

HELP-SEEKING BEHAVIORS AND THE MENTAL  
WELL-BEING STATUS OF ALBANIAN IMMIGRANTS  
IN MALAYSIA

BY

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## ABSTRACT

Immigration causes significant challenges for immigrants. Numerous factors contribute to psychological stress in immigrant populations moving to a new country. The feeling of loss, language barriers, lack of financial support, employment difficulties, discrimination, limited social support, and many other stressors affect the emotional wellbeing of immigrants. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore and investigate the life experiences of 16 Albanian and Kosovo-Albanian immigrants living in Malaysia, as well as those who previously lived in Malaysia and currently live overseas in Australia and Albania. Specifically, the study explored the following: (i) Immigrants' psychological health and issues in order to determine their perception and attitude towards mental wellbeing; (ii) The obstacles and barriers immigrants face in Malaysia; (iii) The immigrants' coping strategies for their mental wellbeing; (iv) The role of stigmatisation in the help-seeking behaviour of immigrants; and (v) Suggestion and recommendation to live in Malaysia. Qualitative phenomenological case study using in-depth semi-structured interviews was the vehicle through which the data was collected. The result showed that indicators of mental wellbeing such as inner peace, mental, psychical and spiritual health, happiness, gratefulness, purpose in life, accomplishment, fulfilling family needs, balanced life, and self and life improvement positively affected the immigrants' mental wellbeing. However, cultural shock, visa and employment pass issues, difficulty to obtain PR status, difficulty to secure employment status, foreigner and *orang putih*, and lack of family support negatively affected the wellbeing of the immigrants. Furthermore, Albanian immigrants felt safer to share their burden and challenges with family and close friends because they wish to keep their problems a secret and to avoid outsiders' perception. This fear of people's perception is closely associated with stigma. Hence, they felt that there is a need to hide anything which they deem wrong, to avoid a bad name, and to maintain the right image within the Albanian community. To deal with psychological problems, they resort to several strategies which include calmness, prayer, patience, and having a positive attitude in solving and analysing problems. According to the respondents, Malaysia is a country which offers many opportunities in terms of education and business. Finally, the participants voiced their suggestions to policymakers, social workers, psychologists and academicians to improve the state of wellbeing of Albanian diaspora immigrants as well as other immigrants residing in Malaysia.

## خلاصة البحث

تسبب الهجرة تحديات كبيرة للمهاجرين حيث هناك العديد من العوامل التي تساهم في الضغط النفسية لدى الأفراد المهاجرين الذين ينتقلون إلى بلد جديد على سبيل المثال لا الحصر الشعور بالفقدان والحوازر اللغوية ونقص الدعم المالي وصعوبات التوظيف والتمييز والدعم الاجتماعي المحدود والعديد من الضغوطات الأخرى التي تؤثر على الرفاهية النفسية للمهاجرين. تهدف الدراسة الى التعرف على تجارب الحياة لـ 18 ألبانياً وكوسوفو -المهاجرون الألبان الذين يعيشون في ماليزيا ، وكذلك أولئك الذين عاشوا سابقاً في ماليزيا ويعيشون حالياً في الخارج في أستراليا وألبانيا على وجه التحديد. حيث تطرق البحث إلى ما يلي: (أ) الرفاه النفسي للمهاجرين وقضايا الهجرة من أجل تحديد موقفهم واتجاهاتهم السلوكية تجاه الرفاهية النفسية . (ب) الصعوبات والتحديات للمهاجرين . (ج) استراتيجيات التعامل النفسي التي استخدموها من اجل الرفاهية النفسية . (د) دور الوصم المجتمعيه في طلب المساعدة للمهاجرين ؛ و (هـ) اقتراحات و توصيات للعيش في ماليزيا. استخدمت الباحثة المنهج النوعي تحديا دراسه الحاله حيث استخدمت المقابلات شبه المنظمة هي تعتبر وسيلة من خلالها يتم جمع البيانات. حيث أظهرت النتيجة أن هناك مؤشرات للرفاه النفسي مثل السلام الداخلي والعقلي و الروحي، والصحة الروحية والسعادة والامتنان ، وان يكون لديهم هدف من الحياة، والإنجاز، و إشباع الاحتياجات الأسريه، و الحياة المتوازنة، والتحسن الايجابي كلها تؤثر على الرفاه النفسي للمهاجرين . بالرغم من ذلك إلا أن الصدمة الثقافية والتأثيرات والحصول على التوظيف وقضاياها ، والصعوبة في الحصول على الاقامه الدائمه ، والصعوبة في تأمين فرص العمل ، والافتقار إلى الدعم الأسري تؤثر سلبا على الرفاه النفسي للمهاجرين. اضافة إلى ذلك أن المهاجرين الألبان يشعرون بالمعاناة لمشاركه معاناتهم للآخرين و مع العائلة والاصدقاء لأن ذلك يؤثر على الصورة الذاتيه لذلك يحتفزون بمشاكل الأسرة سرا وتجنب الغرباء " . هذا الخوف من الناس يرتبط بشكل وثيق مع وصمة العار المجتمعيه. لذلك تم استخدامات العديد من الاستراتيجيات للتعامل مع مشاكلهم التي تشمل الهدوء والعبادة ، والصبر ، والموقف ايجابي في حل وتحليل المشاكل. ووفقا لأفراد العينة ، ماليزيا بلد يوفر العديد من الفرص في مجال التعليم وفي فرص والعمل. وأخيرا، عبر أفراد العينه عن اقتراحات لصناع القرار والعاملين الاجتماعيين وعلماء النفس والأكاديميين لتحسين حالة الرفاهية النفسي للبان فضلا عن غيرهم من المهاجرين المقيمين في ماليزيا.

## APPROVAL PAGE

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## DECLARATION

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# CHAPTER ONE

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Immigration has been, and still is, today's social phenomenon across the globe. Individuals that are unhappy or dissatisfied with their own countries due to many factors such as economic, political and personal reasons, choose to leave their motherland and migrate to other countries. This movement is often associated with the hopes and dreams of a better life and the desire to achieve goals that were probably unattainable in their home country. While refugees commonly flee for their lives given short notice to unknown destinations, most immigrants have made preparations or a real choice to change their country of residence. In other words, immigrants plan-ahead practically, psychologically and systematically (Tribe, 2002). This movement can be stressful and can result in many difficulties and obstacles for the immigrants to adjust to, and they are more vulnerable to stress and psychological problems. Ku and Waidmann (2003) found that barriers such as language and culture are experienced by immigrants, which impact their quality of life. Indeed, living in an environment that is different to one's own country and belief systems can be highly challenging and stressful. Immigrants that are residing in the host country are exposed to life stressors and challenges while having to assimilate, therefore, this may affect their mental wellbeing. According to researcher, there have been no studies undertaken to examine the mental wellbeing of Albanian and Kosovo Albanian immigrants currently living or have lived in Malaysia. Therefore, the current study aims at enhancing the understanding of the wellbeing of the immigrants. Furthermore, the study also explores how immigrants perceive their mental wellbeing, what psychological barriers

they face in a foreign country and the strategies employed to cope. This study explores the immigrants' suggestions and recommendations for living in Malaysia. This study also examines how self-stigma inhibits the help-seeking behaviours of the immigrants, or how immigrants seek for help. This is because in some cultures, mostly eastern cultures, problems with psychological health are seen as a social stigma which carries shame.

Therefore, mental health issues are often overlooked and not discussed openly. Due to the fear of being stigmatised, individuals are afraid to reveal and disclose their mental health problems (Pinto-Foltz & Logsdon, 2008; Hays & McLeod, 2014). Social stigma is the major influencing factor affecting those seeking psychological help in Asian societies (Nam, Choi, & Lee, 2015). In these cultures, people who have mental health problems are overlooked because of society's negative beliefs related to mental health difficulties. Consequently, people tend not to seek the necessary treatments to avoid being labelled as mentally ill (Corrigan, 2004).

## **1.2 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

In the past three decades, a plethora of research has contributed to the body of knowledge in understanding the term "mental wellbeing." Mental wellbeing has been theorised as: positive feelings, such as feelings of happiness; as a personality trait inclusive of the psychological possessions of self-esteem and mastery; and as resilience, which is the ability to cope with adversity. People who face traumatic and shocking life events are able to persevere and function at an average rate because of a high level of resilience (Bonanno, 2004). Furthermore, Kolk & McFarlane (2012) postulate that "Most people who have been exposed to traumatic stressors are

somehow able to go on with their lives without becoming haunted by the memories of what has happened to them".

According to the literature review, it has been reported that immigrants face difficulties in adjusting to the new country and therefore their mental health declines.

Albanian diaspora immigrants, as well as other immigrants, face several challenges when they arrive in a new country. According to Pantelidou and Craig (2006), the process of migration can be a stressful road for immigrants due to psychological difficulties. Numerous factors predict mental stress in immigrants moving to a new country, namely: language, cultural barriers, social support, employment, financial and educational opportunities. According to Harrison, 1997, an individual's health is also influenced by their access to social and development resources, such as education. Both formal and informal learning is a critical factor affecting health. Individuals with higher education overall have better health than those who have lower education.

Immigrants do not seek help for their psychological problems due to numerous reasons. For instance, the stigma of being labelled as a "crazy person" is deeply rooted in social and cultural norms, and that may lead to immigrants not seeking professional help. As a result, anxiety and shame remain undiagnosed and untreated. According to Fung and Wang (2007), attitudes towards seeking psychological help are greatly influenced by an individual's cultural norms and beliefs. Every culture perceives mental health problems and help-seeking behaviour practices differently.

Albanians and Kosovo Albanians immigrants are a small group of people who have been residing in Malaysia since the end of communism in 1990 and Kosovo war in 1998-1999. Their primary reasons for migrations were political concerns, poor economic situation or escape, Albanians' communist period, and the Kosovo war.



Even though Albania and Kosovo are the same people throughout history, they have been situated in different circumstances. Albania was fighting for her freedom and Kosovo for her national identity. During the war, Kosovo faced many casualties and ethnic conflicts, which resulted in a vast migration. During this period, most immigrants migrated and found a safe place in neighbouring countries; though, some immigrated to Asia, including Malaysia. Kosovo was part of Albania; however, when Albania gained her independence in 1912, Kosovo was left outside of Albania borders as part of Yugoslavia or Serbia. Since then, Kosovo was living in a shadow of the world, fighting for her national identity; until 2008, when Kosovo gained her independence which is partially recognized by the world.

During her time of getting independence Kosovo was left with many fatalities like lack of financial resources, infrastructure problems, psychological health problems and many more, and this goes same for Albania after the end of communism 1990 the country faced economic and psychological health problems. Regarding the immigrants from the Republic of Albania and the Republic of Kosovo, the problems and difficulties during their migratory process are not well documented throughout history. Albanians' diaspora people have been forgotten throughout history. Although Albanians and Kosovo Albanians are the same people, they share the same language, cultural norms, and traditions, but they have been situated differently in history. Albanians were isolated and prohibited to be in touch with anything foreign. The histories for both of these countries are obviously that the Serbian government wanted Kosovo Albanians out. Whilst the government in Albania wanted to keep its people inside the country. In contrast, Albanians Kosovar, with their persistence and perseverance's, tried to resist the Serbian's rules to stay in their land at any cost. Therefore, both immigrants from Albania and Kosovo looked forward to neighbouring

countries with expectations and opportunities to build a better-off and more rewarding life for themselves and their families.

The first Albanians that came to Malaysia were a group of 50 plus male students with scholarships from Malaysia government. After their graduation, some students returned, got married and brought their wives to Malaysia. However, some finished their studies and only returned. Through the years, many Albanians and Kosovar Albanians migrated to Malaysia with their families to have a better future with regards to education and business opportunities. The Albanian and Kosovar Albanians people generally look like typical Europeans or Arabs such as Syrians and Palestinians. However, they have a unique culture that is distinct to any of these.

During the communist regime Albanian's experienced several psychological problems and traumas. The communist dictatorship in Albania was the strictest communist regime of the time, much like the North Korea of today. The communist period revoked the public's fundamental freedoms, and they were not allowed to be connected or interact with the outside world. Anything foreign was forbidden, people were penalised for reading foreigner literature and many scholars were punished and prosecuted. Consequently, there was minimal exposure to foreign literature, including the field of psychology. Sadly, this isolation resulted in enormous losses in financial, educational, employment, psychological and wellbeing areas.

Furthermore, the development of psychological studies was inhibited during the communist rule as a result of the prohibition of western psychology. Unaware of new theories and research, people lacked the knowledge to seek any mental health services. Therefore, many looked towards the West to find a better future in terms of education and employment opportunities. Additionally, during this period, people were not allowed to travel outside of Albania, and for those who did, they were not

allowed to return and were labelled as traitors to the country. If they were caught escaping the country, they were executed, and their families were prosecuted for the rest of their lives.

### **1.3 THE OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY**

The objective of the study was to investigate and explore the life experiences of Albanian and Kosovar immigrants living in Malaysia as well as those that left Malaysia and currently reside in Australia and Albania. The primary purpose of this study was to explore the psychological problems of Albanian and Kosovo Albanian immigrants and to identify their attitudes towards mental wellbeing. The second purpose was to investigate and explore the obstacles and barriers faced by immigrants in Malaysia. The third objective was to understand the strategies that immigrants use to cope with their mental wellbeing. The fourth objective of the study was to determine the role of stigmatisation on the help-seeking behaviours of Albanian immigrants living in Malaysia. This study explored the experiences and the recommendations of the immigrants living in Malaysia.

### **1.4 RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

Roberts (2004) asserts that the purpose of research questions is to accomplish two goals: Firstly, to guide the study and secondly, to present the structural outline of the research.

- 1) How do immigrants perceive their mental wellbeing?
- 2) What are the psychological barriers faced by immigrants in a foreign country?
- 3) How does self-stigma prevent the help-seeking behaviours of immigrants?

- 4) What strategies do immigrants use to cope with their mental wellbeing?
- 5) What are the immigrants' suggestions and recommendations for living in Malaysia?

### **1.5 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY**

The significance of this study was to explore the life experiences of the immigrants in order to provide a better understanding of the mental wellbeing issues and help-seeking behaviours of immigrants and their experiences of psychological barriers, obstacles faced in Malaysia and their coping mechanisms. Historically, a few studies have been conducted on the mental wellbeing of immigrants in other geographical settings. However, there are no previous studies examining the mental wellbeing issues of Albanian and Kosovo Albanian immigrants living in Malaysia. Therefore, this investigation is significant as it intends to assess the state of mental wellbeing among them. Since little is known about the wellbeing of the Albanian and Albanian Kosovar minorities in Malaysia, this study is vital. It is hoped that the data gathered from this study will contribute to the body of knowledge that is available in order to improve the life of Albanian and Kosovo Albanian immigrants, as well as other immigrants living in Malaysia. Moreover, the research findings may help health educators design and develop cultural programs and workshops. Additionally, the results may have an effect on educational settings, such as universities and health centre services to create future programmes tackling mental health problems. Moreover, the findings would be helpful to current universities for training purposes, especially for health education staff, such as psychologists, educational psychologists and other experts to identify and recognise the psychological health problems of immigrants. This is so that immigrants can receive the help they need because

Malaysia is a country whose population consists of many foreigners including Indonesians, Filipinos, Bangladeshis, Nepalese and so on.

## **1.6 DELIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY**

Every study has delimitations which are unavoidable, and the delimitations of this study are as follows. Participants were limited to Albanians and Kosovar Albanians who are currently living and that have lived in Kuala Lumpur Malaysia. Adults above 18 years will be covered in the research. The fact that the sample was taken from only one city in Kuala Lumpur Malaysia may compromise the results. If the study was conducted throughout Malaysia, it would be a better representation of the prevalence of mental wellbeing of Albania immigrants. Therefore, the results of this study cannot be generalised to Albanian immigrants living in all parts of Malaysia. Additionally, the interviews were voluntary and based on the willingness of the participants. As such, the results depend on immigrants who were willing to provide information and participate in the research.

## **1.7 DEFINITION OF TERMS**

This section will provide definitions of the specific terms used in the study.

### **ALBANIA**

**Theoretical definition:** Albania is a country located in South-Eastern, Europe. Albanians are the direct descendants of the ancient Illyrians, which makes them the first population of Europe (Woods, 1918), Furthermore, according to Prifti and Biberaj (2016), historical data and archaeological research shows that Albanians are the direct descendants of the ancient Illyrians. From outside world Albania is called

Albania but Albanians call themselves *Shqiptarë* and their language, *shqipë*, that is, Albanian (Lloshi, 1999:277).

**Operational definition:** In the context of this research, Albanians are individuals who were born in Albania and have Albanian blood.

## **KOSOVO**

**Theoretical definition:** Kosovo is a country located in South-Eastern, Europe. It was part of Albania. In 1912 it was left outside Albania borders. On 17 February 2008 Kosovo asserted full autonomy and got the independence (Tansey, 2009).

**Operational definition:** In the context of this research, Kosovo are individuals who were born in Kosovo and are named Kosovar Albanians or Kosovo Albanians. By non-Albanians the country is called *Kosovo*, but the Albanians themselves name it Kosova.

## **IMMIGRANTS**

**Theoretical definition:** Immigrants are people who move to a new country for resettlement. Most immigrants have made preparations to change their country of residence, usually, they have the opportunity to plan ahead of time practically, psychologically and systematically (Tribe, 2002). Immigrants are individuals who move to a country to take up permanent residence (Shumsky, 2008).

**Operational definition:** Immigrants are individuals that choose to reside in another country to improve their quality of life.

## **CULTURE**

**Theoretical definition:** Culture refers to a group of people that shares beliefs, values, norms and behaviours. In the principle of symbolic interactionism, “culture is meaning” (Maines, 1985). The concept of culture emphasises the meaning and action that defines culture as consisting of “symbolic vehicles of meaning, including beliefs, ritual practices, art forms, and ceremonies, as well as informal cultural practices such as language, gossip, stories and rituals of daily life.” (Swidler, 1986, p. 273).

**Western Culture** is derived from ancient Athens, Rome and Judeo Christianity.

**Eastern Culture** is derived from Islam, Confucianism, Taoism and Mahayana Buddhism. (Chia Mun Onn, 2009).

**Operational definition:** Cultural is an integrated system of learned behaviour, values, language and religion that are characteristic of the members of any given society.

## **MENTAL WELLBEING**

**Theoretical definition:** The World Health Organization (WHO, 2005) defines mental health as, "a state of complete physical, mental and social wellbeing in which the individual realises his or her abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and can make a contribution to his or her community".

**Operational definition:** The ability to reason, think and behave appropriately to any emotional concern.

## **SOCIAL FACTORS**

**Theoretical definition:** Factors, such as people, are seen as the environment because they influence and create emotions within the interpreter, which has an effect on their decision-making (Kahneman and Klein, 2009).

**Operational definition:** Social factors are elements or indicators which result from culture, environmental setting, society, family, government, the media and religious beliefs that causes the individual to reason or think and act in a certain way. Put simply, social factors are indicators which establishes an individual's identity.

## **PERSONAL FACTORS**

**Theoretical definition:** People are complex beings that vary in many ways. Some of these differences have an impact on concern for the environment and how people respond to environmental problems. (Gifford & Nilsson, 2014).

**Operational definition:** Generally, people's behaviours are influenced by personal characteristics.

## **ENVIRONMENTAL FACTORS**

**Theoretical definition:** People's behaviours are influenced by the environment and vice versa. People's environments tend to affect their behaviours, in return the actions of the individual are also responsible for a change in the environment. This means that