
RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Role of Demographic Variables and Ethnic Identity in Predicting Well-being Among Syrian Circassian Returnees to the Caucasus

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ABSTRACT

Return migration is widely recognised as a complex process involving reintegration, identity renegotiation, and adaptation to social and cultural environments that may differ from expectations. Despite growing scholarship on migration and well-being, limited empirical research has examined how ethnic identity relates to psychological well-being among Syrian Circassian returnees specifically. Existing findings across migrant populations have been mixed, with some studies reporting positive associations between ethnic identity and well-being, while others suggest weak or context-dependent relationships. This study investigated the role of ethnic identity in predicting well-being among Syrian Circassian returnees to the Caucasus, a population shaped by conflict-driven displacement and subsequent return migration to an ancestral homeland. We examined two research questions: first, whether demographic variables (age, gender, and household income) predicted well-being among Syrian Circassian returnees; and second, whether ethnic identity contributed additional explanatory value beyond these factors. A quantitative cross-sectional design was employed, with data collected from 102 adult returnees residing in the Kabardino-Balkarian and Adyghe Republics. Participants completed validated measures of ethnic identity (Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure) and well-being (Mental Health Continuum–Short Form). Hierarchical multiple regression analyses were conducted to assess predictive relationships. Findings indicated that ethnic identity was a significant and moderate positive predictor of well-being, explaining additional variance beyond demographic variables. Age emerged as a modest positive predictor, whereas gender and household income were not statistically significant. These results highlight the central role of ethnic identity as a psychological resource that supports well-being during return migration. Stronger ethnic identification was associated with higher levels of emotional, psychological, and social well-being, suggesting that identity may provide continuity, meaning, and a sense of belonging in the context of reintegration. Overall, this study contributes to the limited empirical literature on Syrian Circassian returnees and extends theoretical understanding of identity processes in return migration contexts. It underscores the importance of considering psychosocial and cultural factors, alongside demographic variables, when examining adaptation among displaced populations. The findings also offer practical implications for policies and interventions aimed at supporting returnees, emphasising the value of strengthening cultural identity and community belonging to enhance psychological adjustment and well-being.

KEYWORDS

Ethnic identity, well-being, return migration, Circassians

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1. Introduction

The Circassians, or Adyghe, are an indigenous ethnic group from the northwestern Caucasus region (Wiley, 2015). Forced displacement during the 19th century led to the creation of a widespread diaspora (Akkieva & Dzamikhov, 2018; Wiley, 2015). Today, Circassian communities exist across Türkiye, the Balkans, Syria, and Jordan, with an estimated diaspora population of close to 1.5 million (Demir & Bolat, 2017). In Syria, up to 100,000 people are of Circassian descent (Korotayev et al., 2024),

many of whom were displaced by the conflict beginning in 2011 (Meiqari, 2019). Some Syrian Circassians have returned to the Caucasus, including more than 1,200 individuals in Kabardino-Balkaria and dozens of families in the Republic of Adygea (Dzutsati, 2013; Soboliev, 2017). These return movements reflect enduring cultural and historical attachments to the ancestral homeland, even in the face of social and economic challenges (Kushabiev, 2012). Lietaert (2021), in the Caucasus context, found that feelings of belonging were pivotal for returnees' evaluations of well-being. Studies underscore the deep and complex psychosocial effects of migration on individuals and families, showing the challenges they face in adapting to new cultural environments, redefining their identities and family roles, and navigating the emotional and psychological experiences that arise along the way (Bulut et al., 2024). Thus, these patterns of displacement and return not only represent demographic movements but also define the psychological landscape in which Syrian Circassians negotiate their everyday lives.

To establish a clear conceptual framework for this study, it is essential to define the key constructs of return migration, ethnic identity, acculturation, and well-being, each of which is shaped by complex social, psychological, and contextual factors. Return migration has been defined by Cassarino (2004) as a multifaceted process shaped by structural, institutional, and individual factors. Ethnic identity refers to individuals' sense of belonging to a particular ethnic group, accompanied by the value and emotional significance attached to that membership. Phinney (1990, 1993) conceptualises ethnic identity as a developmental process involving stages of unexamined identity, exploration, and achievement. More recent research extends this view, highlighting its multidimensional and context-dependent character (Maehler, 2022; Yetim, 2024). Acculturation is a temporal process in which an individual's orientation adapts to different cultural contexts and environments (Titzmann & Lee, 2022). Finally, well-being is a multidimensional construct (Ryff, 1989). Keyes (2002) expanded this framework by integrating emotional, psychological, and social well-being into a continuum from languishing to flourishing. Recent conceptualizations also stress subjective and contextual factors, such as belonging and security, as central to well-being in return migration contexts (Jarden & Roache, 2023; Lietaert, 2021).

2. Literature Review

Research on return migration consistently reveals mixed outcomes. While return can represent a reassertion of identity and belonging (Saar, 2018) and stronger ethnic identity is often associated with higher self-esteem, resilience, and psychological well-being (Cavdar et al., 2021), Tsuda (2010) underscores the contradictory realities returnees face, where idealised notions of homeland clash with social exclusion. Despite genetic or ancestral ties, returnees may still be treated as cultural outsiders. For instance, Takenaka (2009), in a study examining how ethnic hierarchies shape the identities of return migrants from Peru and Brazil to Japan, found that ethnic return migration tended to reinforce ethnic divisions rather than foster ethnic solidarity, as return migrants were frequently treated as outsiders and marginalised within their ancestral homeland. This makes adjustment a key area to examine.

Ethnic identity plays a critical role here. Verkuyten et al. (2019) underscore the importance of examining multiple identity domains—such as ethnic, national, and religious identities—because of their implications for well-being, depression, and social connectedness. In New Zealand, higher levels of in-group warmth and ethnic identity centrality among Indigenous Māori were significantly associated with increases in life satisfaction, personal well-being, and self-esteem over a seven year period (Houkamau et al., 2023). These findings suggest that cultivating a positive ethnic identity may serve as a protective and promotive factor for psychological health and strengthening ethnic identity could enhance mental health outcomes.

However, high well-being can occur even with low ethnic identity (Cross et al., 2020). Cross et al. (2020) identified an "alternate" cluster—comprising individuals with low ethnic identity yet high psychological well-being—indicating that individuals may derive meaning and mental health benefits from other dimensions of identity, such as professional, religious, or gender identities. This evidence underscores the existence of multiple pathways to adaptation and challenges the notion that a positive ethnic identity is a necessary condition for psychological well-being. Furthermore, ethnic identity shows no significant association with relational well-being, which is an individual's perceived quality of relationships with others and with broader communities (Setiawan et al., 2024). Hence while ethnic identity can shape social experiences such as connecting individuals to co-ethnic networks, it does not automatically determine relational well-being, because relational satisfaction can be derived from relationships outside of one's ethnic group, such as friendships, professional networks, or intergroup interactions.

2.1 Conceptual Framework

To understand the complex experiences of Syrian Circassian returnees, we draw on four interrelated conceptual perspectives—return migration, ethnic identity development, acculturation, and well-being—which together provide a framework for examining how identity, cultural integration, and psychological well-being intersect.

Return migration does not simply involve geographic movement, but is often tied to questions of identity, belonging, and reintegration. King and Kuschminder (2022) highlight typologies of return migration, underscoring the complex motivations and outcomes associated with this process. Voluntary return refers to migrants choosing to return to their country of origin of their own accord, typically after a planned or completed period abroad (Dustmann & Weiss, 2007), whereas forced or involuntary return (return of crisis) occurs when migrants are compelled to return due to circumstances beyond their control, including political upheaval, environmental disasters, criminal repatriation, or denied asylum (King & Kuschminder, 2022). Also, temporary

migrants are defined as those who indicate an intention to return to their home country, while permanent migrants are those who report that they plan to remain in the country of residence indefinitely (Bauer & Sinning, 2022). The in/voluntary and temporary/permanent dimensions of return migration arguably impact migrants' ethnic identity development.

Research involving similar ethnic minority groups from Syria who have undertaken return migration to their ancestral homelands illustrates the complexity of classifying and understanding ethnic return. Studies on Syrian Armenians returning to Armenia and Syrian Circassians returning to Abkhazia highlighted that return is shaped by both the constraints of conflict and the opportunities for cultural reconnection. For Syrian Armenians, return has been influenced by the protracted Syrian conflict, characterised by extensive violence and infrastructure collapse, which has made return to Syria improbable, while Armenia has offered a more secure setting in which historical and cultural ties can be sustained (Thomas et al., 2020). Scholars have debated whether these returnees should be considered migrants, refugees, repatriates, or diasporan returnees, reflecting their multiple identities and contested belonging (Kasbarian, 2025). In the case of Syrian Circassians returning to Abkhazia (Abaza, 2023) noted that even second- or third-generation returnees maintain emotional ties that give return personal meaning. Yet, as Shami (1998, as cited in Abaza, 2023) observed, anticipated comfort in returning to one's co-ethnics often gives way to feelings of dissonance, non-recognition, and being perceived as "the other," despite shared ethnicity.

Phinney (2003) defines ethnic identity as a dynamic and multidimensional construct that denotes an individual's self-concept as a member of an ethnic group. Ethnic identity is not static; it is shaped by context and can be reactivated or renegotiated in response to new environments (Maehler, 2022). Core definitional elements include social identity, self-identification, a sense of belonging and commitment, evaluative attitudes toward one's group, and cultural dimensions such as language, practices, values, and historical knowledge (Phinney, 1990, 2003).

Phinney's model describes a three-stage progression to ethnic identity formation: the first stage, unexamined ethnic identity, is marked by a lack of personal exploration, with individuals either indifferent to ethnicity (diffusion) or adopting uncritically positive attitudes from their parents (foreclosure). The second stage, ethnic identity search or moratorium, involves active exploration and efforts to understand the personal meaning of one's ethnicity, often including immersion in one's cultural heritage and sometimes rejection of dominant cultural values. The final stage, achieved ethnic identity or internalization, is characterised by a secure and confident sense of ethnic identity, attained through resolving key challenges faced by ethnic minorities, such as cultural differences and societal marginalization. Research on ethnic identity has faced critique due to conceptual fragmentation, limited theoretical clarity, and methodological challenges. While Phinney's framework emphasises a linear progression from unexamined to achieved ethnic identity, critics argue that it fails to capture the fluid, multidirectional pathways that individuals may experience (Cross et al., 2020).

Homeland attachment for many is tied not only to territory but to the preservation of language, religion, and traditions maintained in the diaspora, which both protect cultural identity and reinforce minority status (Sukiasyan, 2022). Syrian Armenians thus embody multilocal identities, shifting between being rooted in Syria and routed toward Armenia (Sukiasyan, 2022, p. 70). Rossman-Kiss (2023) found similar dynamics among Syrian Circassian repatriates to Abkhazia, whose return was motivated by safety, family networks, and symbolic cultural ties. However, many experienced limited integration; citizenship often functioned as a formal status that reinforced boundaries rather than facilitating inclusion. Social distinctions—particularly regarding tradition and gender—further separated repatriates from the majority population, and homeland was experienced as a form of "mobile indigeneity" rooted in the broader Caucasus rather than the Abkhaz state (Rossman-Kiss, 2023, p. 54). These cases demonstrate that belonging is negotiated through ancestry, sociopolitical realities, and transnational identity formations, complicating simplistic notions of return. They also reveal limitations in existing research, which focuses heavily on cultural continuity while giving less attention to psychological outcomes. Additionally, the conceptual understanding and measurement of ethnic identity overlaps with related constructs, including acculturation (Phinney, 2003).

Acculturation has been understood as changes arising from sustained, direct contact between cultural groups, resulting in modifications to one or both groups' cultural patterns (Redfield et al., 1936, as cited in Berry, 2021). Berry's (1997) acculturation framework conceptualises how individuals navigate dual cultural demands through strategies of integration, assimilation, separation, or marginalization. Integration occurs when individuals sustain their cultural heritage while engaging meaningfully with other cultural communities. Assimilation denotes prioritizing interaction with the dominant group while minimizing heritage culture. Separation involves maintaining heritage culture while avoiding contact with other groups. Marginalization describes minimal engagement with and disconnection from both heritage and host cultures, often due to exclusion or discrimination (Jones Christensen & Newman, 2024). Research indicates that integration often yields the most adaptive outcomes, being positively associated with psychological and sociocultural adaptation (Berry, 2017; Gvetadze & Pirtskhalava, 2024; Li et al., 2022). On the other hand, marginalization is linked to significantly lower psychological well-being as well as the lowest levels of life satisfaction and overall mental health of all four strategies (Berry, 2021).

The literature on acculturation also highlights the unique dynamics of return migration. Kunuroglu et al. (2016) describes reacculturation as the process of readjusting to one's heritage culture after extended time abroad, a process distinct from initial acculturation due to identity changes developed in the host context. Berry's (2021) dual-phase acculturation model emphasises that returnees must integrate behaviours and identities acquired abroad while readjusting to a home culture that

may have transformed during their absence. This perspective underscores the significance of considering both cultural and psychological dimensions in understanding the acculturation experiences of migrants, and hints at a relationship between acculturation and well-being.

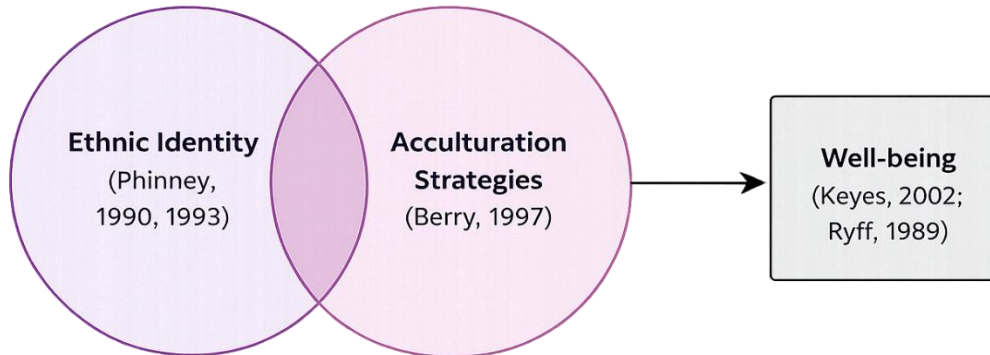
Well-being is a multidimensional and dynamic process involving engagement in life and the expression of intellectual, social, emotional, and physical potential (Ryff, 1998), encompassing both subjective evaluations of life and effective engagement with existential challenges (Keyes, 2002). Ryff's (1989) multidimensional model of psychological well-being emphasises human potential and optimal functioning across six dimensions: self-acceptance, personal growth, purpose in life, positive relations with others, environmental mastery, and autonomy (Ryff & Singer, 2008). Keyes' (2002) Mental Health Continuum (MHC) conceptualises mental health as the presence of positive emotions and effective functioning. The continuum classifies adults into three categories: flourishing, with high emotional well-being and positive functioning; languishing, marked by low well-being and stagnation; and moderately mentally healthy, encompassing those in between. Together, these frameworks highlight that well-being extends beyond the absence of distress or mental illness, to encompass flourishing across emotional, social, and psychological domains.

2.2 Integrative Conceptual Model

This current study integrated ethnic identity development, acculturation theory, and well-being frameworks, in the context of return migration (see figure 1). Ethnic identity was positioned as the central predictor, shaping returnees' sense of self and belonging. Acculturation strategies operate as contextual mechanisms that either support or hinder identity consolidation. Well-being represents the key outcome, encompassing emotional, psychological, and social dimensions. We conceptualised successful adjustment as depending on the dynamic interplay of identity exploration, acculturation strategies, and well-being outcomes. Ethnic identity exploration may strengthen resilience, while inclusive acculturation strategies (e.g., integration) foster flourishing.

Figure 1

Schematic Representation of the Integrative Conceptual Model of Study's Theoretical Framework



Conceptual Pathway: Ethnic identity provides a sense of belonging within a context of acculturation strategies, leading to variation in psychological well-being.

In the scope of the current study, the experiences of Syrian Circassian returnees can be comprehensively understood through the interrelated perspectives of ethnic identity, acculturation, and well-being. Return migration represents a pivotal moment in which ethnic identity exploration may be renewed, often following non-linear or evolving trajectories rather than a fixed progression (Cross et al., 2020). Some returnees may develop hybrid identities that integrate Circassian heritage with influences acquired during the diaspora, while others may maintain primarily symbolic connections to their ethnicity without engaging in active exploration (Sazanova, 2020). This variability underscores the context-dependent and dynamic nature of ethnic identity, highlighting its dual role as both a resource for resilience and a potential source of tension, while illustrating the continued relevance of Phinney's framework for studying migrant populations (Yetim, 2024). Additionally, acculturation provides further insight into the challenges faced by returnees as they navigate dual cultural expectations. Although strategies of integration often support optimal adaptation, returnees may encounter marginalization due to linguistic, cultural, or social differences, and the process of reacclimation can be further complicated by identities developed during their time abroad (Kunuroglu et al., 2016; Soboliev, 2017). These dynamics suggest that ethnic identity may simultaneously foster psychological

resilience and contribute to experiences of exclusion, depending on the alignment between diaspora-developed identities and local cultural norms. Finally, well-being frameworks offer an additional lens for understanding these processes, emphasizing the importance of belonging and self-acceptance for psychological adjustment (Henríquez et al., 2021; Lietaert, 2021). Intercultural engagement and the development of multiple cultural identities are closely linked to well-being, with a strong ethnic identity associated with positive mental health outcomes, including enhanced social adjustment, greater collective self-esteem, and reduced acculturative stress (Amer, 2023; Ward & Szabó, 2023). By integrating these three perspectives, it is possible to capture the complex interplay of identity, cultural integration, and psychological functioning in the lives of Syrian Circassian returnees.

While the existing literature has advanced understanding of Circassian history and diaspora demographics (Akkieva & Dzamikhov, 2018; Wiley, 2015), return migration theory (Erciyas, 2014; King & Kuskminder, 2022), and the psychological constructs of ethnic identity and well-being (Phinney, 1990; Ryff, 1989), there remains a significant gap regarding ethnic identity formation and well-being experiences of Syrian Circassian returnees to the Caucasus. Syrian Circassians face distinct challenges due to their minority status, prolonged diaspora, and the impact of the recent Syrian conflict, which differentiate their return migration experiences from those of other groups.

In addition, previous studies indicated demographic and socio-economic factors such as age and household income significantly influence migrants' well-being and identity integration (Rajman & Geffen, 2017). Without empirical data on these factors in the Syrian Circassian returnee context, it is unclear which variables most strongly affect ethnic identity affirmation and well-being outcomes. Accounting for household income is essential in this study because economic resources shape individuals' access to opportunities and living conditions, which can influence well-being alongside ethnic identity among Syrian Circassian returnees to the Caucasus. Moreover, including household income as a variable alongside age and gender in this sample allowed for a more comprehensive understanding of whether the relationship between ethnic identity and well-being reflects cultural factors alone or is also conditioned by socioeconomic inequalities. Indeed, income was a significant predictor of personal well-being among ethnic Koreans in China, alongside demographic factors such as age, gender, and education (Nielsen et al., 2012), highlighting the importance of including economic variables when analyzing well-being within ethnic groups.

By exploring these relationships, this study aimed to enhance theoretical frameworks on return migration and ethnic identity and inform practical strategies supporting minority returnees. Therefore, we made the following hypotheses:

H1: Age, gender, and household income predict well-being among Syrian Circassians who have returned to the Caucasus following the Syrian conflict.

H2: After accounting for age, gender, and household income, ethnic identity contributes to the prediction of well-being.

3. Method

3.1 Research Design

This study utilised a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design to examine the predictive relationship between ethnic identity and well-being. The non-experimental design facilitated hypothesis testing through regression analyses, which are commonly used to examine the strength and direction of relationships among variables without manipulating them (Field, 2018). However, we acknowledge design limitations such as not allowing for causal inference and relying on self-report.

3.2 Materials

Participants were first asked to give their age, gender, and household income in Russian Rubles (₽).

The Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM) (Phinney, 1992): 14 items assessing three dimensions of ethnic identity: affirmation and belonging (5 items), identity achievement (7 items), and ethnic behaviours (2 items). Items are rated on a 4-point Likert scale. The Other-Group Orientation subscale (6 items) was excluded from this study due to its broader focus beyond belonging. The full 14-item scale demonstrated strong reliability, with Cronbach's alpha values of .81 for high school students and .90 for college students (Phinney, 1992). In the present study, the reliability of the scale was .86.

The Mental Health Continuum–Short Form (MHC-SF) (Keyes, 2002): 14 items that assess three dimensions of well-being: emotional well-being (3 items) social well-being (5 items), and psychological well-being (6 items). Each item reflects a positive mental state, and respondents rate the frequency of their experiences over the past month on a 6-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (never) to 6 (every day). The internal consistency reliability coefficients for the three measurement domains in both the short and long forms of the MHC have consistently demonstrated strong reliability, with coefficient values exceeding .80 (Keyes, 2009). In the present study, the reliability of the scale was .90.

3.3 Participants

The sample comprised 102 Syrian Circassian returnees residing in the Caucasus region. A power analysis (G*Power software; Faul et al., 2009) indicated that this ensured adequate statistical power based on an expected medium effect size ($r = 0.30$), an alpha level of 0.05, and a desired power of 0.80. Participants were recruited through social networks that specifically support the Circassian returnee population. Eligibility criteria for participation included confirmed return migration from Syria post-2011, self-identification as Syrian Circassian, fluency in Arabic or English, and current residence in either the Kabardino-

Balkarian Republic or the Adygea Republic. Participants who reported experiencing distress when discussing their return to the Caucasus were excluded from the study to ensure ethical standards were maintained.

The final sample included 54 females (52.9%) and 48 males (47.1%), indicating a relatively balanced gender distribution.

Participants' ages ranged from 21 to 83 years, with a mean age of 35.81 years ($SD = 12.06$). Age and income, in Russian Rubles (Mean: ₹84,293.82; $SD = ₹88,198.41$), showed substantial variability within the sample. Overall, participants tended to be young adults with widely ranging income levels. The substantial variance in income suggests notable variation in participants' economic circumstances, a factor that may or may not contribute to differences in perceived well-being.

3.4 Procedure

Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Essex Online Ethics Committee prior to the commencement of data collection. The survey was hosted on Qualtrics and offered in both Arabic and English. Prior to full deployment and upon ethical approval, the survey pilot was conducted with a small group of five participants to assess clarity, comprehensibility, and completion time. Feedback from the pilot was used to refine the survey items and overall format. Following refinement, the survey was distributed through an online Circassian group, social media networks, and other community members. Participants were provided with detailed study information and asked to provide electronic consent before commencing the survey. The survey was designed to be completed anonymously, with an estimated completion time of 10–15 minutes. No IP tracking or collection of personally identifying information occurred. The survey remained open and accessible online for a period of two months in July–August 2025. Upon completion, participants were presented with a debriefing statement that included information on relevant mental health resources and support services.

4. Results

Prior to conducting inferential analyses, the dataset underwent thorough preparation to ensure reliability, validity, and robustness of the results. All responses were screened for plausibility and consistency, and potential outliers were identified through inspection of standardised residuals. Assumptions necessary for the planned inferential analyses were tested. Collectively, these preparatory steps ensured that all assumptions were either fully met or deviations sufficiently justified. Ethnic identity (MEIM) scores ranged from 28 to 56 (Mean=45.74; $SD=6.66$). Well-being (MHC-SF) scores ranged from 7 to 70 (Mean=40.70; $SD=43.56$).

A correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationship between the predictor variable, ethnic identity, the covariates (age and household income [gender cannot be included in correlations]), and well-being, as the outcome variable. Well-being had a weak to moderate correlation with ethnic identity ($r=.38$, $p<.001$), and a weak correlation with age ($r=.25$, $p<.001$). The correlation with household income was not significant.

We hypothesised that age, gender, and household income would predict well-being among Syrian Circassians who have returned to the Caucasus following the Syrian conflict (H1), and that, after accounting for these demographic variables, ethnic identity would contribute to the prediction of well-being (H2). We conducted a hierarchical multiple regression to test the hypotheses, starting by evaluating assumptions. The assumptions of linearity, independence, normality, homoscedasticity, absence of multicollinearity, and normality of residuals were adequately satisfied, supporting the validity of the hierarchical regression analysis. In interpreting effect sizes, we aligned with Nieminen (2022), who indicates that for coefficient β , effect sizes between 0.10–0.29 are small, between 0.30–0.49 are medium, and 0.50 or greater are large.

Step 1: Age, gender, and household income as predictors: This was reported as statistically significant, $F(3, 98) = 2.80$, $p < .05$, and accounted for 7.9% of the variance in well-being ($R^2 = .079$, adjusted $R^2 = .051$). Age was the only significant predictor ($\beta = .24$, $t = 2.43$, $p < .05$), indicating that older participants reported higher well-being. Gender and household income did not significantly predict well-being.

Step 2: Addition of ethnic identity: The overall model remained significant, $F(4, 97) = 6.66$, $p < .001$, explaining 21.5% of the variance in well-being ($R^2 = .215$, adjusted $R^2 = .183$). The addition of ethnic identity contributed an additional 13.6% to the explained variance ($\Delta R^2 = .136$, $p < .001$). Within this model, age remained a significant predictor of well-being ($\beta = .24$, $t = 2.43$, $p < .05$), with gender and household again not having a significant effect. Ethnic identity was a moderate positive predictor ($\beta = .37$, $t = 4.11$, $p < .001$).

In summary, while gender and household income did not predict well-being, age, was a modest predictor, partially supporting H1. H2 was fully supported, in that, after controlling for the demographic variables, ethnic identity emerged as a significant and robust predictor of well-being among Syrian Circassian returnees, explaining an additional 13.6% of variance. These findings underscore the centrality of ethnic identity in supporting the well-being of returnees.

5. Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the extent to which ethnic identity predicted psychological well-being among Syrian Circassian returnees to the Caucasus, while also considering the contributions of age, gender, and household income. The study addressed a gap in the literature regarding the psychological aspects of return migration among ethnic diasporas who return to ancestral homelands following displacement. The findings supported the central hypothesis: ethnic identity significantly

and positively predicted well-being in this population. Age emerged as a modest predictor, with older returnees reporting slightly higher well-being than younger individuals. In contrast, gender and household income did not significantly influence well-being. These findings suggest that, within this particular population and cultural context, ethnic identity functions as a central psychological resource.

Ethnic identity is widely conceptualised as a dynamic, multifaceted construct involving a sense of belonging, self-understanding, and emotional connection to an ethnic group (Phinney, 2003). The present findings are consistent with perspectives that emphasise ethnic identity as a crucial component of personal continuity and psychosocial stability, particularly during significant life transitions. The strong association between ethnic identity and well-being observed in this study converges with research showing that cultural belonging buffers individuals against the effects of stress and marginalisation. García et al. (2021) reported that collective identity fosters mental health by reinforcing cultural belonging and stabilising self-concept. Studies of diasporic and minority populations also found that strong ethnic identification promotes well-being, resilience, and positive self-perceptions. For example, individuals deeply fused with their Basque identity reported higher personal and social well-being (Zabala et al., 2020). While much of the existing research focuses on immigrant groups adapting to host societies or on minority groups within multicultural environments, the current study demonstrates that ethnic identity retains its protective qualities even in the unique scenario of ancestral return. Return migration involves a complex interplay of nostalgia, cultural expectations, and sociopolitical realities. Under these conditions, ethnic identity may hold amplified psychological relevance because it links past experiences of individuals with their present context, providing a sense of belonging that transcends geographical and historical disruption.

Although the overall pattern fits within the prevailing evidence, it is important to acknowledge research that shows inconsistent or context-dependent associations between ethnic identity and well-being. Wibowo et al. (2021) found no significant relationship between ethnic identity and well-being among Javanese students, while Arneaud et al. (2022) demonstrated that ethnic identity enhanced private but reduced public well-being. One possible explanation lies in the distinctive experiences of Syrian Circassian returnees: unlike many immigrant or minority populations, returnees encounter a cultural environment that is symbolically familiar yet practically novel. In this context, ethnic identity may not merely reflect cultural attachment but may also serve as a critical psychological anchor during reintegration. Thus, the results suggest that ethnic identity takes on heightened significance in situations characterised by displacement, cultural restoration, and return to ancestral homelands.

Return migration has been conceptualised as a decision shaped by emotional, cultural, social, and economic motivations (Arababab et al., 2023; Mensah & Owusu Ansah, 2022). While structural conditions contribute to return decisions, emotional ties, cultural belonging, and the desire to reconnect with a homeland often drive return more strongly than material factors such as income or employment (Kunuroglu & Yüzbaşı, 2024). The present study's finding that ethnic identity predicted well-being fits within this pattern: strong identity ties may reflect motivations that brought individuals back to the Caucasus and may simultaneously support their psychological adjustment upon arrival. Return migration studies have also shown that psychosocial outcomes depend on intersecting factors including ethnicity, age, and gender (Vathi, 2022). We extend this literature by showing that ethnic identity predicts well-being even after accounting for demographic variables. This suggests that, during cultural reintegration, identity processes may be more central to psychological adaptation than demographic or socioeconomic factors. We note that research on diasporic return migration among Iranian Armenians showed that return decisions were shaped more by political and economic conditions than by idealised cultural belonging (Fittante & Barryin, 2022). Possibly the motivations for return and the mechanisms that facilitate adjustment post-return may differ in emphasis, with identity becoming more salient in the reintegration phase.

Interest in age-related variations in well-being is conceptually grounded in psychological theories of life course development, which emphasise the significance of managing key life challenges from young adulthood to old age (Keyes, 2002). The study finding that older returnees reported slightly higher well-being aligns with evidence that age is associated with increased resilience and adaptive functioning. Advancing age is linked with enhanced resilience in stressful circumstances (Fields et al., 2022). Older individuals may draw upon accumulated psychological resources and identity stability that support adjustment during reintegration. However, previous research has indicated that older refugees experience greater difficulty adapting to new environments (Nersisyan & Tanajyan, 2023). This discrepancy may reflect differences between conventional refugee resettlement and ethnic return migration. Returning to an ancestral homeland may provide older individuals with a sense of cultural familiarity and identity consolidation that buffers against adjustment challenges typically observed in refugee populations. Alternatively, the return to cultural roots may carry particular emotional significance for older adults, who may feel a stronger sense of closure, belonging, or fulfilment compared with younger returnees.

Despite expectations based on prior literature, neither gender nor household income significantly predicted well-being. We argue that, in the context of return migration, psychosocial adaptation may be shaped more strongly by cultural identity than by demographic or socioeconomic factors. Shared cultural and migratory experiences may supersede gender-based or income-related differences, creating a more homogeneous psychological experience across demographic groups. Moreover, returnees may evaluate well-being using criteria that differ from those found in stable societies. For individuals who experienced

displacement, identity stability, community belonging, and cultural continuity may hold greater psychological weight than income or gender-based roles. This does not suggest that gender or income are irrelevant to well-being more broadly, but rather that their effects may be diminished or overshadowed under conditions of cultural reconnection and reintegration.

The findings of this study can be understood through three interrelated conceptual frameworks: ethnic identity development, acculturation, and well-being. Ethnic identity development theory provides a useful foundation for interpreting these findings. Classic models emphasise the processes through which individuals explore, negotiate, and eventually commit to a sense of ethnic belonging (Phinney, 1990, 1993). Ethnic identity is therefore viewed as an evolving construct that reshapes itself in response to sociocultural transitions. More recent perspectives have reinforced this dynamic view by demonstrating that identity continues to develop across the lifespan and can be reactivated during significant life changes, including migration and return migration (Maehler, 2022). The strong association between ethnic identity and well-being identified in the current study suggests that return migration may have prompted renewed identity exploration among participants. Encountering the ancestral homeland possibly transformed what had been a diasporic or inherited identity into an actively engaged and lived one. As identity became more coherent and meaningful through this process, it contributed to higher levels of psychological well-being.

Acculturation provides a second interpretive pillar. Traditional models conceptualise cultural adaptation in terms of assimilation, separation, marginalisation, and integration (Berry, 1997, 2017, 2021). Among these approaches, integration—where individuals maintain heritage culture while also engaging with the broader society—tends to produce the most favourable psychological outcomes (Gvetadze & Pirtskhalava, 2024; Yetim, 2024). The context of return migration introduces a distinctive form of acculturation, wherein individuals must reconcile their heritage culture with a contemporary homeland that may differ from the imagined or remembered one. Within this landscape, strong ethnic identity may enable returnees to maintain cultural continuity while also adapting to the evolving social, political, and cultural environment of the Caucasus. Participants may have been engaging in forms of acculturative integration, drawing on both their diaspora experiences and their re-engagement with the ancestral culture. Contemporary multidimensional acculturation models, which emphasise hybrid identities and fluid cultural belonging (Ahn & Lee, 2023; Schwartz et al., 2010), further support this interpretation. Rossman-Kiss's (2023) concept of "mobile indigeneity" is especially relevant, suggesting that individuals can sustain a sense of belonging across different cultural contexts, an idea that closely mirrors the experiences of Syrian Circassian returnees navigating both Syrian and Circassian cultural worlds.

The third conceptual pillar comes from well-being. Ethnic identity contributed to well-being by offering individuals a sense of meaning, belonging, and social anchoring. Research has shown that ethnic identity often mediated the link between cultural involvement and well-being, suggesting that identity served as a psychological conduit through which cultural participation enhances overall functioning (Gutiérrez-Carmona & Urzúa, 2022). We argue that ethnic identity supports well-being. For returnees, affirming or reconstructing a meaningful ethnic identity may have provided psychological coherence during a period of transition, helping them to make sense of both past experiences of displacement and current challenges of reintegration.

When these theoretical frameworks are considered together, a more comprehensive understanding of the findings emerged. Ethnic identity development explains why identity processes may have been especially salient for returnees: the act of returning likely prompted renewed exploration and consolidation of ethnic identity. An acculturation lens suggests that this identity work may have facilitated adaptive engagement with the contemporary cultural context of the Caucasus, enabling returnees to integrate heritage practices with new social realities. Subsequently, as coherent identity structures were developed and meaningful cultural belonging experienced, well-being improved. Ethnic identity can be seen as a dynamic psychological resource that supports adaptation during major life transitions. We argue that well-being among Syrian Circassian returnees depended on their capacity to reconstruct a coherent and meaningful ethnic identity within the shifting cultural landscape of return migration.

5.1 Limitations of the Study

Several factors constrained the conclusions that could be drawn. Although the sample size was sufficient for statistical analyses, it may not have fully captured the heterogeneity of Syrian Circassian returnees. The relatively small and culturally specific sample limits the generalisability of findings to other returnee populations or broader migrant groups. The exclusive use of self-report measures also imposes limitations. While suitable for assessing perceptions of identity and well-being, self-report relies on participants' subjective accounts and may be influenced by social desirability or cultural norms regarding emotional expression. In the context of return migration, identity presentation may be shaped by expectations from the community, potentially affecting the accuracy of reported experiences. Also, participants with stronger cultural ties may have been more likely to take part, potentially amplifying the observed link between ethnic identity and well-being. The cross-sectional design further limits causal interpretation. Although ethnic identity predicted higher well-being, the study cannot determine whether stronger identity leads to improved well-being or whether individuals with higher well-being are more likely to affirm their ethnic identity. Additionally, the study did not incorporate contextual variables such as perceived discrimination, social support, community engagement, or degree of cultural integration. These factors are known to influence identity and well-being and may act as mediators or moderators in the observed relationships. Overall, the study effectively addressed its research question while

identifying opportunities for methodological refinement and deeper exploration of identity and well-being in return migration contexts.

5.2 Future Directions

Several avenues for future research are apparent. A longitudinal design would provide deeper insight into how ethnic identity and well-being evolve over time during the reintegration process. Tracking returnees at multiple stages could reveal whether identity strength predicts well-being, or whether higher well-being promotes stronger identity affirmation, clarifying the directionality of the observed relationships. Expanding the scope of contextual variables would also enhance understanding. Including measures of social support, community engagement, perceived discrimination, and cultural integration could uncover potential mediating or moderating factors that shape the identity–well-being link. This would allow researchers to identify mechanisms through which ethnic identity contributes to psychological outcomes.

Future studies could also examine demographic interactions more closely. Exploring how factors such as age, gender, socioeconomic status, or education interact with identity processes may reveal more nuanced patterns, helping to identify subgroups that benefit most from interventions or require additional support. Methodologically, combining qualitative approaches—such as interviews or ethnographic observation—could provide richer insight into lived experiences of participants.

6. Conclusion

This study makes a clear theoretical contribution by extending existing frameworks of ethnic identity development and acculturation into the relatively underexplored context of ethnic return migration to an ancestral homeland. While prior research has largely focused on immigrant or minority populations in host societies, the present findings demonstrate that ethnic identity remains a central psychological resource even when individuals return to a culturally symbolic home. In doing so, the study refines theoretical understandings by showing that ethnic identity is not only protective under conditions of marginalisation in host contexts, but may become particularly salient during reacculturation, where familiarity and difference coexist. By integrating ethnic identity theory with acculturation and multidimensional models of well-being, the findings support a more dynamic conceptualisation of identity as a context-sensitive and adaptive process that underpins psychological adjustment during major life transitions such as return migration. This contributes to theory by highlighting the role of identity in reacculturation as a key mechanism linking return migration to well-being.

From a practical and policy perspective, the study underscores the importance of identity-informed approaches to returnee support and reintegration planning. Interventions that promote cultural engagement, community participation, and opportunities for meaningful connection to heritage—such as cultural initiatives and community networks—are likely to enhance well-being and facilitate adjustment. The finding that demographic and economic variables were less predictive than ethnic identity suggests that policies focused solely on material integration (e.g., employment or income support) appear less central in this context relative to psychosocial and cultural factors. More broadly, the study provides evidence to inform culturally sensitive reintegration frameworks, emphasising that successful return is not only a structural process but also a deeply psychological one, shaped by belonging and identity reconstruction.

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