemployment or/and financial difficulties. Promotion of welfare is taken care by general welfare or social policy and nowadays also the needs of children are at least in political talks taken into account. Finnish service and education system is based on universal services, although a process of privatisation is going on. Services are supported by special projects which are seen as a way towards new services to supplement the old ones. (Childhood and Well-being 2001.)

The Focus of the Study and Data Collection

The focus of the present study is on immigrants and how they experience Finnish society and their everyday life in Finland. Everyday well-being is analysed from the perspective of families with children: *How do Finnish families with Russian background experience their everyday well-being and its connection to health?* Well-being is interpreted through everyday life in connection with socio-economic status, close relationships, experiences of welfare services, and life satisfaction. Close relationships and socio-economic status are thought to contain social, spiritual, emotional and economic dimensions of well-being. In this article the emphasis is mainly on the connection between health and life satisfaction (see also article Törrönen & Vauhkonen 2007).

The available statistics yield information on changes in family structures, number of children per family and family income, but they do not directly portray families with Russian

background, and not at least from their own perspective. The present study collects subjective and objective indicators of well-being. The immigrant group with Russian background is the biggest one in Finland (year 2006: 42,000 people, Statistics Finland).

The study is based on quantitative data collected for The Department of Social Policy of the University of Helsinki, Finland, and for the project "*Empathos – Preventive work with families and children in the border region of Finland and Russia*". The data concerning everyday well-being is collected in Southeastern Finland. Five hundred (500) structured questionnaires were sent to families in spring 2007 and 207 replies (42 %) were received. The respondents were randomly selected from the population register. All families resided in Southeastern Finland, had at least one family member younger than 18 years of age who had at least one guardian and whose first language was Russian. The selected respondents had been living in Finland since 1991 or later, and at least for one year.

The data was analysed by using the SPSS program. The questionnaire included 63 questions and was 16 pages long. The questionnaire was modified from the questionnaire of research team of Katja Forssén et al. It was divided into 8 parts: family structure, accommodation, education and working life, livelihood, everyday life of the family and values, satisfaction with the current life situation and experiences of services. The questionnaire approaches everyday well-being from a wide perspective including social, physical, emotional and economic dimensions (see also Forssén et al. 2002, 82).

Ages of respondents are mostly from 25 to 49, and about 80 % are women and 20 % men. The vast majority of women in the data is in line with the fact that in Southeastern Finland 64 % of immigrants with Russian background are women. Also the age of respondents is equivalent of the age of people with Russian background residing in Southeastern Finland (Statistics Finland 1 Jan. 2007). Most of the respondents are from the Russian Federation (95 %). 29 % of the respondents are Finnish citizens and 71 % are not. 86 % of the respondents are co-habiting or married and 10 % divorced (4 % are outside these categories). The majority of respondents (79 %) had 3-4 persons in their household.

Little over half of the respondents had moved to Finland in the 1990s and the other half in the 21st century. Every seventh female and every second male respondent were originally Finnish and therefore their official status was so called "returnee" or they were family members of

returnees. For 11 % of women and 17 % of men, the reason to move to Finland was their own or their spouse's working career. Marriage or starting a family was the reason for immigration for women more often than for men. Studies were the reason for immigration for 2 % of men and women.

Satisfaction with the Life Situation

When talking about immigrants it is common to emphasize negative and pessimistic evaluations of their life situation. When asking Russian immigrants about their life situation, it is rather astonishing how satisfied they seem to be with it. So 69 % of the respondents were satisfied with their families' life situation, and only 7 % were dissatisfied. Responses to the question about how satisfied they were with their own life situation the answer were rather similar: 68 % were satisfied and 8 % dissatisfied. About 25 % of them could not articulate their opinion clearly. According to these responses Finland seems to be a good society for immigrants. Most of them (74 %) also see their future prospects in Finland as being good. Only 7 % see their future in Finland as being as poor as currently and 19 % cannot say. Slightly over 50 % of respondents felt that they had been warmly welcomed to Finland whereas 24 % do not think so and 22 % cannot say.

When evaluating the different areas of their everyday life, 68-90 % of immigrant families with children in Southeastern Finland were satisfied with them. The different areas included life situation, future prospects in Finland, health, work, livelihood, accommodation and personal relationships. In spite of the high level of satisfaction, the number of families dissatisfied with different areas of their everyday life varied between 6 and 8 %. The number of those who cannot clearly define their situation varied between 5 and 25 %.

Table 1: Satisfaction with the different areas of the everyday well-being

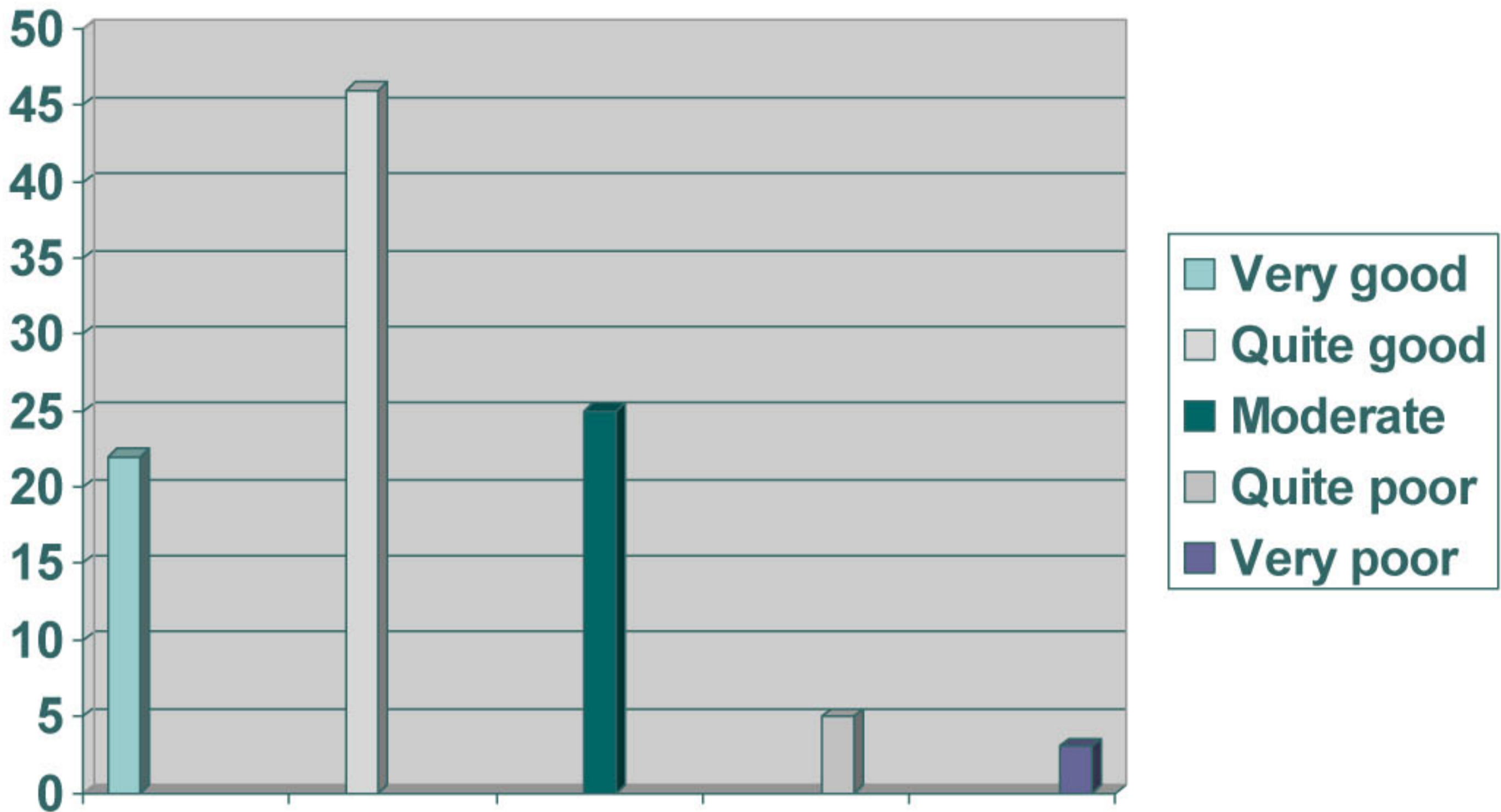
Satisfaction	Satisfied	Not satisfied/ Dis-satisfied	Dis-satisfied	Total (N varies)
Life situation	70	23	7	100
Future prospects in Finland	74	19	7	100
Health	68	24	8	100
Work	87	5	8	100
Livelihood	69	25	6	100
Housing	69	25	6	100
Relationships	68	25	7	100

These results show that approximately 2 out of 3 respondents are quite satisfied, satisfied or very satisfied with their everyday well-being in Finland. These results are not interpreted directly as reflecting the objective everyday well-being but as subjective experiences that are seen as reflecting the life situation.

Satisfaction with Health

There is a close connection between satisfaction with health and satisfaction with life situation. This connection may also explain some differences in the answers. The respondents were asked to tell how they would describe their physical or mental health at the moment when they were filling in the questionnaire. 68 % of respondents were satisfied with their health whereas 8 % characterize their health as being poor. Satisfaction with health was linked to satisfaction with life situation. The same has been found in previous research. For example, Karisto (1984, 213) has discovered that health is clearly connected to how people experience happiness in their lives. So here 80 % of those who consider their health to be good were satisfied with their life situation, and only 2 % dissatisfied.

Figure 1: How does the respondent describe his/her physical or mental health (%)?



However, 20 % of those who were dissatisfied with their health were satisfied with their life situation. There might be a wide variety of health conditions with diverse impacts on personal life. This study does not separate physical health from mental health. This could be dealt separately in a future questionnaire. The negative effect of illness is visible in slightly under 40 % of the answers where respondents were dissatisfied with their health and also dissatisfied with their life situation. This also reinforces Karisto's (1984, 213, 227) claim that the best way to make implications of illness visible is through interpretation of subjective experiences rather than objective identification. In his research poor health conditions were transmitted to how people experienced the quality of life, and also even happiness.

Table 2: Satisfaction with their own life situation according to their health condition

How satisfied is the respondent with his/her life situation at the moment?	How does the respondent describe his/her health at the at the moment			
	good	mode- rate	poor	total
Satisfied	83	49	19	68
Not satisfied or dissatisfied	15	39	43	24
Dissatisfied	2	12	38	8
Total %	100	100	100	100
N	130	51	21	202
p=0,000				

Everyday Well-Being in Immigrant Families with Children

Dissatisfaction with various areas of everyday well-being is cumulated on slightly under 10 % of respondents. Typically the dissatisfaction with the life situation is connected to poor health, financial difficulties or contentious relationships. Those who describe their health as being poor are less satisfied with their everyday well-being than those who think they are in good health. The lower the combined income of the household the more the respondents are dissatisfied with their life situation – also the more frequent the quarrels between partners.

The results show that immigrant families with children with Russian background in Finland are in an unequal position, some of them are better off than others. A prolonged difficult situation may reinforce long term inequality between immigrant families.

Polarisation among respondents seems to be connected to gender and life situation with small children. It might be that women themselves have chosen to take care of their children at home and not take part in working life. So the marginal status of working life is then their

own choice. Their marginal status might also be indicative of their family values and the understanding of the women's role in the family. This kind of choice is valuable but on the other hand it might bring financial difficulties to the family at the same time.

The choice for women to stay at home with children might reflect also the difficulties to find employment. This comes to mind, because for instance Sutela (2005, 86; see also Reuter & Jaakkola 2005, 38) has found in her comparative research in Finland that Russian immigrants are the better educated compared to immigrants coming from Estonia, Somalia and Vietnam. It has also been shown that in Finland, Finnish education is valued over education acquired abroad (Forsander 2002, Sutela 2005, 86).

Everyday well-being is based on close relationships and possibilities to satisfy basic needs. Political decision-making is needed to prevent the development of polarisation. However, there is also need for preventive social work with a focus on support for bilingual identity especially among children and young people. Some of the methods of preventive social work are disseminating more information about immigrants with Russian background to reduce experiences of racism and discrimination and providing social support for finding employment and learning the Finnish language.

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