Examining factors that contribute to subjective well-being in newcomers to Canada and international students

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Background and objectives

The purpose of the current study is to understand the subjective well-being of two groups of learners at Mohawk College: newcomers to Canada and international students.

Well-being is defined as a state of overall health (Merriam-Webster, 2024). Since the COVID-19 pandemic, the focus on mental well-being has increased (World Health Organization, 2022) and yet, mental well-being is only one aspect of overall well-being. That is, well-being can be measured from multiple dimensions including physical, mental, social, financial and spiritual (Government of Canada, 2024).

The current study looks at the healthy immigrant effect as it relates to well-being to determine if subjective wellness varies over time and by group status (newcomers to Canada and international students). The current study examines the following questions:

1. Do newcomers to Canada and international students differ in terms of how they rate their subjective well-being?
2. What are the strategies that students with high subjective well-being describe using that promote coping and resiliency in a new host country? Do these strategies differ by international and newcomer groups?
3. Are there factors that are associated with high and low subjective well-being scores?

Methods

This study utilizes a mixed-methods, pilot-scale approach. Research participants were recruited from two groups: newcomer learners enrolled in the LINC (Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada) program at Mohawk College, and international students enrolled in semester two or higher of a postsecondary program. Newcomer learners must have been in Canada for five years or less, to align with the Statistics Canada (2010) definition of a newcomer. Research participants from each of these two groups were randomly selected and invited to participate in a survey which collected the following:

- Demographic variables
- Employment and education history
- The Flourishing Index (a subjective wellness index that assigns participants a score out of 110 where the higher the score, the higher the individual's well-being)

Forty-nine survey responses were collected. Among these, eight participants were invited to participate in a follow-up interview to gain a more in-depth picture of the factors that have impacted their health and well-being. These eight participants were selected in an effort to have equal proportions of newcomer and international students, and those that had the highest and lowest overall wellness scores.

Study sample

The 49 participants who completed the survey and wellness index are, on average, 29 years old. Their median wellness index is 77/110. Seventy-eight percent of the sample identify as women, while 22% identify as men[3]. Eleven of the 49 participants are international students, while the other 38 are newcomers to Canada. Twenty-six percent of those newcomers arrived to Canada as refugees. The sample represents several different countries, as shown in Fig 1. The distribution of the wellness index is shown in Fig 2.

[3] Participants could also input a non-binary gender identity; this particular sample chose to identify as either "man" or "woman".

Fig 1. (Top) – Pareto chart, countries of origin among participants

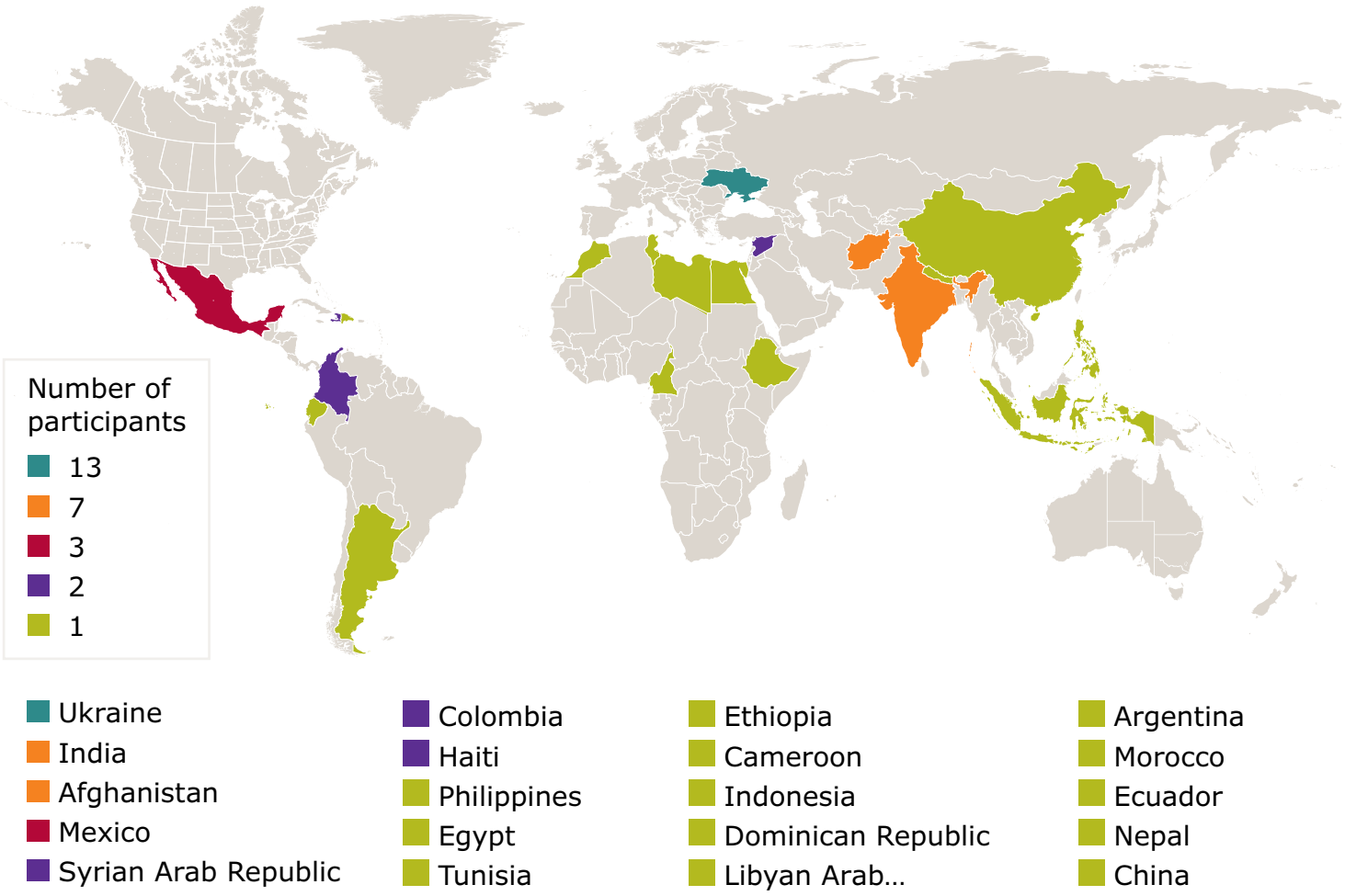
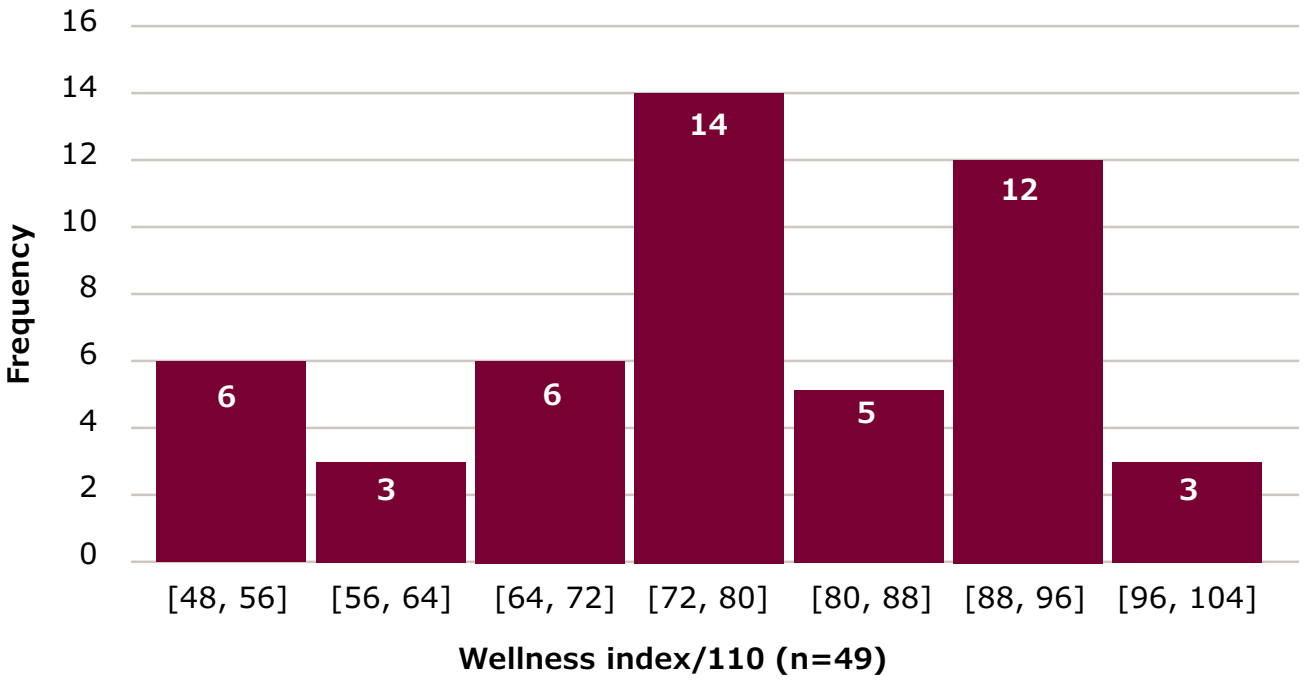


Fig 2. (bottom) – Histogram, distribution of the Flourishing Wellness Index among participants



Results and Discussion

The variables of the study were analyzed in several different combinations in order to locate significant differences and/or associations. Variables were tested for normality where applicable.

Single-factor ANOVA comparing the average wellness scores of students on a study visa ($\bar{x}$ =71.4, n=24), permanent residents ($\bar{x}$ =81.8, n=11), and Ukrainian temporary residents or dependents of such ($\bar{x}$ =74.4, n =11) revealed a significant difference (p-value=0.08) between the three groups at α=0.1. A post-hoc Bonferroni correction was applied to determine that the significant difference lies between the participants with permanent residency status and participants on a study visa (international students), such that the permanent residents have a significantly higher average wellness score (p-value=0.02).

Spearman rank correlation indicates a moderate to strong positive correlation (r=0.45, two-tailed p-value=0.003, α=0.05) between the wellness index and the years of post-secondary education a participant received before attending their current program at Mohawk College, such that higher wellness scores are associated with more years of postsecondary education.

A two-sample T-test compared the wellness scores of participants who arrived to Canada with their family ($\bar{x}$ =81.5, n=27) to those who arrived without their family ($\bar{x}$ =72.4, n=22) and found a significant difference at α=0.05 (one-tailed p-value=0.01), such that those arriving with their families have significantly higher wellness scores.

The follow-up interviews with eight of the 49 participants (five newcomers and three international students) revealed a few prominent themes that are also supported by the quantitative analyses described above:

1. Participants with the highest wellness scores tended to have strong social support networks in Canada, while participants without a strong social support network had scores on the very low end. This is supported by the results of the ANOVA test described above, where permanent residents, who have higher wellness scores than their international student counterparts, are also far more likely to arrive to Canada with their families who often form a large part of the social support network. The two-sample T-test (described above) also supports this conclusion.

“My sponsor family has been incredible, they have been like a real family to me.”

interview participant #1

“Connecting with friends [here] who are from my home country has helped me a lot with my mental health.”

interview participant #2

2. Participants with the highest wellness scores tended to have well-developed career plans, while those without a plan in mind had lower wellness scores. This is supported by the correlation between the wellness index and years of postsecondary education, as those with more postsecondary education when arriving in Canada are also more likely to have had a well-developed career plan which they described during their interview.

“I was a teacher in [my home country] so I plan to complete [Early Childhood Education] after LINC and then look for a job”.

interview participant #3

“My degree [from my home country] is in Social Psychology, so I want to do SSW program and obtain employment in that field”.

interview participant #4

Conclusions and next steps

This pilot-scale study provides direction on the themes and factors that could be investigated in a larger cohort, and/or could be used to guide wrap-around supports and programming that could help to mitigate the challenges that newcomers and international students face with their health and well-being. Specifically, such supports and programming should consider how to help individuals build strong social support networks and plans for their future career. The results of this study suggest that these two factors are critically important for well-being and, ultimately, success in Canada.

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