**Religion and Refugee Well-Being: The Importance of Inclusive Community**

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***Abstract***: We use a large sample of refugees in Utica, New York to investigate how religiosity and the ability to practice religion are related to happiness in one's community. We analyze religious and secular facets of the community in which they live, such as perceived ability to practice their religion, sense of safety, and experiences of discrimination. Contrary to the literature on broader populations, we find that religiosity is unrelated to refugees' happiness in their community, but their perceived ability to practice is strongly related to this measure of well-being. Ability to practice religion remains strongly related to happiness in the community even for refugees who are not religious and for ones who do not regularly attend services. These findings point to the need for more studies to include measures not only of individual religiosity, but facets of religion in people's larger communities, especially for vulnerable populations like refugees.

***Keywords***: refugees, religion, well-being, community, inclusive, Utica

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While a voluminous literature examines the relationship between religion and various subjective measures of well-being, most studies focus on how different facets of individual religiosity (such as self-identified religiosity, church attendance, or denominational membership) contribute to well-being. A number of researchers have shown across different populations and contexts that religion can provide social support and coping mechanisms (Blasi 2011; Ellison and Henderson 2011; Green and Elliot 2010; Idler 2014; Kilbourne, Cummings, and Levine 2011; Krause 2006; Prado et al. 2004; Rosemarin and Koenig 1998), but there are other studies that challenge religiosity's protective effects, indicating that these benefits may be overstated (Ellison et al. 2001; Krause 2006; Masters and Spielmans 2007).

In our study, we build upon extant scholarship on religiosity and subjective well-being in two ways. First, we focus on an understudied population, that of refugees. Second, in contrast to most research in this area which fails to take into account how one's larger community might affect an individual, we include measures of community characteristics likely to influence well-being, such as affordances for religious community, safety in one's living environment, and perceived discrimination from others. These community characteristics are particularly likely to matter with respect to more vulnerable minority populations, such as refugees, for whom community support – or by contrast, discrimination, alienation, or indifference – might have a greater impact on their lives than middle or upper class members of racial or ethnic majority groups (Ai, Peterson, and Huang 2003; Fox 2012; Rios 2011; Waters 1999).

Using survey data of refugees in the small city of Utica in upstate New York, we examine how their religiosity and sense of inclusion relates to their sense of well-being. While there are many different ways to measure an individual's subjective well-being, we use the response to a survey question asking about refugees' happiness with living in their new city. We move beyond

traditional measures of individual religiosity by examining how a community-level sense of religious opportunities and a broader sense of safety and inclusion in their community (apart from religiosity) relate to their well-being.

While prior literature finds religiosity to be associated with greater well-being, our findings suggest that refugee well-being is more strongly related to community factors than to individual religiosity and practice. Specifically, those who feel free to practice their religion are more likely to report greater happiness with living in their community than others. Interestingly, the ability to practice their religion is related to greater well-being not only for the religious, but also for the non-religious in our study. Other community-level factors, such as feelings of safety and the absence of discrimination, also affect well-being, but do not eliminate the relationship between the ability to practice religion and individual happiness with one's community. The fact that refugees' sense of inclusion and belonging are shown to be instrumental to well-being may partly relate to the timing of the survey, which was conducted in the summer of 2017 at the height of significant anti-immigrant and anti-refugee sentiment. Our results bring attention to the need to examine in more depth and breadth how both religious and secular facets of local communities, in addition to individual religiosity and other sociodemographic factors, affect the relationship between religion and well-being.

## Individual Religiosity and Well-being

Through religion, people can gain valuable social and coping resources (Kilbourne, Cummings, and Levine 2011; Krause 2006; 2011; Idler 2014; Pargament et al. 1998; Schieman and Bierman 2011; Smith, McCullough, and Poll 2003) which contribute to their well-being. From a Durkheimian (1995 [1912]; 2006 [1897]) perspective, religion can provide its adherents with regular social interaction, a supportive community with access to social, emotional,

economic, educational, and religious resources during stressful events or conditions, leading to increased happiness and satisfaction with life (Kilbourne, Cummings, and Levine 2011; Krause 2006; Krause and Bastida 2011; Idler 2014). Most scholars claim that religious attendance has an indirect effect on well-being: through attendance, members can develop friendships and gain other forms of social support, which in turn can provide resources to cope with difficult life circumstances (Tong 2019; Hayward and Elliott 2014; Stark and Maier 2008; Barkan and Nekuee 1999; Myers 2000; Willits and Crider 1988). Krause and Bastida (2011), for example, found that regular church attendance provides emotional support from other church members and engenders a strong sense of belonging in a congregation, which in turn promotes better health (see also Krause 2008). Religious friendships may also help individuals cope with stress and loss, which in turn promotes well-being (Marks 2005; Pargament et al. 1998; Ellison and George 1994).

The ability to practice one's religion has also been tied to well-being. Hayward and Elliot (2014:39) argue that reports of well-being are higher in countries where the ability to freely practice one's religion "is celebrated" and exercised. Hertzke (2018) makes the case that religious inclusivity for marginalized people may be important for their economic prospects and as a means of gaining a greater sense of belonging and acceptance in their host country. This may be particularly important for refugees, given the intersectionality between race, national origin, and religious expression and beliefs in this population (Gangamma and Shipman; Yuval-Davis 2007, 2011).

Other research suggests that religious orientations (Dezutter, Soenens, and Hutsebaut 2006; Schwadel and Falci 2012) and self-identification (Green and Elliot 2010), rather than religious involvement, matter most with regards to mental health and other subjective measures

of well-being. Based on a Bergerian perspective, some scholars suggest that religious identity and the meaning and existential sense of security gained from belief in religious systems and practices matter with respect to one's mental health (Berger 1967; Dezutter, Soenens, and Hutsebaut 2006; Green and Elliot 2010). Ellison (1991, 2001) argues that church attendance may positively affect well-being by strengthening religious beliefs and worldviews which "provide an interpretive framework through which individuals can make sense of everyday reality." (Ellison 1991:89). These "religious plausibility structures," in turn serve as resources for making sense of significant life events and experiences, especially trauma (Ellison 1991:89; see also Ellison et. al. 2001).

Engaging in the ritual practices of a religion, such as prayer, religious reading, and forgiveness toward one's self and God, can serve as coping mechanisms for the stressed (Kilbourne, Cummings, and Levine 2011; Krause and Bastida 2011; Schieman and Bierman 2011). Psychologist Kenneth Pargament and his colleagues identify several additional religious coping mechanisms which can reduce negative impacts from stress: collaborative coping, in which believers problem-solve with God; reframing negative experiences in more positive terms as part of God's plan; seeking comfort and support from God; and surrendering intractable problems over to God (Pargament, Koenig, and Perez 2000).

Other research suggests that religion tends to benefit individuals experiencing particularly high levels of stress (Smith, McCullough, and Poll 2003) and those simultaneously facing multiple types of stressors, such as financial pressures and racial prejudice (Krause 2006). As we explain below, refugees typically face more stress along various dimensions than other Americans do. As such, we expect that they would in particular benefit from religious participation.

While the aforementioned research implies that religion is associated with well-being for many people, it is important to acknowledge that there are additional studies which raise questions about when, whether, how much, and among whom religion is related to good mental health and well-being. For example, using the 1995 Detroit Area Study, Christopher Ellison and his colleagues (2001) found "limited support for the notion that religiosity buffers the deleterious effects of stressors on mental health" (240). When taking into account church attendance, prayer, and belief in eternal life, they concluded that "support for the stress buffering hypothesis surfaces for only one of the religious variables considered here, belief in eternal life" (240), and belief in eternal life only served as a buffer for major life changes, but not short-term stressors. In their meta-analysis of the relationship between prayer and health, Masters and Spielmans (2007) suggest there is no clear relationship, despite popular opinion to the contrary. Other research suggests that religion's positive effects on well-being tend to be most robust among those who strongly identify as religious, who attend frequently, and are strongly committed to the religious community and worldview (see for example Hayward and Elliott 2014; Mochon, Norton, and Ariely 2011; Green and Elliott 2010), rather than among all religious people.

## Refugees, Religion, and Well-Being

Although there is limited research on refugees' religiosity and well-being, we know that refugees face serious and on-going obstacles to well-being, both from the trauma related to displacement and from the demands of adjusting to life in a new, and often unwelcoming, country. Refugees often struggle with post-traumatic stress from their experiences with war, deaths of family and friends, loss of home, property, and livelihood, and more generally the chronic uncertainty and unpredictability about their everyday lives and futures as displaced persons (see Horst and Grabska 2015; Fox 2012; Kirmayer et al. 2011; Ai, Peterson, and Huang

2003; Gozdziak 2002). Upon arrival in a new country, refugees face a host of struggles to learn a new language, adapt to a new culture while trying to preserve their own, and find stable employment (see Werkuyten and Nekuee 1999). In addition, they often face discrimination by members of the host country (Correa-Velez, Gifford, and Barnett 2010; Corea-Velez, Gifford, and McMichael 2015; Noh et al. 1999; Werkuyten and Nekuee 1999), which some research has identified as a primary factor that makes a sense of belonging unattainable and decreases well-being (Correa-Velez, Gifford, and Barnett 2010; Corea-Velez, Gifford, and McMichael 2015).

Refugees' ability to cope with the many challenges they face often hinges on their access to material and social resources, as well as their embeddedness in a community that fosters optimism, hope, self-efficacy, and control of their daily lives. One of the strongest predictors of refugee well-being is having a network of friends of the same ethnic group (Hagstrom, Pereira, and Wu 2020; Schweitzer, Greenslade, and Kagee 2007). Religion may also offer vital resources to facilitate and enhance coping. Cognitive resources (such as belief in the efficacy of prayer), behavioral practices (e.g. prayer and participation in the ritual life of a community), and social and emotional support provided by membership in a religious community have all been shown to relate to refugees' well-being (Adam and Ward 2016; Gozdziak 2002; Schweitzer, Greenslade, and Kagee 2007). In particular, adhering to a religion that stresses forgiveness, has a benevolent deity, spiritual connection, can also help refugees cope with displacement and trauma (Ai, Peterson, and Huang 2003; Fox 2012). Given the various ways in which religion can provide support for refugees, it is not surprising that religion and religious practices can become more salient in refugees' lives upon arrival in the United States (Burwell, Hill, and Van Wicklin 1986:361). These findings that religion becomes more salient for refugees and provides them with important psycho-social coping resources mirror some research on immigrant religion more

generally (Cadge and Ecklund 2007; Chen 2005). In their review of this area of scholarship, Cadge and Ecklund discuss how religion "eases the transition" from pre- to post-immigrant identity and can also help immigrants retain their ethnic culture and traditions (2007:363).[1]

Based on the scholarship discussed above, there are several reasons we would expect religion to have a positive contribution to well-being among our sample of refugees. First, being part of a religious community may provide material and social resources, as well as a sense of belonging, which helps refugees adjust to dislocation and relocation. Second, religion may provide the cognitive and socio-emotional resources to cope with the traumas associated with forced migration. Finally, being part of a religious community may provide refugees with a network of similar others from their ethnic background, with whom they can continue shared cultural practices and traditions.

That said, there is also the possibility that refugees who practice a religion that is different to the predominant religions in their new locations may feel marginalized and isolated from the rest of society. Rousseau et al. (2011) document how Muslim Arabs have experienced an increase in psychological anxiety related to discrimination before and after 9-11. Ahluwalia and Pellettiere (2010) discuss the generalized discrimination against all that appear Muslim and

[1] Other scholarship suggests that religious participation declines following migration. Even though religion and spirituality remain important, other factors can pull immigrants away from active involvement with a religious community (Connor 2009). Akresh (2011) notes that declining religious participation among immigrants may stem from issues due to relocation (e.g., loss of time for religion due to time devoted to employment or unavailability of a comfortable religious community; see also Massey and Higgins, 2011; Connor, 2009).

Arab, including men in the Sikh community who have been targets of verbal and/or physical abuse because of misperceptions and ignorance regarding their identities. This opposing effect of religious participation and practice on well-being could be especially strong in areas of the country with few religious minorities.

## The Importance of Community Religion

Although examining the "locality of residence," which includes local history, institutions, and leadership, has been a topic of sociological study since its early years (Park and Burgess 2019), the religiosity of the broader communities in which people live has regularly been overlooked by scholars, and is worthy of more attention (Lazerwitz 1977; Olson 2019) across different areas in the sociology of religion.

Building upon Emile Durkheim's (1995[1912; 2005 [1897]) and Talcott Parsons' (1944) theories of social integration, some scholarship suggests that religion can help the religiously affiliated feel more attached to where they live. In particular, Martinson, Wilkening, and Buttel (1982) found that Christian religious affiliation made adherents feel a greater sense of belonging in the broader communities in which they lived. However, few contemporary studies examine how community-level religious factors may contribute to a sense of belonging in a particular locale, and if that then affects residents' overall sense of well-being.

Other scholars have taken community religion into account in testing Rodney Stark's theory of moral community (Stark, Doyle, and Kent 1980), which suggests that the strength of religious culture that permeates one's larger community will have an inverse relationship with delinquent behavior, such as crime or gambling (Eitle 2011; Stack and Kposowa 2011; Sturgis and Baller 2012; Trawick and Howsen 2006; Ulmer, Bader, and Gault 2008; Welch, Tittle, and Petee 1991). These studies have generally operationalized religious culture by the degree of

"religious homogeneity" in the community. We build upon this conceptualization of religious community by providing another way of understanding and measuring religious moral community based instead on a heterogeneous understanding of religious community, in which we measure whether people from different ethnic backgrounds are able to practice their religion in their community.

Hearkening back to classical social theorists' postulations and scholarship suggesting that religious influence within a community can lead to feelings of belonging there, we investigate whether perceptions of the religious nature of one's community contribute to the well-being of a group facing many challenges in integrating into a community: refugees. In doing so, we recognize the potential importance of community-level religion. We turn the focus from many past studies on majority groups in America to how marginalized groups entering the United States interpret support for their religion where they live, and how this matters in their well-being and likely, their ability to integrate into an American city. By doing so, we focus on the way in which religious opportunity structures and support for religious heterogeneity can enhance feelings of inclusion for marginalized groups.

## Data

To study the relationship between refugee religiosity, community integration, and well-being, we use the Survey of Utica Refugee Retention and Financial Inclusion (SURRFI), a 2017 survey of refugees living in Utica, New York. Located approximately 250 miles north of New York City, Utica and its surrounding areas have experienced a significant exodus of jobs and economic opportunities over the last several decades. The depressed local economy has led to a significant decline in the population from a peak of over 100,000 people in the 1950's and 1960's to roughly 60,000 people by the late 1990's and has since stayed roughly stable around

that number. Over the past few decades, a large flow of refugees has prevented the city from further population decreases, with over 16,000 refugees arriving in Utica since 1979. This influx of refugees is in great part attributed to the efforts of the Mohawk Valley Resource Center for Refugees (MVRCR), a voluntary agency established under the auspices of the Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service (LIRS). The MVRCR opened its doors in 1981, helping settle refugees from all over the world by providing resettlement services funded by the Office of Refugee Resettlement. Several different waves of refugees have arrived, with particularly large numbers from the former Soviet Union, Bosnia, Southeast Asia, and several countries in Africa such as the Sudan and Somalia.

The SURRFI was conducted in the summer of 2017 by face-to-face interviews across most residential neighborhoods in the city.[2] Between May-August of 2017, research teams traveled door-to-door to identify and interview households with refugee members. To maximize potential response rates, the survey was translated from English into Russian, Bosnian, Burmese, Karen, and Arabic and made available to respondents in any of these six languages. Interviewers visited 7,216 residences out of the 21,351 total addresses identified in the City of Utica's administrative records. At least one person was home and answered the door at 4,198 of these addresses. Of those who answered, the research teams identified 1,041 households with at least

[2] To contain costs, the team did not survey several high income and low population density sections of the city. Initial attempts to identify refugees in such neighborhoods proved unsuccessful.

one refugee member, and collected surveys from 523, for a response rate of 50 percent.[3] Although the overall response rate was high, refugees from the former Soviet Union were initially underrepresented, so the MVRCR helped recruit more people originally from this region of the world. These efforts yielded nearly 100 more respondents, for a total sample size of 619 surveys, making the SURRFI data one of the largest known refugee samples for one particular city.[4]

## Methodology

The survey asked a number of attitudinal questions about refugees' lives in the United States and their feelings about living in the city of Utica, as well as basic demographic information such as age, gender, country of origin, and highest level of education attained. To analyze the relationship between well-being and religion, we estimate Ordinary Least Squares regressions that use one's happiness with living in Utica as a dependent variable. We include independent variables on facets of individual religiosity and community-level religion. We also include other community-level characteristics such as perceived safety and discrimination. Finally, we include other variables pertaining specifically to refugees and sociodemographic

[3] Refugee households in which only minors were present were recorded as one of the 1,041 refugee households. We did not ask minors to complete a survey without parental consent, so these households necessarily add to the denominator but not the numerator.

[4] The only other comparably sized survey is the RISE survey from Denver, Colorado, which obtained responses from 467 refugees in 2011-12 and followed them for four subsequent years (Lichtenstein, 2016).

control variables, as discussed in more depth below. All regression models use robust standard errors to address the problem of heteroscedasticity.

**Dependent Variable**

To measure well-being of refugees, we use their responses to the following statement, which we use as the primary dependent variable for our analysis: "I am happy with my life in Utica". The survey provided five possible responses to this statement, ranging from "strongly disagree" (coded as 1) to "strongly agree" (coded as 5). Table 1 shows the summary statistics for the dependent variable used in this study. The mean responses for the agreement with the statement "I am happy with my life in Utica" is 4.11, falling somewhere between "agree" and "strongly agree".[5]

**Independent Variables**

***Individual Religiosity***

There are two variables related to one's individual religiosity that we analyze in this study. To code people's religious affiliation, survey respondents are asked: "What is your religion, if any?" and are provided with the categories "Christianity", "Islam", "Buddhism", "Other" or "None". We also include religious attendance. The survey includes the question "How often do you attend religious services?" and allows people to respond with "Never", "Only for important religious holidays/events", "Once or twice a year", "Once or twice a month", or "At least once a week". Given the skewed nature of the distribution (61 percent of the refugees in

[5] In additional analysis not shown here, we also use as a dependent variable the response the following statement: "I am happy with my life in the United States" and obtain largely similar results.

the survey indicate that they attend services at least once a week), we include a dichotomous variable in our main regressions for attending at least weekly. Nonetheless, our results are not changed by including separate indicators for all attendance categories relative to not attending all.

In terms of religious traditions, just under half of the sample identifies as Christian (49 percent), while 39 percent identify as Muslim, and 5 percent identify as Buddhist. Roughly 6 percent of respondents identify with another religion (outside of Christianity, Islam, or Buddhism) or claim to have no religious affiliation. Over half of the respondents attend religious services at least once a week (54 percent).

***Family Religiosity***

Individuals in the survey were also asked to respond to the question "Would you say that your family is religious?" They could answer either "yes" or "no". The vast majority of refugees (83 percent) consider their family to be religious.

***Community-Level Variables***

In addition to these questions about individual belief and practice, the survey also asked people about their level of agreement with the statement, "It is easy to practice my religion in Utica," with possible responses ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Agreeing with this statement may indicate a feeling of inclusion and belonging in the community. Notably, this question is asked of all respondents, not only those claiming to be religious or those that indicate they attend religious services.

Most of the sample also agrees or strongly agrees with the statements, "It is easy to practice my religion in Utica," and "My community cares about refugees," with mean responses of 4.37 and 4.14 out of 5, respectively. The reactions to the statements, "I feel safe in Utica," and

"There is little discrimination against refugees" are more neutral, with mean responses of 3.70 and 3.03 out of 5, respectively.

**Control Variables**

In our models, we control for sociodemographic variables that are typically found in the literature on subjective well-being such as gender, highest level of education attained, employment status, having children, and income range. Specifically, we include several dichotomous variables for females, individuals with at least a four year college degree, those with at least one child, employed individuals, a high income indicator variable (annual household income greater than $60,000) and a medium income indicator variable (annual household income between $30,000 and $60,000). We also include several control variables that pertain specifically to refugees: the age at which a refugee entered the United States, the number of years since entering the U.S., the degree to which survey takers agree (on a 1-5 scale) with the statement "my friend group is composed of people from my ethnic background," as well as an indicator variable for those respondents whom interviewers noted as having weak English skills.[6]

[Table 1 about here]

As Table 1 shows, the average age of respondents is just over 34 years, 57 percent are female, and roughly 70 percent (15 percent) have completed at least a high school (four year

[6] Age is a typical control variable in well-being research, but we are unable to include this in our regression analysis because age of entry into the United States and the number of years that one has lived in the U.S. are collinear with age. Another typical specification in the literature includes a quadratic term in age in addition to the linear term. Additional regressions using age, age squared, and years in the United States have similar results.

college) degree. A little over half of the sample is currently employed. Most households have modest incomes, with 56 percent below $30,000 annually, 32 percent between $30,000 and $60,000, and only 12 percent over $60,000 per year. As for the countries of origin for the refugees in our sample, the largest group of people are from Southeast Asia (primarily the ethnic Karen people from Myanmar), comprising 42 percent of the entire sample. Individuals from the former Yugoslavia (nearly all Bosnians) and the former Soviet Union (largely Belarussians, Ukrainians, and Russians) make up another 22 and 20 percent of the sample, respectively. Refugees from various African nations are 12 percent of the sample, while those from the Middle East, or for whom their origin is unknown, make up the remaining 4 percent.

## Results

[Table 2 about here]

In Table 2, we show results for Ordinary Least Squares regressions[7], where the dependent variable is measured on a 1-5 scale, indicating the degree to which respondents agree with the statement "I am happy with my life in Utica," with higher values indicating stronger agreement.

We find in column 1, contrary to much of the literature showing a positive relationship between religion and well-being, that self-identified religiosity is not significantly related to being happy living in Utica. In column 2, we run a specification similar to the one in the first column except that we substitute a measure of religious attendance (attending religious services at least

[7] Ordered probit and ordered logit models yield very similar results.

weekly)[8] for the self-identified religiosity variable. Once again, we do not find a relationship between this variable and happiness with life in Utica. In column 3, we substitute religiosity with the level of agreement with the statement "it is easy to practice my religion in Utica." Our results here reveal a very large and statistically significant relationship. The coefficient implies that those who strongly agree that it is easy to practice their religion in Utica are 0.37 points happier on a 5 point scale, compared to otherwise similar individuals who only agree with that statement. This is 50 percent larger than the effect of having a high income (greater than $60,000 per year), relative to a low income (below $30,000 per year), on happiness. Finally, in column 4, we enter all of three of the religion variables simultaneously and find that the coefficient on the ease in practicing religion remains unchanged in magnitude and statistical significance, while the religiosity and frequency of attending religious services variables continue to be insignificant in impacting well-being.[9]

[8] Including separate indicator variables for each of the attendance categories (attend only on religious holidays, attend once or twice a year, attend twice a month, attend at least weekly) relative to the omitted category of never attending does not yield significant results for any of the categories.

[9] In terms of other control variables, we find that gender, the presence of children, and employment status are not significantly related to being happy living in the local area, while those with at least a four year college degree are significantly less happy with living in Utica relative to others. We also find that more recent arrivals are happier about living in this area than earlier arrivals, and those with friends primarily composed of those in their own ethnic group are

The finding that attendance and religious practice are unrelated to refugees' reports of well-being runs counter to much of the literature on religiosity and well-being discussed earlier.[10] However, the result that the ease of practicing one's religion impacts well-being is consistent with Hayward and Elliot (2014) and Hertzke (2018). Before turning to possible explanations for why religious inclusion is associated with well-being, we test the robustness of this finding by estimating separate regressions according to the country of origin for these refugees. Earlier research suggests that the relationship between religion and well-being is consistently found in a variety of countries and among different populations (e.g. native, immigrants, and refugees. See Elliot and Hayward 2009; Grozinger and Matisake 2014; Hackney and Sanders 2003; Hayward and Elliot 2014; van Turbergen 2006;).

[Table 3 about here]

Column 1 in Table 3 includes the group of refugees from the former USSR (mostly Russians, Belarussians, and Ukrainians). For this subsample, frequently attending religious services is not correlated with our measure of well-being, and for this group of refugees, those that consider themselves religious are actually less happy. The coefficient is -0.49 and is

much happier about life in Utica. Unsurprisingly, those flagged by interviewers as having weak English speaking skills are significantly less happy about living in their new city.

[10] In additional results not shown here, we use several recent waves of the General Social Survey and find that one's general happiness in life is strongly and significantly associated with both considering oneself a religious person and considering oneself a spiritual person.

statistically significant at the 5% level.[11] Meanwhile, we continue to find that those who think it is easy to practice their religion are overall happier with their lives in their local community. In column 2, we estimate the regression for the sample of refugees from the former Yugoslavia (primarily Bosnians). Here, we find that neither being religious nor frequently attending religious services are correlated with happiness, but once again, those that consider it easy to practice their religion are happier than those that do not. Next, we analyze the sample of Southeast Asian refugees (primarily the Karen ethnic group from Myanmar) in column 3 and find that being religious and being able to easily practice religion are positively associated with happiness, though the coefficient on religiosity is only significant at the 10% level. Finally in column 4, we look at the group of refugees that come from various countries in Africa. Here, the coefficient on being religious is negative and marginally significant (p-value of 0.06), while attendance and ease of practicing religion are not significant. We note, however, that the coefficient on the ease of practicing religion is still positive, and it becomes statistically significant when entered alone without the other two religion variables. Taken together, the results from Tables 2 and 3 show that having the ability to practice religion has a strong and positive impact on the happiness of refugees, and this result is fairly consistent across different refugee groups. Meanwhile, religious service attendance is not related to well-being, while the results for religiosity are mixed and inconsistent.

To further analyze the relationship between ease in practicing religion and refugees' happiness, we test to see whether there are any interactions between this variable and other facets

[11] When conducting the same regression that omits religious attendance and ease of practicing religion, the coefficient on religiosity is still negative, but no longer statistically significant.

of religiosity. We begin by separately estimating a regression for those that consider their families religious versus those that do not, and these results are shown in the first 2 columns of Table 4.

[Table 4 about here]

The great majority of individuals (over 80 percent of the sample) consider their families to be religious, so it is unsurprising that the regression in Column 1 continues to show that the ease in practicing one's religion in Utica is strongly related to happiness in the local area. However, even for the 93 individuals who do not claim to be religious, the ability to freely practice one's religion remains a strong predictor of happiness. Remarkably, the coefficient on this variable is nearly identical across the two subgroups.[12]

Next, we compare the results for those that regularly attend services at least weekly (Column 3), versus all others (Column 4), which splits the sample roughly in half. While there are a few differences in coefficients across these groups (high incomes, having children and having many friends in the same ethnic group are positively related to happiness for non-attenders but not for regular attenders), the result for the ease of practicing religion is positive

[12] There are some differences in coefficients for other variables. Having a high income is strongly related to being happier for the non-religious (magnitude of 0.57 and significant at the 1% level), but not at all for the religious. Meanwhile, weak English skills, being in the US for a longer period of time, and having a college education are all negatively related to happiness for the subgroup of religious refugees, but none of these variables are correlated with happiness for the non-religious.

and significant regardless of whether or not someone regularly attends services. Remarkably, the coefficient is actually 50% larger for people who do not regularly attend services (0.44) than for those that are regular attenders (0.29). It is striking that even for refugees that do not consider themselves religious or for those that do not regularly attend services, they are nonetheless happier when they perceive that it is easy to practice religion. As a third test of robustness of the effects, we split the sample into the group of people that identify as Christians (Column 5) and those that identify as Muslims (Column 6). Once again, we find a positive and significant relationship between ease in practicing religion and happiness with living in Utica for both groups, with a somewhat higher coefficient for Muslims than for Christians.[13]

We have identified a strong and robust result: the perception that it is easy to practice religion positively and significantly increases the happiness of refugees' lives in their new location, regardless of religious affiliation, religiosity, or religious attendance. Meanwhile, whether or not one attends services and whether or not one considers their family to be religious are not strong predictors of happiness. So what might explain these results? It is possible that the degree to which people feel free to practice their religion is proxying for other positive aspects of a community.

[Table 5 about here]

In Table 5, we explore this idea by re-estimating the main regression, but adding in three additional independent variables that reflect attitudes toward one's community: the degree to which people agree with the statements "There is little discrimination against refugees", "I feel

[13] The great majority of the sample identifies as either Christian or Muslim, so the remaining sample is too small to analyze separately.

safe in Utica", and "My community cares about refugees". For ease of comparison, we reproduce Column 3 of Table 2 and show these results in the first column of Table 5. Note that the magnitude of the coefficient on "Easy to practice my religion in Utica" is 0.37, so that a one point increase (on a scale from 1-5) in agreement with the statement "It is easy to practice my religion in Utica" corresponds to a 0.37 point increase (one a scale from 1-5) in agreement with the statement "I am happy with my life in Utica".

In Column 2, we add an independent variable for the level of agreement with the statement "There is little discrimination against refugees" to the original regression. The coefficient is positive and statistically significant at the 5% level, though its magnitude is fairly small (0.08). Meanwhile, the coefficient on "Easy to practice my religion in Utica" remains statistically significant and is virtually unchanged (0.36). While the absence of discrimination has a modestly positive effect on the well-being of refugees in Utica, controlling for this community characteristic does not diminish the effect of the ability to practice one's religion.

Next, we test whether the well-being effect of being able to easily practice one's religion is affected by the inclusion of a variable for feelings of safety. The results in Column 3 show that the agreement with "I feel safe in Utica" has a large (magnitude of coefficient is 0.32) and significant effect on individual happiness of refugees. The coefficient of the ease of practicing one's religion continues to be statistically significant, though the magnitude of the effect is reduced by over 25% (from 0.37 to 0.27).

In column 4 we incorporate into the regression a variable that represents a refugee's sense of care from the community. The coefficient on the agreement with the statement "My community cares for refugees" is large (0.40) and statistically significant at the 1% level. Being able to freely practice one's religion is still a significant predictor of refugee well-being, but the

coefficient is now greatly reduced to 0.17. Finally, we include all of these variables simultaneously in a regression and show these results in Column 5. Feeling safe in one's community and feeling that the community cares about refugees both remain significant predictors of happiness, but the absence or presence of discrimination is not significant. The coefficient on *easy to practice my religion in Utica* remains statistically significant and is now reduced to 0.15. Although the happiness of refugees greatly depends on their perceptions of the community's care for them and their feelings of security, there continues to be an additional effect of the ability to easily practice religion.

Although some prior studies have also found that the ability to easily practice one's religion to be associated with higher levels of well-being, the populations under study were generally actively practicing the religion (Hayward and Elliot, 2014; Elliot and Hayward, 2009; Gozdziak, 2002). The association between religious inclusion and well-being, even among those who do not actively practice religion, suggests that this variable may measure a more fundamental concern for refugees. Trauma, insecurity, and risk are hallmarks of the refugee experience, and some of Utica's refugees come from countries that suppressed or limited the exercise of religion. We suspect that the ability to freely express and practice religion reflects the degree to which refugees' sense of insecurity has been relieved by coming to Utica. It may be that for refugees, simply feeling free to worship is more important than actually practicing religion (Hertzke, 2018; Horst and Grabska, 2015; El-Shaarawi, 2015).

Our findings are particularly noteworthy, as the survey was fielded in 2017, a historical moment marked by heightened anti-immigrant and anti-refugee sentiment in the United States, stemming in part from the nation's political leadership (Young 2017). The ability to freely practice one's religion may have been particularly important to refugees during a period of anti-

Muslim rhetoric and travel bans on individuals from certain foreign countries. Yet even under these national conditions, the particular facets of the Utica community which contributed to refugee well-being, the ability for refugees to practice their religion, feelings of safety, and feelings that the community cared about them, all contributed to their overall happiness in living there.

## Conclusion

This paper contributes to the large and growing literature on religion and well-being by showing that for a particularly vulnerable group, refugees living in upstate New York, the degree to which they feel it is easy to practice religion has a large and significant impact on happiness. Contrary to the majority of the literature on religion and well-being, which suggests that individual religiosity is generally associated with well-being, we find that one's perceived ability to practice religion in their community is more closely tied to their sense of well-being than an individual's religiosity or one's attendance of religious services. This result is robust and holds across different religious affiliations, across different refugee groups, and for both recent arrivals as well as refugees who have lived in the United States for a long period of time. Interestingly, the ability to easily to practice religion is an important determinant of happiness, even for those that do not declare themselves as religious and for those that do not regularly attend religious services.

Further analysis suggests that one's perception of the ease in practicing religion partly captures other positive characteristics of a community, such as the degree to which it cares about its refugees, the absence of discrimination, and the perceived safety of the area. However, even after accounting for these other community-level characteristics, there continues to be an additional effect of the ability to practice religion on the happiness with living in the community.

More generally speaking, our findings bring attention to the need to develop more community-level measures of religion that assess not only the degree of religious homogeneity, but also how a broader sense of religious heterogeneity, inclusivity, support for interfaith dialogue and initiatives, and other related measures of community-level religious belonging may affect people's sense of belonging, integration into the places they live, and overall well-being.

Our findings also importantly point to community-level structural and cultural factors which may counter the negative influences of prejudice and discrimination occurring in the United States during this time period, as well as to refugees' resilience in the face of the many hardships they face and challenges associated with settling in a new country as members of ethnic and often racial minority groups.

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Table 1: Summary Statistics

| Variables | Mean | Std Dev. | Min | Max |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Female | 0.57 | 0.49 | 0 | 1 |
| Age | 34.25 | 14.40 | 15 | 91 |
| Less than High School | 0.28 | 0.45 | 0 | 1 |
| High School Degree | 0.29 | 0.45 | 0 | 1 |
| GED | 0.04 | 0.19 | 0 | 1 |
| Some College | 0.08 | 0.28 | 0 | 1 |
| Two Year College Degree | 0.14 | 0.35 | 0 | 1 |
| Four Year College Degree | 0.08 | 0.27 | 0 | 1 |
| More than Four Year College | 0.06 | 0.23 | 0 | 1 |
| Other Education Level | 0.03 | 0.18 | 0 | 1 |
| Employed | 0.56 | 0.50 | 0 | 1 |
| Income<=30K | 0.56 | 0.50 | 0 | 1 |
| 30K<Income<60K | 0.32 | 0.47 | 0 | 1 |
| Income>=60K | 0.12 | 0.32 | 0 | 1 |
| Years in United States | 12.61 | 8.97 | 0 | 71 |
| Consider Family Religious | 0.83 | 0.38 | 0 | 1 |
| Attend Religious Services at Least Weekly | 0.54 | 0.50 | 0 | 1 |
| Easy to Practice My Religion in Utica | 4.37 | 0.76 | 1 | 5 |
| Happy with Life in Utica | 4.11 | 0.84 | 1 | 5 |
| Feel Safe in Utica | 3.70 | 0.99 | 1 | 5 |
| Community Cares about Refugees | 4.14 | 0.82 | 1 | 5 |
| Little Discrimination against Refugees | 3.03 | 1.14 | 1 | 5 |
| | | | | |
| Refugee Groups | Total | % | | |
| Former Soviet Union | 121 | 19.5 | | |
| Former Yugoslavia | 134 | 21.6 | | |
| Southeast Asia | 257 | 41.5 | | |
| Africa | 74 | 12.0 | | |
| Middle East | 24 | 3.9 | | |
| Other/Unknown | 9 | 1.5 | | |
| Reported Religion | | | | |
| Christianity | 303 | 49.0 | | |
| Islam | 243 | 39.3 | | |
| Buddhism | 34 | 5.5 | | |
| Other/None | 38 | 6.2 | | |

Table 2: Religion and Happiness in Utica
Dependent variable:1-5 Scale of Agreement with "I am happy with my life in Utica"

| Independent Variable | (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Female | -0.04 | -0.03 | -0.04 | -0.04 |
| | (0.07) | (0.07) | (0.07) | (0.07) |
| Has Children | 0.16 | 0.15 | 0.17* | 0.15* |
| | (0.10) | (0.10) | (0.09) | (0.09) |
| 4 Years College or More | -0.28** | -0.28** | -0.32*** | -0.32*** |
| | (0.11) | (0.11) | (0.11) | (0.11) |
| Employed | 0.07 | 0.07 | 0.08 | 0.07 |
| | (0.08) | (0.08) | (0.07) | (0.07) |
| Age of Entering US | 0.04 | 0.04 | 0.02 | 0.03 |
| | (0.04) | (0.04) | (0.03) | (0.04) |
| Years in US | -0.12** | -0.12** | -0.10** | -0.10** |
| | (0.05) | (0.05) | (0.04) | (0.04) |
| Friends in Same Ethnic Group | 0.12*** | 0.13*** | 0.07** | 0.07** |
| | (0.03) | (0.03) | (0.03) | (0.03) |
| Weak English Skills | -0.20** | -0.20** | -0.19** | -0.19** |
| | (0.09) | (0.09) | (0.09) | (0.09) |
| 30K<Income<60K | 0.00 | 0.00 | 0.00 | 0.01 |
| | (0.08) | (0.08) | (0.08) | (0.08) |
| Income>=60K | 0.24* | 0.24* | 0.24* | 0.24* |
| | (0.13) | (0.13) | (0.12) | (0.12) |
| Consider Oneself Religious | 0.10 | | | 0.03 |
| | (0.10) | | | (0.10) |
| Attend Services at Least Weekly | | -0.00 | | -0.10 |
| | | (0.07) | | (0.07) |
| Easy to Practice My Religion in Utica | | | 0.37*** | 0.38*** |
| | | | (0.05) | (0.06) |
| Constant | 3.61*** | 3.68*** | 2.28*** | 2.26*** |
| | (0.19) | (0.17) | (0.26) | (0.27) |
| Observations | 543 | 543 | 542 | 542 |
| R-squared | 0.088 | 0.086 | 0.183 | 0.186 |

Robust standard errors in parentheses
*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Table 3: Religion and Happiness in Utica (by Refugee Group)
Dependent variable:1-5 Scale of Agreement with "I am happy with my life in Utica"

| Independent Variable | (1) Former USSR | (2) Former Yugoslavia | (3) SE Asia | (4) Africa |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Female | 0.07 | -0.16 | -0.10 | 0.18 |
| | (0.15) | (0.14) | (0.10) | (0.24) |
| Has Children | -0.29 | 0.39* | 0.16 | 0.24 |
| | (0.19) | (0.20) | (0.14) | (0.26) |
| 4 Years College or More | -0.25 | -0.08 | -0.27 | -0.92* |
| | (0.18) | (0.19) | (0.30) | (0.54) |
| Employed | 0.07 | -0.06 | -0.03 | 0.23 |
| | (0.17) | (0.19) | (0.12) | (0.26) |
| Age of Entering US | 0.09 | 0.01 | -0.05 | 0.25 |
| | (0.06) | (0.07) | (0.05) | (0.16) |
| Years in US | -0.03 | 0.14 | -0.11 | -0.18 |
| | (0.09) | (0.18) | (0.07) | (0.32) |
| Friends in Same Ethnic Group | 0.10 | 0.11* | 0.13** | 0.04 |
| | (0.09) | (0.06) | (0.06) | (0.08) |
| Weak English Skills | -0.15 | 0.10 | -0.11 | -0.79** |
| | (0.20) | (0.16) | (0.13) | (0.37) |
| 30K<Income<60K | 0.37* | 0.23 | -0.12 | -0.21 |
| | (0.21) | (0.19) | (0.13) | (0.25) |
| Income>=60K | 0.35 | 0.32 | 0.94*** | -0.71 |
| | (0.24) | (0.20) | (0.31) | (0.48) |
| Consider Oneself Religious | -0.49** | 0.14 | 0.39* | -0.69* |
| | (0.23) | (0.14) | (0.22) | (0.35) |
| Attend Services at Least Weekly | 0.05 | -0.31 | -0.08 | 0.21 |
| | (0.19) | (0.22) | (0.10) | (0.22) |
| Easy to Practice My Religion in Utica | 0.34** | 0.47*** | 0.33*** | 0.31 |
| | (0.15) | (0.09) | (0.10) | (0.20) |
| Constant | 2.29*** | 1.19** | 2.17*** | 2.99*** |
| | (0.65) | (0.52) | (0.50) | (0.97) |
| Observations | 112 | 120 | 210 | 68 |
| R-squared | 0.192 | 0.382 | 0.215 | 0.353 |

Robust standard errors in parentheses
*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Table 4: Religious Freedom and Happiness in Utica (by Religiosity and Attendance)
Dependent variable:1-5 Scale of Agreement with "I am happy with my life in Utica"

| Independent Variable | (1) Religious | (2) Not Religious | (3) Regularly Attend | (4) Not Attend | (5) Christian | (6) Muslim |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Female | -0.05 | -0.02 | -0.05 | -0.02 | -0.12 | 0.09 |
| | (0.08) | (0.17) | (0.10) | (0.10) | (0.09) | (0.12) |
| Has Children | 0.18* | 0.03 | 0.08 | 0.28** | -0.00 | 0.34** |
| | (0.10) | (0.24) | (0.13) | (0.13) | (0.13) | (0.14) |
| 4 Years College or More | -0.38*** | -0.07 | -0.32* | -0.25* | -0.34** | -0.42** |
| | (0.13) | (0.21) | (0.18) | (0.14) | (0.16) | (0.18) |
| Employed | 0.08 | -0.03 | 0.01 | 0.15 | -0.01 | 0.11 |
| | (0.08) | (0.24) | (0.10) | (0.11) | (0.10) | (0.13) |
| Age of Entering US | 0.02 | 0.08 | 0.04 | 0.01 | 0.01 | 0.09 |
| | (0.04) | (0.11) | (0.05) | (0.05) | (0.04) | (0.07) |
| Years in US | -0.12** | 0.03 | -0.14** | -0.00 | -0.10* | 0.01 |
| | (0.05) | (0.11) | (0.06) | (0.05) | (0.06) | (0.10) |
| Friends in Same Ethnic Group | 0.06 | 0.13* | -0.00 | 0.17*** | 0.12** | 0.07 |
| | (0.04) | (0.07) | (0.05) | (0.04) | (0.06) | (0.05) |
| Weak English Skills | -0.25** | 0.02 | -0.24* | -0.12 | -0.10 | -0.30* |
| | (0.10) | (0.22) | (0.13) | (0.11) | (0.11) | (0.17) |
| 30K<Income<60K | -0.04 | 0.30 | 0.00 | 0.02 | 0.02 | 0.00 |
| | (0.09) | (0.21) | (0.11) | (0.12) | (0.11) | (0.15) |
| Income>=60K | 0.13 | 0.57*** | 0.06 | 0.32** | 0.26 | 0.20 |
| | (0.15) | (0.21) | (0.20) | (0.14) | (0.19) | (0.20) |
| Easy to Practice My Religion in Utica | 0.37*** | 0.35*** | 0.29*** | 0.44*** | 0.34*** | 0.49*** |
| | (0.07) | (0.11) | (0.09) | (0.06) | (0.10) | (0.08) |
| Constant | 2.38*** | 1.77*** | 3.02*** | 1.37*** | 2.34*** | 1.44*** |
| | (0.31) | (0.52) | (0.40) | (0.33) | (0.45) | (0.40) |
| Observations | 449 | 93 | 289 | 253 | 261 | 217 |
| R-squared | 0.185 | 0.229 | 0.094 | 0.351 | 0.180 | 0.278 |

Robust standard errors in parentheses
*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Table 5: Attitudes towards Utica and Happiness in Utica
Dependent variable:1-5 Scale of Agreement with "I am happy with my life in Utica"

| Independent Variable | (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) | (5) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Female | -0.04 | -0.02 | 0.01 | -0.02 | 0.01 |
| | (0.07) | (0.07) | (0.06) | (0.06) | (0.06) |
| Has Children | 0.17* | 0.16* | 0.11 | 0.12 | 0.09 |
| | (0.09) | (0.09) | (0.09) | (0.09) | (0.08) |
| 4 Years College or More | -0.32*** | -0.32*** | -0.27*** | -0.23** | -0.20** |
| | (0.11) | (0.11) | (0.09) | (0.10) | (0.09) |
| Employed | 0.08 | 0.08 | 0.07 | 0.07 | 0.06 |
| | (0.07) | (0.07) | (0.07) | (0.07) | (0.07) |
| Age of Entering US | 0.02 | 0.02 | 0.04 | 0.02 | 0.04 |
| | (0.03) | (0.04) | (0.03) | (0.03) | (0.03) |
| Years in US | -0.10** | -0.11** | -0.08* | -0.07 | -0.06 |
| | (0.04) | (0.04) | (0.04) | (0.05) | (0.05) |
| Friends in Same Ethnic Group | 0.07** | 0.07** | 0.08** | 0.06** | 0.07** |
| | (0.03) | (0.03) | (0.03) | (0.03) | (0.03) |
| Weak English Skills | -0.19** | -0.23** | -0.20** | -0.14* | -0.18** |
| | (0.09) | (0.09) | (0.08) | (0.08) | (0.08) |
| 30K<Income<60K | 0.00 | -0.01 | 0.03 | 0.02 | 0.03 |
| | (0.08) | (0.08) | (0.07) | (0.08) | (0.07) |
| Income>=60K | 0.24* | 0.24* | 0.27** | 0.13 | 0.18 |
| | (0.12) | (0.12) | (0.12) | (0.11) | (0.11) |
| Easy to practice my religion in Utica | 0.37*** | 0.36*** | 0.27*** | 0.17*** | 0.15*** |
| | (0.05) | (0.05) | (0.05) | (0.05) | (0.05) |
| Little discrimination against refugees in Utica | | 0.08** | | | 0.01 |
| | | (0.03) | | | (0.03) |
| Feel safe in Utica | | | 0.32*** | | 0.24*** |
| | | | (0.04) | | (0.04) |
| Community cares about refugees | | | | 0.40*** | 0.32*** |
| | | | | (0.05) | (0.05) |
| Constant | 2.28*** | 2.09*** | 1.44*** | 1.48*** | 0.96*** |
| | (0.26) | (0.28) | (0.26) | (0.26) | (0.26) |
| Observations | 542 | 537 | 541 | 539 | 533 |
| R-squared | 0.183 | 0.195 | 0.315 | 0.301 | 0.380 |

Robust standard errors in parentheses
*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1