

TOMASZ ŁĄCZEK

Jan Kochanowski University, Kielce  
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3063-5317>  
tomasz.laczek@ujk.edu.pl

## Factors to Success in Life as Perceived by Ukrainian War Refugees

*Czynniki sprzyjające osiągnięciu sukcesu życiowego  
w opiniach uchodźców wojennych z Ukrainy*

**Abstract:** The aim of this article is to present the results of the research on how Ukrainian war refugees perceive the category of success in life. The information obtained shed some light on how the respondents understand success in life and which factors, in their opinion, contribute to achieving it. Additionally, the results unveil their opinions and beliefs regarding their own success in life and whether they believe achieving life success makes people happy. The full-scale war that has been ravaging Ukraine since February 24, 2022 has forced a significant Ukrainian population out of the borders of their own country. Fearing for their life and safety, most of them took temporary shelter in Poland. Scientific studies with Ukrainian refugees as participants are not something that scholars engage in frequently. There are many reasons for that, and the most important is the fact that a suitable and willing group of participants is hard to come by. However, researching this population has a very important social dimension, especially from the educational and psychological perspective, because the majority of Ukrainian refugees have been arriving in Poland with minor children, who are then enrolled in the Polish school system, are cared for by Polish teachers, and participate in Polish educational, socialisation, and adaptation processes. That is why, it is crucial to consistently investigate the refugees' opinions on their personal and social life. Teachers are a particularly important group of readers who might benefit from this paper. It is them who are predominantly responsible for the processes taking place in the educational domain. Due to the vast numbers of refugee children and students from Ukraine taught in Polish kindergartens and schools, researching the topic of success and self-fulfilment factors may increase the effectiveness of teaching, upbringing, and care in educational institutions.

**Keywords:** success; life success; scientific research; war refugees; Ukraine

**Abstrakt:** Celem artykułu jest przedstawienie wyników badań dotyczących opinii uchodźców wojennych z Ukrainy w zakresie postrzegania przez nich kategorii, którą jest sukces życiowy. Uzyskane informacje pozwoliły określić, jak respondenci rozumieją sukces życiowy i które według nich czynniki sprzyjają osiągnięciu sukcesu życiowego. Dodatkowo zostały poznane opinie badanych dotyczące ich przekonań o osiągnięciu własnego sukcesu życiowego oraz o tym, czy osiągnięcie sukcesu życiowego czyni człowieka szczęśliwym. Trwająca od 24 lutego 2022 roku

pełnoskalowa wojna na Ukrainie spowodowała przemieszczanie się ludności Ukrainy poza granice własnego państwa. W obawie o własne bezpieczeństwo największa ich część znalazła się czasowo na terytorium Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej. Badania prowadzone w środowisku uchodźców wojennych z Ukrainy nie są prowadzone często. Powodów jest wiele, ale jednym z najważniejszych są trudności z dotarciem do odpowiedniej grupy badawczej, która zdecydowałaby się wziąć udział w badaniach. Prowadzenie badań w tej grupie ma jednak bardzo ważny wymiar społeczny, szczególnie w aspekcie pedagogiczno-psychologicznym. Znaczna część uchodźców przybywa bowiem na terytorium Polski wraz z niepełnoletnimi dziećmi, które tutaj kontynuują naukę szkolną, prowadzona jest nad nimi opieka i tutaj są uczestnikami procesów wychowawczych, socjalizacyjnych, adaptacyjnych itp. Dlatego tak ważne jest systematyczne monitorowanie opinii uchodźców dotyczących wymiaru ich indywidualnej i społecznej egzystencji. Szczególnie ważną grupą odbiorców artykułu są nauczyciele. Są oni bowiem odpowiedzialni szczególnie za przebieg procesów dokonujących się w przestrzeni edukacyjnej. Znaczna liczebność dzieci i uczniów, którzy posiadają status uchodźców wojennych z Ukrainy w polskich przedszkolach i szkołach sprawia, że eksploracja badawcza tematyki sukcesu, uwarunkowań samorealizacji może zwiększyć skuteczność nauczania, wychowania i opieki w placówkach edukacyjnych.

**Słowa kluczowe:** sukces; sukces życiowy; badania naukowe; uchodźcy wojenni; Ukraina

## INTRODUCTION

All human activity is aimed at obtaining a positive result. By undertaking an action, making an effort, and showing commitment, one expects to succeed. This applies to everyday activities, but also to plans and tasks concerning key life goals. It can be safely said that – deliberately or not – people’s actions are mostly success-driven. Therefore, the issue of success, especially life success, is the focus of academic interest to scholars in the field of social sciences and humanities. When striving to implement their plans and goals, a person evaluates their own capabilities and individual potential in the context of their own effectiveness. They wonder whether their own resources will suffice to arrive at the optimal outcome. The situation changes in the face of difficulties over which the person has limited or no control. This is the case with any war: the circumstances force people to make decisions about which they are not entirely sure. Fleeing one’s homeland in fear of their life and the life of their loved ones is certainly one of such extreme situations.

## THE WAR IN UKRAINE IN THE CONTEXT OF THE STAY OF WAR REFUGEES FROM UKRAINE IN POLAND

The military operations perpetuated by Russia on the Ukrainian territory since February 24, 2022 have led to the death of many people and caused much destruction. The lion’s share of the inhabitants of the east of Ukraine have fled abroad, with many of them taking shelter in Poland. The exact number is beyond estimation even for statistics experts. The situation is dynamic: there is a high turnover; some people change their place of residence without notifying Polish services, some people do not work, some work illegally, some are minors, etc. The number of Ukrainian citizens registered

with the Polish Social Insurance Institution (ZUS) as of December 31, 2023 totalled 759.4 thousand and constituted over 65% of all 1.128 million foreigners registered with ZUS in Poland (PAP, 2024, p. 1). The Polish authorities and citizens have been giving Ukrainians a very warm welcome. Ukrainians have been given comprehensive medical, financial, social, and psychological help. There have been no transit camps for Ukrainian war refugees in Poland. Despite their vast number, the refugees live with Poles in their homes or in residential places provided by local self-government units at the municipality, county, and province levels. Based on the research conducted on a representative group of Poles, it can be concluded that the general public approval for accepting refugees from Ukraine has remained at a high level since the war outbreak. Initially, it was 94%, then 70–80% during the years 2022–2023 (CBOS, 2023, p. 2). However, the research carried out in December 2023 among Ukrainians staying in Poland revealed that there was a clear division among Ukrainians into those who integrated and did not integrate with Polish society. The refugees reported they saw a lot of advantages of living in Poland over life in Ukraine: it is easier to get a job, there are better working conditions, the legal system works efficiently, there is a better public transport system, the cultural and entertainment offer is much broader, and Poles have higher personal culture. They also believed that after the war most refugees would return to Ukraine (CBOS, 2024, pp. 1–2). Ukrainian refugees can obtain a PESEL number, i.e. a national identification number used in Poland, which gives them the same rights and privileges as Polish citizens have. It is thanks to the immense spontaneous and generous help of thousands of Poles that so many war refugees from Ukraine are able to live in Poland in decent conditions.

#### SUCCESS AND SUCCESS IN LIFE – TERMINOLOGY IN THE CONTEXT OF THESE CONSIDERATIONS

Being a war refugee shifts the perception of everyday reality. However, does this perception change completely? Are people experiencing war constantly thinking only about saving their life and maximising their chances of survival? Do they also think about day-to-day problems and the difficulties in meeting their basic needs? Do they think about life success? Having found themselves in such a predicament, are they able to describe factors contributing to success in life? All these questions are worth answering. This paper focuses primarily on how life success is understood by the Ukrainian refugee respondents and which factors they believe are the most conducive to achieving it.

The term “success” can be defined as “a successful outcome of an undertaking” (Drabik & Sobol, 2007, p. 600). However, the term used in the considerations of this paper as a leading category states that “life success is a relatively constant, individually defined positive result of actions taken by a person to achieve a tangible or intangi-

ble goal directly related to something that subjectively constitutes the person's most important life achievement so far or is anticipated as the ultimate goal to be achieved in life" (Łączek, 2019, p. 30).

Undoubtedly, the essence of success in life is highly subjective. Everyone has the right to evaluate their own actions in the context of their personal accomplishments and to perceive them as life success.

## RESEARCH DESIGN AND RESULTS

Proper preparation for a scientific study requires defining research objectives. The main objective was to learn the opinions of the war refugees from Ukraine regarding success in life. One specific goal was to obtain data on the respondents' understanding of the category "success in life" and to identify the factors that they believed were conducive to achieving life success. Another important aspect was to determine whether the participants believed they had achieved success in life and whether achieving this kind of success makes people happy.

The research was conducted using the diagnostic survey method, and the research technique and tool included the author's own survey questionnaire called "Mój sukces życiowy (N-2)". The survey questionnaire used in this case included a modified version of an original questionnaire, "Mój sukces życiowy" [My Life Success], used in a different life success research.

The research was carried out in 2023 among the Ukrainian war refugees living in Poland who, having crossed the border, decided to legalise their stay and obtain the rights of war refugees. All respondents were beneficiaries of the "Świętokrzyskie dla Ukrainy" aid project co-funded by the European Social Fund (ESF).

Before starting the research, the respondents were informed about its objectives, and that their participation was voluntary and anonymous. After providing their consent to participate in the research, the respondents completed paper questionnaires. After the verification of questionnaire answers, 129 questionnaires ( $N = 129$ ) were qualified for the second stage. The data and information presented below are part of a larger scientific project involving research on the life success of Ukrainian war refugees residing in Poland.

Figure 1 contains data on the gender of the respondents. More than three quarters of all respondents were female (75.2%,  $n = 97$ ). The remaining 24.8% were male ( $n = 32$ ).

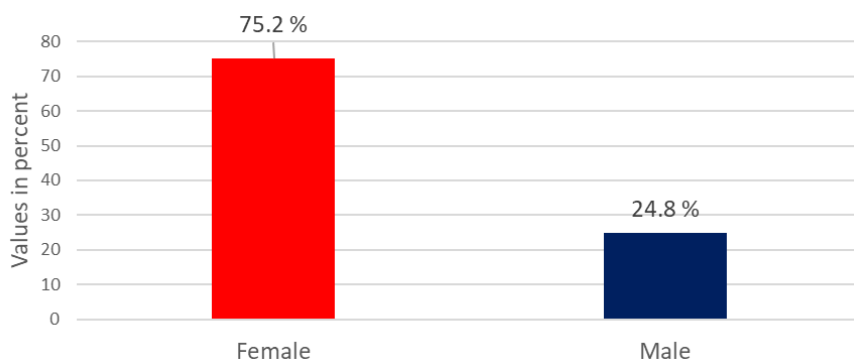


Figure 1. Gender of respondents

Source: Author's own study.

As for the breakdown by age, the largest group was 17–20 (41.1%,  $n = 53$ ). The second largest age group was 31–40 (24.8%,  $n = 32$ ), then those aged 40–50 (21.7%,  $n = 28$ ). The smallest group included participants aged 21–30 (12.4%,  $n = 16$ ) (Figure 2).

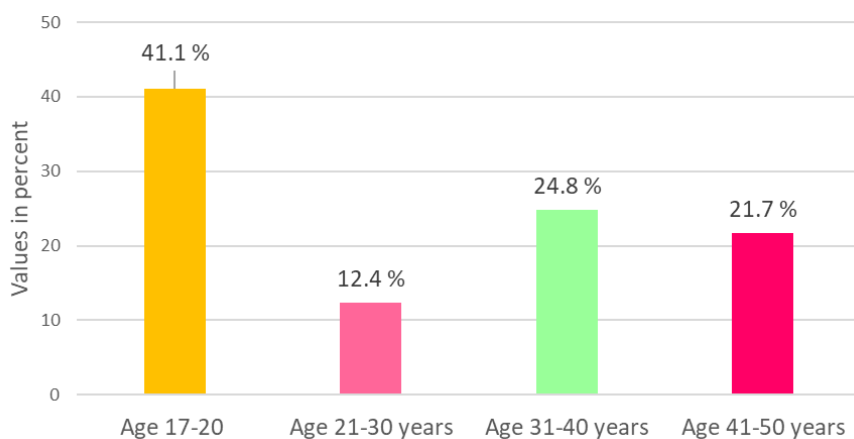


Figure 2. Age of respondents

Source: Author's own study.

The respondents were asked about their place of residence in Ukraine. It was determined that their current residential environment in Poland was – like before – temporary and short-term and that it was not a place of residence of their choice. (Unlike their home in Ukraine, where they had experienced the realities of the living environment before coming to Poland.) The vast majority of the respondents lived in cities (82.9%,  $n = 107$ ), and the remaining 17.1% ( $n = 22$ ) – in the country (Figure 3).

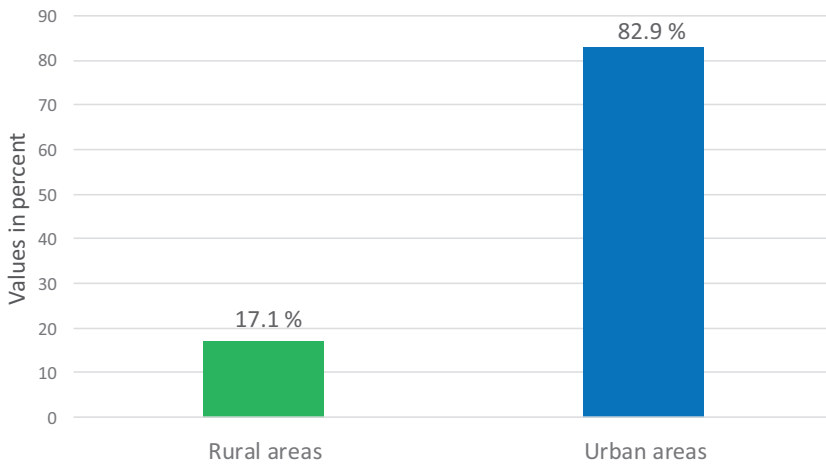


Figure 3. Respondents' place of residence

Source: Author's own study.

The questions included in the survey questionnaire made it possible to collect data in the key area – what does success in life mean for the research participants?

The most popular categories of answers were: “having a happy family” (69.8% of answers, 90 respondents); “being happy” (69.0% of answers, 89 respondents); “being healthy” (63.6% of answers, 82 respondents); “ongoing development of one’s own personality” (53.5% of answers, 69 respondents); and “rewarding job” (48.1% of answers, 62 respondents). The greatest number of answers concerned having a happy family. Under normal circumstances, this most often equates to living in a happy family environment. During war, the situation is different, as families are usually temporarily separated – men (husbands, fathers) remain in the warzone, while women and their children become war refugees in a safe place free from war hostilities. It is worth noting that almost half of all the respondents indicated that they equated success in life with having a rewarding job. This is important, because it shows that such a radical change in lifestyle, i.e. fleeing to another country from war, did not ravage the respondents’ desire for professional self-fulfilment.

Less popular categories included: “achieving set goals” (40.3% of answers, 52 respondents); “highly successful career” (27.1% of answers, 35 respondents); and “experiencing great true love” (26.4% of answers, 34 respondents). These three categories do not necessarily refer to the present but may be associated with something that might happen in the future. The ongoing situation might have made the respondents “postpone” these goals and put them on hold until the war is over.

The least popular answer categories were: “having a lot of money” (19.4% of answers, 25 respondents); “getting a college/university degree” and “living a long life (at least until ninety)” (*ex aequo* 3.9% of answers, 5 respondents each); “being famous”

(2.3% of answers, 3 respondents); and “other” (1.6% of answers, 2 respondents). Answers in the “other” category included: “surviving the war” and “having a sound home to come back to”. Two options in the “other” category received zero answers: “having political power” and “enjoying high social prestige”. The respondents placed wealth and fame at the bottom of the catalogue of life success categories. The non-material factors, i.e. family and happiness, turned out to be more important. Detailed data are presented in Figure 4.

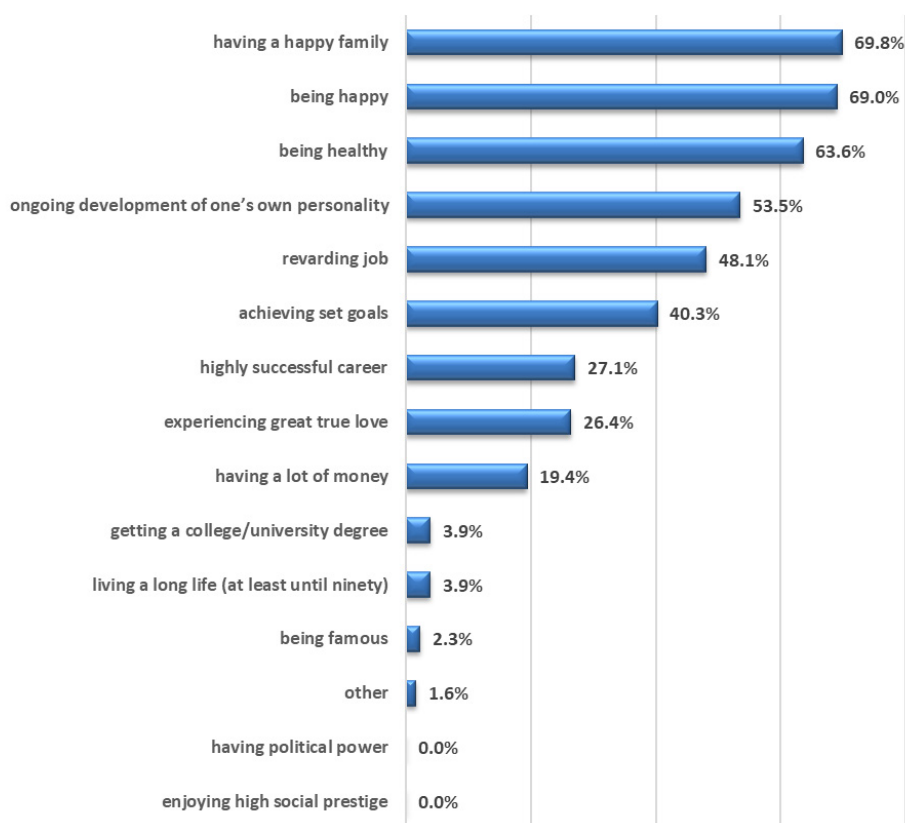


Figure 4. Understanding of life success by respondents\*

\* due to the use of multiple-choice questions in the survey questionnaire, the percentages in the “%” column do not add up to 100%

Source: Author's own study.

Almost every third participant (32.6% of answers, 42 respondents) declared that they had achieved success in life. Slightly more than one in five (20.2% of answers, 26 respondents) stated that they had not yet achieved success in life. Almost half of the participants (47.2% of answers, 61 respondents) answered “I don't know” (Table 1).

Table 1. Respondents' opinion on having achieved success in life

No.	Category	N	%
1	yes	42	32.6
2	no	26	20.2
3	I don't know	61	47.2
4	total	129	100.0

Source: Author's own study.

In the next question, the respondents were asked to express their opinion on whether achieving success in life makes people happy. More than four fifths of them (80.6% of answers, 104 respondents) replied "yes". The answer "no" yielded only a few replies (7.0% of answers, 9 respondents). The "I don't know" category garnered slightly more responses –12.4% of all the surveyed people (16 respondents). The vast majority believed that achieving success in life would make them happy (Table 2).

Table 2. Respondents' opinion on whether achieving success in life makes a person happy

No.	Category	N	%
1	yes	104	80.6
2	no	9	7.0
3	I don't know	16	12.4
4	total	129	100.0

Source: Author's own study.

In order for the respondents to compare their own personal beliefs regarding success in life, they were asked what they thought the key life goals were for the majority of other people, not themselves. A cafeteria-style check-list included various categories, including "success in life".

In the respondents' minds, the key life goals for the majority of other people were: "successful family life" (61.2% of answers, 79 respondents); "self-fulfilment" (60.5% of answers, 78 respondents); "travelling and exploring the world" (56.6% of answers, 73 respondents); "material goods" (43.4% of answers, 56 respondents); and "career" (35.7% of answers, 46 respondents). In this case, the category with most responses was analogous to the category with which the respondents equated success in life – a happy family life, in general. However, other categories the respondents selected for this question indicate that they perceive others as being more focused on pursuing the hedonistic side of life than themselves. To them, the "success in life" category is not very important to other people, as it ranked seventh according to the number of answers it yielded. In the opinion of the respondents, most people prioritise such life goals as travelling, career, and material goods. The respondents perceive themselves as people who are more focused on the non-material aspects of human life than the rest.



(It is worth nothing that there were a lot of answers declaring spiritual development, i.e. 20.9% of all replies, 27 respondents).

The least popular goals included: “power” (5.4% of answers, 7 respondents); “getting a college/university degree” (4.7% of answers, 6 respondents); “being extremely knowledgeable” and “being famous” (1.6% of answers, 2 respondents each), and “other” (0.8% of answers, 1 respondent). The last category had the following answer: “being an expert in something”. In the opinion of the respondents, knowledge, power, and prestige are of little importance to most people (Table 3).

Table 3. The most important life goals for most people according to the respondents\*

No.	Category	N	%
1	successful family life	79	61.2
2	self-fulfilment	78	60.5
3	travelling and exploring the world	73	56.6
4	material goods	56	43.4
5	career	46	35.7
6	feeling independent	45	34.9
7	achieving success in life	28	21.7
8	spiritual development	27	20.9
9	having a lot of money	24	18.6
10	own comprehensive development	23	17.8
11	personal experience of the so-called “great love”	15	11.6
12	entertainment, fun	13	10.1
13	prestige	8	6.2
14	power	7	5.4
15	getting a college/university degree	6	4.7
16	being extremely knowledgeable	2	1.6
17	being famous	2	1.6
18	other	1	0.8

\* due to the use of multiple-choice questions in the survey questionnaire, the percentages in the “%” column do not add up to 100%

Source: Author’s own study.

The living conditions of Ukrainian war refugees, particularly during the first phase of their stay in a foreign country, typically differ from the conditions in their homeland environment – where they lived before war. Also, the circumstances associated with work, leisure, cultural life, social interactions, etc. are different than before fleeing to Poland. How did the respondents define the factors to success in life?

These were the most popular categories of answers: “happy family life” (61.2% of answers, 79 respondents); “hard work” (55.0% of answers, 71 respondents); “consistent self-improvement” and “creativity” (44.2% of answers, 57 respondents each); and “perseverance” (43.4% of answers, 56 respondents).

What is uplifting is the fact that the participants did not attach much importance to factors such as “sound economic situation of the country” (36.4% of answers, 47 respondents) or “place of residence” (20.9% of answers, 27 respondents). In the light of the war crisis and economic challenges faced by Ukraine and the fact that the respondents lived outside Ukraine, the results lead to the conclusion that the above factors do not stop the war refugees from pursuing life success.

The least popular answer categories were: “proper upbringing” (3.1% of answers, 4 respondents) plus “being clever and cunning”, “political views”, “marrying rich,” and “having authority” (1.6% of answers, 2 respondents each). No one selected the following categories: “being a man”, “favouritism” and “other”. It is worth mentioning that “being a woman” yielded only 7.0% of answers (9 respondents). This means that the participants believed gender or sex is not a crucial factor contributing to success in life, which is a positive observation (Table 4).

Table 4. Factors conducive to achieving success in life according to the respondents\*

No.	Category	N	%
1	happy family life	79	61.2
2	hard work	71	55.0
3	consistent self-improvement	57	44.2
4	creativity	57	44.2
5	perseverance	56	43.4
6	discipline	54	41.9
7	having their own value system	50	38.8
8	skills	48	37.2
9	belief in success	48	37.2
10	sound economic situation of the country	47	36.4
11	openness to experience	41	31.8
12	to plan realistically achievable goals	38	29.5
13	high professional qualifications	36	28.6
14	relying only on oneself, not on others	34	26.4
15	ability to manage one's free time	34	26.4
16	entrepreneurship	30	23.3
17	place of residence	27	20.9
18	ability not to put off doing something necessary	26	20.2
19	having a hobby	25	19.4
20	the belief that the intended success will be achieved	24	18.6
21	profession, type of work	21	16.3
22	ability to “translate” theory into practice	21	16.3
23	having a lot of money	20	15.5
24	ingenuity	19	14.7
25	ability to draw conclusions	19	14.7
26	higher education	17	13.2
27	having a lot of acquaintances	16	12.4
28	belief in a great idea	15	11.6
29	consistency of purpose	12	9.3

### Factors to Success in Life as Perceived by Ukrainian War Refugees

No.	Category	N	%
30	empathy	12	9.3
31	frequent experience of favourable coincidences (so-called "luck in life")	11	8.5
32	being a woman	9	7.0
33	proper upbringing	4	3.1
34	being clever and cunning	2	1.6
35	political views	2	1.6
36	marrying rich	2	1.6
37	having authority	2	1.6
38	being a man	–	–
39	favouritism	–	–
40	other	–	–

\* due to the use of multiple-choice questions in the survey questionnaire, the percentages in the “%” column do not add up to 100%

Source: Author's own study.

The research results presented above have a high descriptive value. They lead to a certain diagnosis and description of the existing social reality regarding the opinions of Ukrainian war refugees living in Poland. Unfortunately, the size of the research group was not big enough for the researchers to be able to generalise and draw sweeping conclusions that could be applied to a larger part of the population of Ukrainian war refugees who decided to stay in Poland after February 24, 2022. Further research on life success as experienced and perceived by this population is advisable. The potential future studies could be used to offer effective aid to the refugees. Once we know what the refugees see as important and what they believe facilitates success in life, we will be able to take better systemic actions aimed at meeting their real needs and to better choose target groups for the expected help.

## CONCLUSIONS

Because of the current geopolitical situation, for over two years Polish kindergartens and schools have been observing a steady influx of children and teenagers who are war refugees from Ukraine. Even though Ukrainian children and adults have a similar cultural background to Poles, effective and sensible education should identify and take into account the things that they see as important.

According to Szymański, in times of globalisation, rapid information exchange, and global migration, there is greater tolerance for otherness, although it still varies depending on the environment and a country. This means that even in a small social space, there can be coexistence of people who prefer different lifestyles (Szymański, 2024, p. 70). What is crucial is their common ground – the foundation for mutual understanding and tolerance.

In the opinions of the surveyed war refugees from Ukraine, success in life is most often understood as having a happy family, and the most important life success factor is leading a happy family life. To sum up, the respondents perceive success in life primarily in terms of a family. This is a good sign for the future, because family, as a basic unit of society, is the best environment for the development and upbringing of children. Knowledge about the respondents' family-driven perspective on life success will certainly help Polish teachers act more deliberately and effectively in the processes of education, upbringing, care, and psychological support provided for children and teenagers who are Ukrainian war refugees.

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