

# Fifty Shades of Gray: Satisfaction with Life Among Jewish Immigrants from the Former Soviet Union to Israel

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In the present study, we tested the morbidity and salutary hypotheses of immigration investigating satisfaction with life (SWL) among Jewish immigrants from the Former Soviet Union to Israel. The study was conducted using a random representative sample of first-generation immigrants from the Former Soviet Union to Israel ( $N = 400$ ) and a large geographically dispersed sample of Jews staying in Russia ( $N = 935$ ). We applied three measures of SWL: general satisfaction with life (GSWL), multifaceted satisfaction with life (MSWL), and relative satisfaction with life (RSWL). The results demonstrated that immigrants were higher than stayers in GSWL. At the same time, the difference between the two populations was not significant in the average scores of MSWL. When comparing the two populations in ten domains of MSWL, immigrants reported higher satisfaction only in medical care. Stayers reported higher satisfaction in four domains: work, family relationships, relationships with friends, and entertainment and leisure. Immigrants assessed their standard of life as higher compared to the premigration period and to that presently existing in their country of origin. However, they assessed their standard of life as lower compared to the non-immigrant Israelis. Thus, immigration was a mixed blessing for the studied group of immigrants, salutary in some aspects and onerous in others.

**Keywords:** General satisfaction with life, Multifaceted satisfaction with life, Relative satisfaction with life, Jewish immigrants from the Former Soviet Union in Israel, Jews staying in Russia.

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# Пятьдесят оттенков серого: удовлетворенность жизнью среди еврейских иммигрантов из бывшего СССР в Израиле

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В настоящем исследовании проверялась гипотеза о morbidity/благотворности иммиграции через изучение удовлетворенности жизнью иммигрантов из бывшего Советского Союза в Израиле. Исследование проводилось с использованием случайной репрезентативной выборки иммигрантов в первом поколении из бывшего Советского Союза в Израиле ( $N = 400$ ) и большой географически рассредоточенной выборки евреев, оставшихся в России ( $N = 935$ ). В исследовании использовались три показателя субъективного благополучия: общая удовлетворенность жизнью, удовлетворенность жизнью в различных сферах и относительная удовлетворенность жизнью. Сравнение иммигрантов с евреями, оставшимися в России, осуществлялось по первым двум показателям субъективного благо-

получия. Полученные результаты выявили, что общая удовлетворенность жизнью выше среди иммигрантов. В то же время показатели удовлетворенности жизнью в различных сферах в двух выборках отличались незначительно. По 10 параметрам этого фактора более высокие показатели в группе иммигрантов были зафиксированы только в степени удовлетворенности медицинским обслуживанием. Оставшиеся в России отмечали большую удовлетворенность в четырех сферах: работа, отношения с близкими, отношения с друзьями, а также отдых и развлечения. Иммигранты оценивали уровень своей жизни как более высокий по сравнению с доэмиграционным и с тем, который существует на их родине в настоящее время, но как более низкий по сравнению с уровнем жизни других израильтян (не иммигрантов). Таким образом, иммиграция для исследуемой группы иммигрантов оказалась благотворной в одних аспектах и обременительной в других.

**Ключевые слова:** общая удовлетворенность жизнью, удовлетворенность жизнью в различных сферах, относительная удовлетворенность жизнью, еврейские иммигранты из бывшего Советского Союза в Израиле, евреи в России.

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## Introduction

There are two main hypotheses related to the well-being of immigrants: the morbidity and salutary hypotheses. Most researchers adhere to the immigration morbidity hypothesis that assumes that immigration is stressful and, therefore, causes a decrease in psychological well-being and may be even traumatic for immigrants [10]. Researchers attribute the morbidity of immigration to two main factors: losses resulting from leaving the country of origin (e.g., loss of mother tongue and the related cultural environment, physical environment, and social connections) and acculturative stress in the receiving country (e.g., difficulties related to mastering a new language, financial strains, and discrimination) [3; 17]. However, other researchers adhere to the salutary hypothesis, stressing the potentially positive aspects of immigration related to the opportunity for immigrants to enjoy the benefits of a more developed and democratic receiving country. The potential benefits of immigrants in the new country may be economical (e.g., higher earnings and welfare services) and political (e.g., political freedom and protection of human rights) [3; 9]. Surprisingly, the psychological literature on the immigrants' well-being rarely accounts for the salutary immigration hypothesis.

To test the morbidity vs. salutary hypotheses of immigration, immigrants are usually compared with the local population in the receiving country. In these studies, immigrants have most often reported lower levels of psychological well-being and higher distress levels than the majority population in the receiving country [3; 4; 7; 10]. However, immigrants usually arrive from countries with a lower economic development level and a lower level of psychological well-being than in the receiving country. Therefore, the immigrants' lower post-migration psychological well-being may be attributed (at least partly) to their pre-migration conditions [7]. Indeed, the rare

studies that have focused on the groups that immigrated from more to less developed countries, or from more to less happy countries, found that these immigrants reported higher well-being than the local population in the receiving country [7].

Thus, to test the morbidity vs. salutary hypotheses of immigration, we have to compare the well-being of immigrants with 'stayers', i.e., people who continue living in the immigrants' country of origin. Unfortunately, there are only about a dozen studies that have compared the well-being of immigrants with the population in their country of origin, and the findings of these studies are inconsistent across countries and indexes of well-being used for comparison [8]. Thus, in a recent comprehensive meta-analysis of studies comparing immigrants with stayers, five studies found a higher level of well-being among immigrants, four found lower well-being among immigrants, and two studies found no difference [7].

In the present study, to test the morbidity vs. salutary hypotheses of immigration, we investigated the psychological well-being of Jewish immigrants from the Former Soviet Union to Israel. We applied three measures of SWL: general satisfaction with life (GSWL), multifaceted satisfaction with life (MSWL), and relative satisfaction with life (RSWL). We compared immigrants with Jews staying in Russia in GSWL and MSWL.

## Method

### Samples

Four hundred immigrants from the FSU living in Israel and 935 Jews and their relatives living in Russia took part in the present study. Both samples were nearly balanced in gender (about 45% male), and about 75% of the participants in both samples were married or living with a partner. However, the immigrant sample was older than the stayers (47,5 vs. 39,6). The participants in

both samples were highly educated; although, a higher proportion of Jews in Russia had tertiary education than the immigrants (86% vs. 72%). A high proportion of participants in both samples had a high occupational status, being either professionals, managers, or businesspersons; however, there were more such people among Jews living in Russia than among immigrants (63% vs. 38%). On the other hand, more immigrants held manual jobs (28% vs. 7%). The proportion of Jews as defined by Jewish religious law (i.e., having a Jewish maternal grandmother) was higher among immigrants (82% vs. 58%). Finally, religiosity was lower among immigrants (1,66 vs. 2,09 on a 5-point scale, from 1 = *atheist* to 5 = *orthodox*).

### Procedure

Participation in the research was voluntary, and participants did not receive compensation for completing the questionnaires. Informed consent was obtained from all participants. The questionnaires were in Russian. The response rate was about 65% in both samples.

**Immigrants.** The immigrant sample was a random representative sample of adult immigrants who arrived from the FSU to Israel since 1989. The sample was built using stratified geographical sampling within the internationally recognized borders of Israel. Completion of questionnaires was done face to face in the participant's home. Data was collected by the PORI Research Institute.

**Stayers.** The study among Jews living in Russia was conducted in five metropolitan areas: Moscow, St. Petersburg, Yekaterinburg, Rostov, and Kazan. The study questionnaires were distributed by research associates living in the metropolitan areas through social networks, in the Jewish community and religious organizations, and through the researchers' acquaintances in face-to-face interviews, by e-mail, and using electronic questionnaires. Adults eligible for immigration to Israel under the Law of Return were asked to complete the questionnaires anonymously. Individuals holding foreign citizenship (i.e., those who emigrated and then returned to Russia) were excluded from the study.

### Instruments

**General satisfaction with life.** General satisfaction with life (GSWL) was measured by the Satisfaction with Life Scale [6]. It is a 5-item measure asking both immigrants and stayers to assess their agreement with the items on a 7-point scale, from 1 = *completely disagree* to 7 = *completely agree*. Internal consistency of the scale was high among both immigrants (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0,93$ ) and stayers (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0,88$ ).

**Multifaceted satisfaction with life (MSWL).** To measure multifaceted satisfaction with life (MSWL), we asked both immigrants and stayers to assess their situation in 10 areas (e.g., work, finances, physical and mental health) on a 5-point scale, from 1 = *very bad* to 5 = *very good* [12; 16]. Internal consistency of the scale was high among both immigrants (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0,87$ ) and stayers (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0,89$ ).

**Relative satisfaction with life (RSWL).** To measure relative satisfaction with life, we asked the immigrant respondents to assess the quality of their life compared

to that of non-immigrant Israelis of similar age and education, people in their country of origin, and their own conditions before emigration from the FSU on a 5-point scale, from 1 = *much worse* to 5 = *much better* [2].

The GSWL score was positively correlated with the average score of MSWL: among immigrants ( $r = 0,71$ ,  $p < 0,001$ ) and stayers ( $r = 0,57$ ,  $p < 0,001$ ). In addition, all items of MSWL were positively correlated with the GSWL score: among immigrants ( $r = 0,37 \dots 0,66$ , all  $p < 0,001$ ) and among stayers ( $r = 0,29 \dots 0,47$ , all  $p < 0,001$ ). Finally, among immigrants, the three facets of the RSWL were positively correlated with each other ( $r = 0,25 \dots 0,60$ , all  $p < 0,001$ ), with GSWL ( $r = 0,32 \dots 0,37$ , all  $p < 0,001$ ), and MSWL ( $r = 0,37 \dots 0,40$ , all  $p < 0,001$ ).

## Results

Table 1 presents the analysis of differences in GSWL and MSWL between immigrants and stayers, controlling for differences in five socio-demographic characteristics between the two populations: age, education, occupational level, Jewish ethnicity, and level of religiosity. The results demonstrated that immigrants were higher than stayers in GSWL. At the same time, the difference between the two populations was not significant in the average scores of MSWL.

When comparing the two populations in ten domains of MSWL, it was found that immigrants reported significantly higher satisfaction in only one domain — medical care. Stayers reported significantly higher satisfaction in four domains: work, family relationships, relationships with friends, and entertainment and leisure. Finally, no significant difference was found in five domains: finances, housing, psychological well-being, health, and education for children.

Comparing themselves to non-immigrant Israelis, 48% of immigrants considered their living standard lower or much lower, 40% — similar, and 12% higher or much higher. Comparing themselves to people living in their country of origin, 19% of immigrants considered their living standard lower or much lower, 26% — similar, and 55% higher or much higher. Finally, comparing their present conditions with their premigration conditions, 21% of immigrants considered their current living standard lower or much lower, 28% — similar, and 50% — higher or much higher.

Using the mean scores of the three facets of RSWL, we found that they all differed significantly from the scale's middle point (3 = *about the same*): in comparison with Israelis ( $M (SD) = 2,46 (0,98)$ ;  $t(399) = -11,2$ ;  $p < 0,001$ ), in comparison with citizens of the country of origin ( $M (SD) = 3,48 (1,05)$ ;  $t(399) = 9,16$ ;  $p < 0,001$ ), and in comparison with the premigration conditions ( $M (SD) = 3,39 (1,03)$ ;  $t(399) = 7,60$ ;  $p < 0,001$ ). Thus, immigrants from the FSU to Israel, on average, assessed their standard of life as higher compared to the premigration period and to that presently existing in their country of origin. However, they assessed their standard of life as lower compared to the non-immigrant Israelis.

**Discussion**

The results obtained did not support either the morbidity or salutary hypothesis of immigration. In some measures of satisfaction with life, immigrants reported a higher level of well-being; in other measures, their well-being was inferior to that of the stayers; and in still others, there was no difference. Compared to non-immigrant Israelis, immigrants reported inferior well-being.

Summarizing, we may say that immigrants demonstrated a higher level of psychological well-being than stayers when reporting it at a higher level of abstraction (general and relative SWL). Simultaneously, they demonstrated worse well-being when reporting it in more specific terms (satisfaction in different life domains). Thus, although Israel is a more developed country than Russia [15], the standard of life of immigrants from the FSU in Israel was not higher than that among Jews staying in Russia. This finding probably indicates that immigrants are unable to fully utilize the advantages provided by the higher level of socio-economic development of Israel as compared to Russia. It may be due to the immigrants' lower level of language mastery and social capital, and the resistance of non-immigrant Israelis to integrate immigrants into the majority society [1; 13].

If so, why do immigrants feel satisfied with their life in Israel and are content with their decision to emigrate? Some intangible aspects of life in Israel (that were not included in the present study) might contribute to the immigrants' general and relative SWL. Among them, there may be freedom, democracy, and the opportunity to practice one's ethnic culture and religion. The effect of these factors on the immigrants' SWL may be investi-

gated in further studies. Finally, it may be the cognitive dissonance mechanism that permits immigrants to justify their decision to emigrate [7].

**Limitations**

The main limitation of the study relates to its cross-sectional design. A more precise assessment of the effect of immigration on the psychological well-being of immigrants requires longitudinal pre- and post-migration studies. Second, the study did not include a comparison with the non-immigrant population in the receiving country. The comparison between immigrants and locals in both general and, especially, multifaceted satisfaction with life may permit us to better understand the relative strength and vulnerability of immigrants in different domains. Finally, the present study was limited to Jewish immigrants from the FSU to Israel, while many Jews also immigrated from the FSU to Germany and the United States.

**Conclusions**

Despite its limitations, the present study expands our understanding of immigration processes. First, it demonstrates that immigration is a mixed blessing. In some aspects, it increases the immigrants' psychological well-being, while in other aspects it may decrease it. Second, the present study maps the areas of vulnerability of immigrants in the receiving country, including work, interpersonal relationships, and leisure. This finding indicates that the psycho-social help to immigrants should be focused on these domains of their life. Third, the results obtained indicate that the immigrants' feelings that their standard of living is lower than that of non-immigrant Israelis may be a source of tension between the two groups [13; 14].

*Appendix 1*

**General and Multifaceted Satisfaction with Life in the Two Samples**

Aspects of life	Immigrants	Stayers	Univariate tests controlling for socio-demographic variables
General satisfaction with life scale	4,08 (1,24)	3,77 (1,05)	$F(6; 1305)=28,8; p<0,001; \eta_p^2=0,022$
Multifaceted satisfaction with life scale (mean across ten domains)	3,61 (0,57)	3,63 (0,49)	$F(6; 1306)=0,51; p=0,477; \eta_p^2<0,001$
Multifaceted satisfaction with life scale (scores for separate domains):			
Work	3,41 (0,90)	3,67 (0,75)	$F(6; 1236)=15,2; p<0,001; \eta_p^2=0,012$
Family relationships	3,96 (0,85)	4,18 (0,81)	$F(6; 1304)=16,0; p<0,001; \eta_p^2=0,012$
Relationships with friends	4,00 (0,79)	4,20 (0,79)	$F(6; 1304)=9,31; p=0,002; \eta_p^2=0,007$
Entertainment and leisure	3,50 (0,92)	3,77 (0,86)	$F(6; 1277)=5,82; p=0,016; \eta_p^2=0,005$
Finances	3,12 (0,88)	3,20 (0,77)	$F(6; 1303)=0,07; p=0,791; \eta_p^2<0,001$
Housing	3,40 (0,95)	3,54 (0,85)	$F(6; 1306)=2,52; p=0,113; \eta_p^2<0,001$
Mental health	3,67 (0,80)	3,72 (0,92)	$F(6; 1304)=0,40; p=0,527; \eta_p^2<0,001$
Physical health	3,54 (0,86)	3,67 (0,75)	$F(6; 1306)=1,79; p=0,181; \eta_p^2=0,001$
Education for your children	3,73 (0,86)	3,58 (0,90)	$F(6; 1231)=3,29; p=0,070; \eta_p^2=0,003$
Medical care	3,80 (0,82)	2,98 (0,94)	$F(6; 1280)=199; p<0,001; \eta_p^2=0,135$

Note: Five socio-demographic variables were controlled in univariate tests: age, education, occupational level, Jewish ethnicity, and level of religiosity.

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