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Are migrants better off through migration? The what, why, and how of considering immigrant happiness

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Are migrants better off through migration?

The what, why, and how of considering immigrant happiness.

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Abstract:

To make the most out of migration, both (prospective) migrants and policy makers benefit of understanding the *overall* outcome of migration and its determinants. However, despite abundant knowledge about various domain outcomes, remarkably little is known about the broad well-being outcome of migration as it has rarely figured as an explicit object of research. The main reason is that human well-being is difficult to study empirically due to its numerous subjective and objective determinants with varying importance across individuals and groups. This article explains what migration scholars can learn about the consequences of migration from assessing a “better life” by considering migrants’ subjectively experienced well-being via their self-reported happiness and life satisfaction. We also address the importance of subjective forms of well-being compared with objective forms of well-being, the role of happiness when migration is not completely voluntary, and the importance of considering happiness in relation to other migration stakeholders (e.g., natives and stayers) and other contexts (e.g., migration behaviour).

Introduction

Migration to another country is likely to result in profound transformations in one's life. The fundamental insight of core social science disciplines is that social factors (socialization in core institutions, work situation, culture, modes of political participation, national identity, etc.) help determine major aspects of one's life experience. Moving to live in a place where social factors are significantly different (vis-à-vis one's country of origin) inevitably results in a different life experience.

To what extent (and under what conditions) do the people who migrate experience these changes as *positive*? We suggest below that the study of migration generally lacks a clear vision regarding what sort of metric could be used to answer that broad question. The purpose of this article is to explore the exact benefits and limitations of using *subjective well-being* (self-reported happiness and/or life satisfaction) to evaluate the broad consequences of migration. This exploration leads us to conclude that considering how the immigrants themselves feel about and evaluate their lives (i.e., their *subjective well-being*) should be at the core of evaluating the consequences of migration for the migrants.¹

Migrants of course anticipate that the changes will be positive, leading to significant improvement in quality of life, either for him/herself or for family members who remain in the origin country (or both). But it cannot be assumed that migrants achieve their intended outcomes, particularly because migration decisions are often based on incomplete (and sometimes biased) information about its consequences (e.g., Mai 2005; Carling 2008) and imperfect decisions may follow from the general human susceptibility to cognitive biases in decision making processes (Schkade and

¹ More general introductions to the literature on happiness and migration are available elsewhere (Simpson 2013; Hendriks 2015; and the 'Migration, Well-Being and Development' issue of the World Migration Report, IOM 2013).

Kahneman 1998; Kahneman 2011). Accordingly, there is a great deal of social science research about the consequences of migration in specific domains that pertain to overall well-being, such as the migrant's economic welfare, identity, discrimination, and social capital. But scholars (and migrants as well) would benefit from development of a clear conceptual framework that facilitates empirical evaluation at the broadest level of well-being (not just of separate domains). It can foster a better understanding of the overall consequences of migration for migrants. Additionally, a broad well-being measure can reveal the importance of each single domain to the overall outcome as well as the merit of specific domains (e.g., what acculturation strategy benefits migrants most?), after which trade-offs between domain outcomes can be made (e.g., how much extra income compensates for the migrant's reduced social status in the host country?). This understanding is essential in supporting prospective migrants in making more informed migration decisions. After migration, it can also support migrants and policy makers in making the most out of migration (what domains deserve priority? What orientations/policies are most beneficial?).

In preparation to identifying the exact contributions of using subjective well-being as a way of quantifying immigrant well-being, we first provide a brief overview indicating what sort of work is typically done by scholars investigating migration outcomes for migrants and discuss its limitations. We then introduce the field of happiness studies (concept and measurement), discuss the contributions and limitations of subjective well-being measures, summarise some of the key research findings of studies that have explored happiness among migrants, and engage with the scepticism we would expect to find among migration scholars in particular. We continue by considering possible directions for research that transcend the question of happiness

outcomes for migrants, after which the key insights from this article are summarized in the concluding section.

Blind spots in research on the consequences of migration

Research on migration is characterised by extraordinary depth and diversity. A concern with migration was at the core of early American sociology (e.g. Thomas and Znaniecki 1918); Castles (2010) is persuasive when he argues that migration is a core form of ‘social transformation’, such that contemporary societies cannot be understood without sustained attention to migration. Analytically, there is a useful distinction to be made between research on the *causes* of migration and research on the *consequences* of migration (e.g. Kivisto and Faist 2009). The focus here is on consequences – especially for the migrants themselves – though we will briefly consider other angles as well.

A vast range of research on the consequences of migration for the migrants helps put to bed what might be considered a ‘common sense’ notion holding that migration is obviously beneficial for the migrants. That notion is evident in earlier work grounded in neo-classical economics assumptions about rational decision-making and revealed preferences (e.g. Sjaastad 1962; Harris and Todaro 1970). It is superficially plausible insofar as one imagines that migration is generally a voluntary endeavour (if it didn’t make the migrants better off, then why would they choose it?) involving movement from poorer countries to wealthier countries (who wouldn’t want to live ‘here’?). A significant portion of migration flows involves movement that doesn’t correspond with this imagination: migration is sometimes not voluntary and often takes place among countries at similar levels of development. But even for migration that does seem to embody the conventional understanding (e.g. migration from Mexico to the USA), what we see in social science research takes us well beyond the notion that

migration generally improves the lives of the migrants. At a minimum, there are very significant *costs* associated with migration (e.g. separation from family and friends, lower socio-economic position in society, sense of dislocation, and homesickness), but one can easily perceive limits on the extent of benefit as well (e.g., underemployment and unmet expectations).

The idea that migration can lead people into situations characterised by challenge and difficulty is deeply embedded in some of the core concepts migration scholars use – in particular, *integration*. To raise the question of integration is to admit the possibility that many immigrants will not achieve full membership in the destination society. Discrimination, lack of social acceptance, and inadequate knowledge can combine to limit immigrants' prospects for full participation in core economic, social and political institutions. Immigrants commonly participate less in politics (Jones-Correa 1998); they sometimes fail to become naturalized citizens despite eligibility (Bloemraad 2006). Their incomes are often lower than those of similarly qualified natives, as qualifications and previous experience are discounted by employers (Alba and Foner 2015). Immigrants often experience increased social isolation, at least temporarily (Morasanu 2013). Depending on context, these disadvantages sometimes persist into the second generation (Portes and Rumbaut 1996).

Of course, for a great many migrants, migration does in fact lead to significant improvements in their lives – or in the lives of family and others in the origin country. For the latter, positive outcomes are achieved primarily via remittances, which significantly exceed the flow of official development aid (World Bank 2014). But migrants themselves can reap some obvious benefits as well. To a significant extent, benefits come in a straightforward economic form: many economic migrants achieve significant economic success (e.g., McKenzie, Stillman, and Gibson 2010; Nikolova

and Graham 2015) in the destination country. Their children also often achieve educational success (Zuccotti, Ganzeboom, and Guveli 2017). Migrants moving for non-economic reasons can also often gain significant benefits; for instance, migrants moving for family reunification often satisfy an important social need. Particularly for those moving to more developed countries, benefits relating to the macro-environment are evident as well. For instance more (perceived) freedom (Nikolova and Graham 2015) and positive changes in gender relations: women originating in countries with more traditional gender relations are more likely to work after migration, which enables them to gain a more active role in the public sphere (Hodagneu-Sotelo 1994) and a more balanced role in their marriages (Pessar 1999). It is probably rare to find that migration has not involved unexpected difficulties and challenges (sometimes rooted in incomplete/inaccurate information, e.g. Carling 2008, Mai 2005)² – but there should be no surprise in finding that many migrants do achieve their goals and enjoy a net gain.

A salient common thread in research on the consequences of migration for the migrants is apparent via the observation that many researchers who consider issues pertaining to the well-being of migrants conceive of well-being at least implicitly in an *objective* sense. That assertion is evident in the discussion above: researchers have focused on migrants' social isolation, or their economic disadvantage, or their political exclusion – or, by contrast, their economic achievements, their political mobilization (and resultant attention from mainstream candidates), etc.

² Additionally, psychologists and behavioral economists show that people's choice behavior is not necessarily in their long-term interest because humans in general are susceptible to cognitive biases (Kahneman 2011; Gilbert 2006). For instance, people who move to escape economic deprivation base their expectations about well-being outcomes, and hence their migration decision, mostly on the gratification of economic needs. After migration, their main concerns typically come to include social factors such as social exclusion, cultural/identity issues, and status (Piore 1979). The shifting preferences may cause a discrepancy between expected and experienced well-being, which means that some migrants may experience a negative migration outcome even though they gratified their main migration motive.

Migration researchers do also consider consequences that involve aspects of migrants' subjective experiences. An important example has to do with migrants' perception of discrimination from natives (e.g. Colic-Peisker and Tilbury 2007; Jasinskaja-Lahti et al. 2009). There is also a significant body of research on the formation and evolution of ethnic identity following migration (e.g. Portes and Macleod 1996; Ryan 2010). One also sees ethnographic and qualitative studies in which immigrants give voice to their pain and regret, e.g. for leaving children and other family members behind and concern about their welfare even given substantial remittances (Dreby 2010, Abrego 2014). Moreover, various studies suggest that migrants' partly shifting frame of reference from the home country to the host country (Gelatt 2013) leads to higher aspirations, and ultimately, to less positive perceptions of their situations, such as declining political trust (Röder and Mühlau 2012) and declining satisfaction with the government (Maxwell 2010) and income (Obućina 2013).

As with the research on objective outcomes, the research on subjective aspects of migration outcomes is of course valuable on its own terms. But as a means of evaluating the consequences of migration for the migrants more broadly, it is also possible to perceive limitations. One might wonder: what do these various objectively and subjectively experienced domain outcomes add up to?

Insofar as the focus is on dimensions of well-being that seem to stand for themselves, one might reasonably perceive an assumption that if particular components of well-being (e.g. income) are judged to be low among immigrants then one would naturally conclude that well-being *as experienced by the immigrants themselves* will surely be low as well. That assumption might strike many people as uncontroversial: don't people feel good when they enjoy good living conditions? Good living conditions indeed improve the chance that people feel good. But a significant body of research

demonstrates conclusively that experienced well-being can diverge from the objective conditions that characterise one's life situation. Notably, a substantial proportion of people with an objectively good life are depressed or dissatisfied with life (and vice versa) – a point that Graham (2009) illustrates via reference to the paradox of 'happy peasants and miserable millionaires'. In this light, some well-being scholars suggest that living conditions constitute individuals' *opportunities* to experience high well-being but are not well-being outcomes in themselves (Veenhoven 2000). Others suggest that objective forms of well-being do have intrinsic value; Sen and Nussbaum (1993) show the deficiency of being content with the happiness of a 'hopeless beggar' who has somehow become reconciled to his/her fate. In any case, if migration enhances objective forms of well-being but migrants are generally less happy, one might need to hesitate before concluding that migration led to an overall successful outcome for the migrants. That observation by no means suggests that scholars' concern with immigrants' objective situations is somehow misplaced. But if we cannot dismiss objective gains (and losses) achieved via migration, still less should we dismiss the consequences of migration for one's subjective well-being. Hence, to the extent that migration researchers do not consider immigrants' subjectively experienced outcomes, then our knowledge about their well-being – and consequently about whether migration has led to an improvement in their lives – is missing a dimension of obvious importance.

Next to these conceptual issues, there are also empirical limitations to assessing well-being using broad objective measures (indexes). Broad subjective measures such as life satisfaction and happiness measures – whether measured via a single survey question or a more elaborate scale, e.g. Diener's "Satisfaction with Life Scale" (1985) – can function as a summary indicator of the way one feels about all the specific aspects of one's life. It would be difficult to conceive of a corresponding measure (index) of

objective well-being – a way of summarising the level of one’s overall well-being across all the various dimensions that might be relevant. Any index generated by the researcher would be incomplete and necessarily involve strong assumptions about which components are to be included and what weight they should have. Decisions of that sort are inevitably arbitrary – and while that concern is reasonably overcome at the level of countries (e.g. with the Human Development Index, HDI), it is a significant obstacle at the level of individuals, to such an extent that, to our knowledge, there is no widely-used individual-level index of objective well-being.³ One likely reason has to do with wide variation in individual preferences: the idea of an overall ‘level’ of well-being is surely incomplete insofar as it does not take account of people’s preferences. A distinct virtue of measuring well-being via global subjective questions (e.g., happiness and life satisfaction) is that the individual is able to assess for him/herself what components matter and what weight they have. Hence, a coherent notion of well-being must extend beyond its objective dimension; even if an index of some sort were feasible, it would still be limited in what it would tell us about *overall* well-being.

Broad subjective measures can overcome these limitations to some extent as they can be designed to cover all potentially relevant well-being dimensions as well as empower migrants to make evaluations based on their own preferences and outcome perceptions. Previously used subjective measures of this type ask migrants themselves for their own evaluation of their migration decision – do they feel satisfied with the way things have worked out (Sloan and Morrison 2016) and perceive their current quality of life to be better than their pre-migration quality of life (e.g., De Jong, Chamrathirong, and Tran 2002)? Similarly, one may argue that people experience

³ One might consider Kahneman’s notion of ‘objective happiness’ (1999) – but this is not what most people mean by ‘objective’.

positive migration outcomes when not regretting their move. However, psychologists and cognitive scientists have shown that these types of direct choice evaluations have very limited accuracy in evaluating human outcomes because people consciously or unconsciously present, remember, and interpret information in ways designed to confirm and rationalize their choices (see e.g. cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger 1954) and Nickerson (1998) on confirmation bias). This also explains why we cannot simply evaluate migration consequences based on re-migration patterns, a form of revealed preferences. A large proportion of migrants experiencing negative migration outcomes may not re-migrate for several possible reasons. They may be reluctant to reveal their disappointing outcomes to people in their home country (Mahler 1995), risk averse, or perceive to be even worse (better) off when re-migrating (e.g., due to the loss of economic and social linkages). Moreover, cognitive dissonance theory suggests that it cannot be excluded that they genuinely believe that they are in a better position than they would have been if they had stayed in their home country. Hence, broad subjective measures can act as an indicator of individuals' overall migration outcomes, in a way that would not be feasible for objective measures but have problems of their own. This indicates the need for exploring other – or at least complementary - angles to evaluating well-being.

Towards a happiness angle in evaluating migration consequences

Migrants typically refer to motives that are more concrete than happiness or well-being when asked about their reasons for migration. But commonly mentioned motives such as improving one's financial situation (economic migrants) or living closer to family (family reunification) are better conceived not as goals that are valuable primarily in their own right but instead as instrumentally important in achieving more fundamental

and overarching (but less concrete) human aspirations (see e.g., Maslow's hierarchy of needs; 1943). On the most general level, virtually all those specific motives are driven by the search of "a better life" (i.e., well-being). Two vital components of well-being are staying alive (survival) and having an enjoyable life (feeling happy), of which survival needs to be gratified first before the migrant moves on to focus on achieving a more enjoyable life. Yet, even those moving who cannot be said to have moved voluntarily can be expected to care about how migration affects how they think and feel about their lives, in other words, their happiness. This suggests that happiness consequences of migration deserves study in its own right but that experienced happiness is also well positioned to provide information about the broader well-being consequences of migration. But what is happiness exactly and can we actually measure it adequately?

Concept and measurement

Happiness refers to the subjective enjoyment of one's life and captures the extent to which an individual experiences affectively pleasant and cognitively satisfying feelings (Veenhoven 2012). This cognitive component relates to the extent to which one perceives oneself as obtaining what one wishes from life (i.e., life satisfaction). The affective component relates to the extent to which an individual experiences pleasant moods and emotions, such as feeling excited, interested and proud as opposed to feeling sad, upset, or lonely. The most commonly used happiness measures are evaluations about how well one's life is going in the form of self-reported happiness or life satisfaction. Typical survey questions are "*All things considered, how satisfied are you with your life as a whole these days?*" and "*Taking all things together, how happy would you say you are?*" with answering scales ranging from 0 (completely

dissatisfied/unhappy) to 10 (completely satisfied/happy). While the happiness evaluation taps both into the affective and cognitive component, the life satisfaction is more cognitively oriented and therefore more sensitive to people's living conditions (Diener et al. 1999). Nevertheless, these types of life evaluations are strongly related with correlations typically around 0.70. A commonly used multi-item scale is the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS; Diener et al. 1985). Another set of measures used to assess people's happiness and their broader subjective well-being focuses purely on the affective component of happiness. In its most simple form, research participants report how often in the past few weeks they have experienced various affective feelings, such as in the Positive and Negative Affect Scale (PANAS; Watson et al. 1988). More intensive methods target people's daily life happiness by repeatedly asking research participants over a number of days or weeks to report their affective experiences at specific moments, after which the sum score of these momentary happiness levels indicates the person's general level of affective happiness. These data can be collected via "experience sampling", where participants are asked to report their present feelings and actions at short notice after receiving each of several signals distributed throughout the day on their pager or Smartphone (Csikszentmihalyi and Hunter 2003), or happiness diaries by means of the "Day Reconstruction Method" (Kahneman et al. 2004). Although the findings from purely affective measures and the more cognitively oriented life evaluations are substantially correlated, it is important to recognize some divergence, which reflects the fact that happiness is not a unitary construct (Kahneman and Deaton 2010).

Happiness measures have a number of qualities that make them effective in capturing an individual's broader well-being. Evaluations of happiness allow research participants to consider all subjective and objective aspects relevant to their own notion

of a good life in an integrated manner because of two features: the measures are self-reported and open-ended by design (see e.g., the reference to ‘all things considered’ and ‘life as a whole’ in the life satisfaction measure). The implicit strength of the open-ended design is its inclusiveness (i.e., no domain is a priori excluded). While research participants do not necessarily consider all relevant aspects of life on the spot, people do implicitly form life evaluations throughout their lives and draw on these accumulated feelings and thoughts when reporting their happiness or life satisfaction (Schimmack and Oishi 2005). The self-report feature empowers the individual to weigh the importance of different aspects of life (instead of the arbitrary and potentially biased selection and weighting of well-being criteria by the researcher) and thereby allows for well-being functions that differ across individuals as well as change within these individuals over time and place. This is important because individuals and groups (e.g., cultural groups) have their own ideas about what constitutes a good life and this may change depending on the situation (Diener and Suh 2000). For instance, some people favour living in close proximity to their relatives more than others do and social inclusion is likely a more prominent need for a recently arrived immigrant who is in the process of rebuilding a social network in the host country than for a more established immigrant. Moreover, happiness measures allow the individual to personally evaluate his or her outcomes and thereby implicitly capture adaptation processes. This is important because an individual’s objective outcomes do not necessarily correspond with his or her perceived outcomes and individuals can evaluate the same circumstance in quite different ways. For instance, recent immigrants from poorer countries appreciate objectively similar host country conditions such as the economy and government more than more established migrants do (Hendriks, De Vroome, and Burger 2017). Affective happiness measures have similar qualities as life evaluations

because the extent to which a person experiences certain feelings depends on the value attached to, and the subjective experience of, a certain situation. In sum, a person's experienced objective and subjective benefits and costs of migration that truly matter are reflected in the person's self-reported happiness. Accordingly, estimated happiness functions can reveal the relative importance of each considered element to the overall happiness evaluation.

One sometimes encounters concerns regarding the specific methods used to measure happiness. These concerns include issues pertaining to questionnaire design, such as question ordering, question wording, and the response format. Other concerns relate to the possibility of socially desirable answering and interpersonal differences in the interpretation of, and response styles to, happiness measures. These issues could indeed distort happiness self-reports at some level, but they can be largely managed via consistent approaches to survey design; more importantly, they are likely to cancel out in large samples as the distortions tend to be non-systematic (Schimmack and Oishi 2005), such that they are unlikely to affect findings for specific and carefully selected research questions. Accordingly, happiness measures have substantial test-retest reliability (Schimmack and Oishi 2005) and studies testing the convergent validity have found substantial convergence between happiness self-reports and peer-reports (Schneider and Schimmack 2009), genuine smiles (Seder and Oishi 2012), and brain activation (Davidson and Schuyler 2015). Moreover, happiness measures show construct validity because they are sensitive to things people intuitively value positive or negative in life. For instance, happiness increases in an objectively favourable surrounding environment (Oswald and Wu 2010) and with the fulfillment of human needs (Tay and Diener 2011), while decreasing with negative life events such as the death of a spouse or becoming unemployed or disabled (Luhmann et al. 2012).

Moreover, intuitively important dimensions in life, such as health, safety, a minimum level of economic security, and social relationships tend to have the strongest correlations with happiness scores (Schimmack, Diener, and Oishi 2002). This reduces the concern that happiness metrics concentrate merely on happiness but ignore other important immigrant values. Well-being scholars have reached a consensus that happiness measures, despite their limitations, have a sufficiently high signal-to-noise ratio to contribute great new insights into research and policy (OECD 2013; Diener, Inglehart, and Tay 2013).

An additional concern in the context of research on international migration is the cross-cultural comparability of happiness measures, especially when comparing migrants to the host country's natives. Potential source of bias concern the imprecise translatability of happiness measures across languages and cultural differences in the response style to happiness measures (e.g., people in conformist cultures generally answer less towards the scale extremes). The literature testing this concern is at an early stage but initial evidence suggests that linguistic and cultural biases are in most cases small and have a marginal influence on happiness regressions, which allows for meaningful if cautious comparisons between most languages and cultures (Oishi 2010; Senik 2014; Exton, Smith, Vandendriessche 2015). For instance, Exton et al. (2015) show that migrant happiness can be largely explained by host country characteristics rather than home country characteristics. Nevertheless, the current evidence does not rule out that cultural and linguistic biases introduce a bias in some specific cases.

Initial insights from the literature on migration happiness

The insights that can be gained from considering migrant happiness appear readily in a number of contributions. Several studies help to build an understanding under which

conditions immigrants are better off as specified in terms of happiness (see Hendriks 2015 for a review). Migrants moving to more liveable countries often, but not always, become happier (Nikolova and Graham 2015) while non-positive happiness outcomes are particularly observed among migrants moving to less liveable countries (IOM 2013; Bartram 2015). Yet, there are notable exceptions to this general pattern. Stillman et al. (2015) analyzed the outcomes of a natural experiment in which Tongan residents hoping to move to New Zealand were entered into a random migration lottery. These authors found that some years after migration the ‘lucky’ migrants were unhappier than the ‘unlucky’ stayers even though the migrants had reached sizeable gains in objective and material well-being, such as a tripling of their income. Similarly, Knight and Gunatilaka’s (2010) study on internal migration in China shows that rural-urban migrants are unhappier than both urban and rural locals, despite their economic gains from migration and their substantial income advantage to rural locals. These findings indicate that one cannot *assume* that migrants – even those obtaining better living conditions – experience improved *subjective* well-being after migration (see also Wright 2012 for a rare instance of qualitative research exploring this connection).

Various studies explored the determinants of migrants’ happiness to reveal what specific conditions are beneficial and important for migrants’ well-being outcomes. At the individual level, studies report that income has only a modest association with migrant happiness (e.g.), which means that migrants may be mistaken in putting much emphasis on economic gains in their search of happiness via (Bartram 2011; Olgiati, Calvo, and Berkman 2011). Immigrant’s relative income position in society (which is often lower in the host society) may even matter more for their happiness than their absolute income (Gokdemir and Dumludag 2012). Similarly, at the macro-level, a good economic environment is certainly not all that matters for immigrants’ happiness.

Hendriks and Bartram (2016) reveal that the social climate is of particular importance for migrant happiness, especially the attitudes of natives towards migrants. Perceived discrimination has a strong negative effect on immigrant happiness (Safi 2010), while acculturation has a modest but positive relation to happiness (Angelini et al. 2015).

Safi (2010) reveals that migrants do not assimilate to the higher happiness levels of natives despite their objectively improving conditions. Hendriks et al. (2017) offer an explanation based on immigrants' declining appreciation of their situation in the host country that follows from a shifting frame of reference, meaning that immigrants from less developed countries gradually develop higher reference points and ensuing expectations because they habituate and increasingly compare themselves to others in the more developed host country. This illustrates the discrepancy between migrant's actual circumstances and their interpretation of those circumstances. Although immigrants' greater appreciation of their conditions gives them a happiness boost compared with natives, immigrants remain generally less happy than natives. Factors contributing to their lower happiness include their disadvantaged socio-economic conditions, discrimination, and social capital (Safi 2010; De Vroome and Hooghe 2014) and pervasive happiness differences between migrants and natives also exist because of immigrants' culturally embedded happiness levels (Senik 2014).

How important is happiness for migrants?

The findings discussed in the preceding section illustrate some of the contributions made by scholars who have investigated the connection between migration and happiness, especially by considering the happiness consequences of migration. Migration scholars might nonetheless wonder: how important are those consequences? To what extent does it *matter* whether migration leads to increased happiness for the migrants, especially if they have improved their well-being in a more objective sense?

How much weight should we put on happiness outcomes, relative to well-being consequences framed in other terms? We address this question here by considering common goals and motivations of migrants. We argue that, if we want to know whether migrants succeeded in achieving their goals, we need to consider not just success in an objective sense but also whether success (or indeed failure) in an objective sense was accompanied by subjective well-being. Situations involving disjunctures in that respect are especially interesting. If objective success leads to happiness, then it might seem that consideration of happiness does not add much to our knowledge; more conventional/established perspectives on migration might seem sufficient. But we surely gain important insight if we find that migrants are unhappy despite success in an objective sense; we might also encounter instances where migrants are happy despite not achieving their goals.

When migration is motivated mainly by economic aspiration, there are grounds for expecting that migration might not lead to increased happiness (or perhaps even lead to lower happiness), irrespective of objective gains. Money matters for happiness mainly via the way money (especially income) is connected with status (e.g. Easterlin 2003); if immigrants increase their income in an absolute sense but end up in a lower social position in the destination country (compared to their position in the origin country), the consequence of migration for their happiness might well be negative (or at least non-positive). Prospects for that sort of outcome are supported by strong evidence from Stillman et al. (2015); other studies (though with weaker designs) reporting similar results include Knight and Gunatilaka (2010) and Bartram (2013). In scenarios of that sort, it seems perverse to evaluate the overall migration outcome as positive, giving weight to objective (income) gains while disregarding subjective (happiness) consequences. Money has instrumental value, not substantive value;

scepticism about the contrary view is deeply rooted, extending back at least to Midas. The belief that one would be happier if only one were richer results from a ‘focusing illusion’, leading to a ‘misallocation’ of time (Kahneman et al. 2006).

On what grounds would migrants be exempt from judgements of that sort? One possibility is that their main goal might be to support the well-being of others (especially family members) who remain in the origin country, via remittances. That intention is surely admirable (especially insofar as it involves self-sacrifice), but to evaluate the migration outcome in this case we would want to know about the actual consequences for recipients’ well-being – in subjective as well as objective terms. Regarding objective consequences, migration research is generally quite positive (e.g. Semyonov and Gorodzeisky 2008). Evidence on the impact of migration and remittances on subjective well-being is mixed, however. Generally positive outcomes are evident for Bangladeshi families with migrant members living in the UK and Malaysia (Joarder et al. 2017). Jones (2013), however, found that the money gained via remittances raised happiness among recipients, but the absence of the migrant family member reduced happiness even more. That latter point is also strongly implied in ethnographic research by Smith (2006) and Dreby (2010), though they do not explicitly consider happiness. At a minimum, positive outcomes cannot be assumed even when remittances are substantial.

Of course, many migrants have reasons for migration that have little or nothing to do with money. Another common motivation is reunification with family – to join a spouse, or a parent, or some other close relative. Separation from family might count as one of the main costs of economic migration; a husband or wife might then decide to join the spouse who migrated earlier. In family reunification migration, the goal is achieved via the migration itself (not by subsequent actions) – so success in regard to

the core motivation might seem obvious. There are of course costs (economic and non-economic, e.g. separation from *other* family members, perhaps including siblings and parents), and the costs might include secondary consequences of migration: perhaps the employment available after migration is less attractive (financially and in other respects) than what was available before migration. On the other hand, the secondary consequences might be positive: employment prospects might improve, and in other respects conditions in the destination might be more 'liveable'.

The complexity of the changes that follow from migration help again to demonstrate the usefulness of asking about the happiness of migrants: it would be hard for the researcher to add up positive and negative changes in an objective sense – so, better to let the migrant evaluate things for him/herself and give her/his own (subjective) evaluation of life after migration. The advantages of this approach are apparent in further consideration of the complexity associated with family reunification. Someone seeking to join a spouse living in another country is likely hoping to re-establish the relationship as it was prior to migration. That goal is probably achieved in many instances, at least to some extent (and possibly fully). But living in another country – with different institutions, different culture, etc. – is likely to change the relationship as well, especially (for heterosexual couples) by affecting gender relations (e.g. Pessar 1999). There is no need to assume those changes would be negative, though migration perhaps commonly puts strains on the relationship at least initially. But the possibility of negative impacts on the relationship (as against the success of family reunification in an objective sense, achieved via the act of migration itself) is worth investigating. We can then consider: if family reunification via migration has led to unhappiness in the relationship, is it successful? That question might answer itself, even if there might be other aspects of well-being to consider (e.g.

the well-being of children). At a minimum, we should not assume that family reunification migration generally enhances migrants' well-being; that question should be addressed empirically, in part via investigation of the migrants' happiness.

Is happiness relevant when migration isn't 'voluntary'?

Intuitively, happiness might seem like a reasonable concern when individuals have met their more basic survival needs (perhaps in the sense of some sort of Maslow hierarchy); when one's basic needs are met, there is scope for questions of the sort where one wonders whether one would be happier pursuing a career as an investment banker or as a carpenter. Evaluating the (likely) consequences of a choice in situations where one can perceive that a choice among viable alternatives is in fact available. In some instances, migration is the result of a choice in that sense: one's basic needs are met, but even so one imagines that life would be better elsewhere (Ottonelli and Torresi 2013).

But the concept of 'forced migration' – a staple of migration studies – shows that in many instances migration is not plausibly seen as a matter of choice. When migrants meet the legal standards pertaining to refugee law (the Geneva Convention and its extensions), one should conclude that there was a substantial threat of persecution. But migration is sometimes 'forced' in ways that go well beyond the prevailing legal categories. Migration can be considered 'forced' insofar as one's 'vital subsistence needs' would otherwise be unmet (Gibney 2004; Betts 2010); the situations that constitute threats in this regard are quite diverse and include civil wars (especially when leading to economic collapse), severe environmental degradation, and perhaps even economic convulsions resulting from globalization processes (e.g. free trade agreements). One might also take the view that migration is reasonably considered forced in situations where people *could* meet their subsistence needs but only in ways

that amount to violations of their human rights (e.g. via forced labour) – a scenario equivalent to the possibility that persecuted dissidents could avoid persecution not only via emigration but by ceasing their dissent (Bartram 2015; Zolberg et al. 1989).

To what extent is happiness a relevant concern in situations of this sort? The answer is facilitated in part by the fact that one cannot draw a dichotomy between voluntary and forced migration; the situations indicated above demonstrate that we must think in terms of a continuum (Richmond 1994). In some instances, migration is ‘forced’ in a very direct sense: if someone does not leave, he or she will die or face threats to basic components of well-being (starve, be shot, lose one’s house in a bombing, etc.). In situations of that sort, happiness is probably not relevant to the question of whether migration led to a ‘successful’ outcome. What matters, at least in the first instance, is only whether the threats to basic well-being are mitigated. If one leaves Syria out of fear that the next bombing raid might destroy one’s apartment block, it doesn’t matter much whether one is happier or less happy in a refugee camp in Turkey. Perhaps happiness is likely to increase in situations of that sort; conditions in refugee camps might be very difficult, but the point of leaving was that conditions at home were also very difficult. But it would hardly matter much if happiness *decreased* with a move to a refugee camp; what matters is only survival and basic well-being. Having said that, researchers and others would surely care about the happiness of what Betts (2010) calls ‘survival migrants’ *after* their survival has been secured. There is virtually no research at all on the happiness specifically of refugees/forced migrants (the only exceptions seem to be Fozdar and Torezani 2008 and Veronese et al. 2012).

Again, however, the scope of ‘forced migration’ extends beyond instances that fall at that end of the continuum invoked by researchers who use the concept. Some instances of migration are reasonably described as ‘forced’ (to some extent) despite not

involving a direct threat to survival. Richmond uses the term ‘economic refugees’ and refers to ‘persons forced to migrate as a result of bankruptcies, total economic collapse, chronic unemployment, and loss of livelihood without safety-net social security measures’ (1994: 69). Similarly, Bacon (2008) analyses migration induced by impoverishment resulting from processes of globalization, e.g. ‘free trade’ regimes such as NAFTA. Using the term ‘forced migration’ here is partly intended to support an argument saying that when other countries (e.g. the USA) are primarily responsible for the processes that lead to impoverishment (e.g. in Mexico), those countries have an obligation to admit the people whose livelihoods were disrupted. In situations of this sort, people who migrate might be able instead to simply accept a significant (perhaps even drastic) decline in their standard of living. The choice to migrate instead is understandable as resulting partly from the constraints introduced by distant powerful actors – as well as partly from the individual’s discretion, i.e., again, one could choose not to move and instead absorb the ‘hit’ to one’s standard of living.

Situations like this are common; they form the basis for the well-known ‘world-systems’ theory of migration (Sassen 1988). Is happiness important when (potential) migrants face this sort of difficult choice? Insofar as the threat to basic well-being is severe (e.g. via malnutrition), then perhaps not. But we can easily imagine less severe (though still quite difficult) situations where the happiness consequences of migrating (vs. not migrating) are indeed important – not least to the migrant. Trade-offs are likely here; someone might choose migration to avoid impoverishment, at the cost of experiencing a difficult (e.g. isolating and xenophobic) situation in the destination country that is not conducive to happiness. (Migrant workers in Persian Gulf countries could constitute an example.) Knowing (empirically) about happiness consequences in these situations seems desirable, even if their importance is not primary. Dismissing

happiness as irrelevant to this category of migrants seems like an extreme and unwarranted position.

Challenges, applications in other contexts, and future directions

To overcome the blind spots in research on the consequences of migration, the literature on migrant happiness discussed above demonstrates original insights into the degree of, and conditions, for successful migration. Even so, we are at an early stage in generating a clear picture of the overall consequences of migration for migrants and its determinants. Various challenges need to be overcome to enable further progress.

A first challenge is to establish a better understanding of how happiness measures perform in contexts that specifically pertain to migrants, particularly the cross-cultural comparability of happiness evaluations. While the current evidence shows that cultural biases generally have a small impact on estimations of happiness levels and correlates across cultures, it is necessary to look at specific cases. For instance, many studies compare Mexicans in the US to US natives or Mexican stayers. To adequately do so in terms of happiness requires the exploration of the potential biases of translation (Spanish vs. English), not answering in one's mother tongue (for immigrants answering in English), and differences/changes in response styles. To identify cultural bias in happiness measures, a multi-method approach is needed because cultural bias is difficult to isolate from cultural effects, meaning that all possible methods have their strengths and weaknesses (Exton et al. 2015). Promising approaches include vignette studies (i.e., correcting people's self-reported happiness by their estimation of the happiness of various described hypothetical persons), experimental techniques (e.g., whether Mexican immigrants answer differently to happiness measures in English than in Spanish; see e.g., Lolle and Andersen 2016), and

exploring the correspondence of happiness evaluations with other (preferably objective) indicators of well-being, such as depression. Additionally, it is important to establish which happiness measure introduces the lowest cultural bias.

A second challenge is the collection of better data concerning immigrants' outcomes in general, and their happiness outcomes in specific. Most migration research is oriented on the migration outcomes for receiving countries rather than for migrants (referred to by Castles 2010 as the receiving country bias). One reason is that it is difficult to collect panel data tracing the situations of individual international migrants before and after migration and natural experiments are sparse (for exceptions concerning happiness outcomes, see Mähönen, Leinonen, and Jasinskaja-Lahti 2013; Stillman et al., 2015). Most existing research resorts to assessing migration consequences using data collected in multiple countries and comparing immigrants' situations to those of their non-migrated counterparts ("stayers") from the same home country and preferably having similar demographic characteristics. One limitation of this approach relates to 'migrant selectivity'; people become migrants in part by virtue of being quite different from others – for example, a higher 'achievement orientation' and lower 'affiliation motivation' (Boneva and Frieze 2001), a greater appetite for risk (Jaeger et al. 2010), and/or relatively low happiness given their socio-demographic characteristics (Graham and Markowitz 2011). This endogeneity problem is only partially solved by methods to limit potential self-selection issue, such as the inclusion of control variables or instrumental variables (Safi 2010), two-stage 'treatment-effects' models (Bartram 2013), or matching procedures (IOM 2013; Nikolova and Graham 2015), which implies that studies lacking pre-migration data have limited leverage in estimating the causal effects of migration. Another limitation is that these types of studies typically use general social surveys (e.g., European Social Survey) which hardly

include specific questions on issues migration scholars are typically concerned with (e.g., identity and acculturation) and have limited representability regarding the migrant population. Concerning happiness, this issue could be solved by incorporating a happiness measure in migration surveys that have a panel structure or involve comparisons between migrants and stayers (e.g., the Mexican Migration Project). Yet, cautious inferences need to be made even when panel designs covering both the migrant's pre and post migration happiness are being used. Migrants may experience a happiness dip in the years before migrating (Melzer and Muffels 2012), followed by a temporary peak shortly after migration (e.g. Obucina 2013). Preferably, therefore, data collections on migrant happiness need to cover various years before and after migration.

When exploring the determinants of immigrant happiness, a third challenge relates to the potential appearance of correlated measurement errors when predicting happiness by other subjective measures such as perceived discrimination because certain individuals may have a general tendency for more positive or negative perceptions and/or answering patterns to subjective measures. The consequence may be the overestimation of the role of subjective predictors in general, and of certain subjective predictors in particular, in predicting happiness. To overcome this bias to some extent, a rich set of (subjective) controls needs to be modelled, particularly controls for mood and optimism as answering tendencies mostly depend on a person's mood and general optimism level (Hendriks, De Vroome, and Burger 2017).

To what extent does happiness work differently for migrants?

To some extent, happiness functions differ between individuals and groups. For instance, income is a stronger determinant of happiness for poor people than for rich people (Layard, Mayraz, and Nickell 2008). This heterogeneity merits further

exploration in connection with migration and migrants, especially insofar as we are motivated to learn what domains contribute the most to the happiness of migrants. Questions of this sort are explored via regression models that use interaction terms to test for different strengths of association (Bartram 2011; Olgiati et al. 2013).

The happiness functions of migrants may differ from those of the general population for three reasons. First, due to ‘migrant selectivity’, migrants are likely to be quite different from people in general. It is quite plausible that personality traits of this sort are associated with happiness – and if those traits are also associated with other determinants of happiness (which also seems likely) then one would expect that the contribution of those other determinants could be different for migrants, relative to their contribution for non-migrants. Second, the migration event itself generates a different happiness function. Compared with non-migrants, migrant happiness is likely to depend more on acculturation, discrimination, and social skills needed to rebuild a social and economic network, which possibly means that other factors become less important for happiness. Third, the happiness of migrants may depend more strongly on the specific reasons that instigated their move (i.e., income for economic migrants, the relationship with one’s partner for ‘love’ migrants, etc.). Hence, it cannot be automatically assumed that findings from the general happiness literature apply to migrants: we need more fine-grained information on what matters most for the happiness of this quite distinct group of people. One could also anticipate additional complexity insofar as ‘migrants’ are themselves a diverse population – people migrate for different reasons, end up in different types of destinations, etc.

Extending the happiness angle to natives and stayers

The consideration of the happiness consequences of migration is also relevant in estimating the consequences for other migration stakeholders than migrants. Given that migration is frequently a family decision, one important group in this respect are significant others left behind in the home country. The economic consequences for families with a migrating family member, via remittances, is well established (e.g., Rapoport and Docquier 2006). Yet, it remains unknown whether the received remittances outweigh the physical separation from a family member. Happiness regressions can isolate the impact of remittances and social costs on people's experienced subjective well-being outcomes. Although remittances are important for happiness (Joarder et al. 2016), two small-scale studies observe non-positive happiness outcomes among families left behind in Ecuador and Bolivia, respectively, as the negative consequences of family separation outweigh the economic welfare gains from received remittances in these cases (Borraz, Pozo and Rossi 2010; Jones 2014).

At the societal level, various studies have explored the effects of immigration in specific domains, particularly the economic domain (e.g., Dustman et al. 2010), but little is known about the overall effect of immigration on the subjective well-being of native populations. Initial evidence suggests that immigration in general has a small positive impact on the well-being of the native population in various European countries (Betz and Simpson 2013; Akay, Constant, and Giulietti 2014). To establish a better understanding of the consequences of migration for these various migration stakeholders, more research using better designs in a greater variety of contexts is needed – in particular, via explorations that consider the impact on particular groups (beyond the average impact for an entire society). Another stakeholder group that

deserves attention is the broader population of the sending society (perhaps equivalent to the notion of a ‘brain drain’).

Extending the happiness angle to migration behaviour

Castles (2010) notes that “we still lack a body of cumulative knowledge to explain why some people become mobile while most do not” (p. 1566). We have argued that the attainment of greater well-being and happiness are key overarching goals for the various types of migrants that migrate at least partly voluntarily (economic migrants, ‘lifestyle’ migrants, migrants for family reunification, etc.). Then, one way forward to better understand migration behaviour is to consider happiness expectations. Of course, happiness expectations are no perfect predictors of voluntary migration behaviour because well-being also includes other elements than happiness and migration behaviour depends on structural migration barriers and opportunities, people’s risk attitudes, and the tendency to postpone migration decisions. Moreover, many people who could benefit from migration simply have never considered the possibility of migration. Nevertheless, when making important life decisions, empirical evidence shows that happiness expectations are major predictors of choice behaviour, thereby outperforming economic and purely objective predictors (Benjamin et al. 2012; 2014). Similarly, the consideration of happiness *expectations* can bring important insights into the extent to which people seek to maximize their happiness by migrating and what factors are important for these happiness expectations.

Moreover, people’s pre-migration happiness *levels* are important predictors of migration intentions. Studies on various populations consistently show that relatively unhappy people given their socio-economic conditions are more willing to migrate and relative unhappiness is found to be a stronger predictor of migration intentions than

income (Graham and Markowitz 2011; Chindarkar 2014; Cai et al. 2014; Otrachshenko and Popova 2014). Moreover, Lovo (2014) demonstrates that happiness is a useful predictor for the preferences over migration destinations of those with an intent to migrate. This should not be interpreted as that people explicitly compare the happiness between their potential destination countries but as that happiness captures aspects of the destination country that are valued by migrants but not captured by the conventionally considered migration drivers. It remains unclear however whether the role of happiness levels extends from migration intentions to actual migration behaviour.

The instrumental role of happiness for improving domain outcomes

Subjective well-being research shows that greater happiness elicits a range of advantages for individuals and society, such as economic, social, and health benefits (for a review; see De Neve et al. 2013) as well as openness towards other values, ideas, and cultures (Fredrickson 2001; Frederick and Johnson 2005). Although it has not yet been explored whether these advantages hold for migrants specifically, it can be reasonably assumed that the general advantages of greater happiness also apply to immigrant populations, ranging from greater productivity of migrant workers to reduced social tensions and polarization in society. Alternatively, greater immigrant happiness may lead to greater inflows of immigrants. Exploring the consequences of immigrant happiness is an important avenue for future research to stimulate a more well-informed debate about how to make the most out of migration.

Conclusion

Migrants move in search of a better life and thus commonly anticipate positive outcomes for themselves and/or their families. They do not necessarily achieve their intended outcomes, however, particularly because they often have incomplete/inaccurate information about how their lives will be and develop in the destination country and commonly experience unexpected challenges. This suggests that migrants could benefit of support in achieving optimal consequences of migration, which depends on their migration decisions and their post-migration developments. To make well-informed migration decisions, migrants benefit of an evidence-based answer to the question: To what extent (and under what conditions) do the people who migrate experience these changes as *positive*? Understanding under what conditions migrants achieve optimal migration outcomes also support migrants and policy makers in developing orientations/policies to optimize the migrant's post-migration well-being development.

The issue we identified, however, is that the broad consequences of migration have rarely figured as an explicit object of research because such all-encompassing consequences (i.e., well-being) are difficult to quantify. A notable divide is between objective and subjective forms of well-being. The objectively and subjectively experienced consequences of migration may substantially diverge (see e.g., Stillman et al. 2015), which implies that a coherent notion of well-being must extend beyond its objective dimension. Assessing the outcomes via objective conditions (indexes) also has various empirical limitations, which particularly relate to its limited coverage and the externally determined preferences and outcomes. This makes it infeasible to construct an accurate summary indicator of migration consequences based on objective conditions. Alternatively, a possible subjective approach to evaluating migration

consequences are direct choice evaluations (e.g., satisfaction with the move or feelings of regret). However, these also have limited accuracy because of its susceptibility to cognitive biases (e.g., cognitive dissonance).

We have identified that a promising approach to circumvent these limitations is to target how immigrants themselves feel about and evaluate their lives (i.e., their *subjective well-being*) via their self-reported happiness and life satisfaction – and comparing these judgements over time or compared with (matched) stayers. The strength of these happiness/life satisfaction measures is that being happy and having a satisfactory life is a fundamental and overarching (but less concrete) goal for all types of migrants (with the exception of the small proportion of migrants that fall at the “forced” end of the forced-voluntary migration continuum). Although these happiness measures are not exempt of the typical limitations of subjective measures (e.g., cultural and language biases), they have proven valuable in estimating the broad consequences of migration and in sorting out the relative importance of specific domains to the overall migration causes and consequences. However, the literature linking migration to happiness is still in its infancy with most studies providing correlational rather than causal evidence. The accuracy of the early findings on the intersection of migration and happiness must be tested using more advanced longitudinal and experimental research designs and in other contexts. The discussed contributions of the subjective well-being approach can also be applied to research on other migration stakeholders (e.g., the consequences of migration for natives), fields (e.g., internal migration), and types of evaluations (e.g., the effects of migration-related policies) than the ones discussed in this article. In conclusion, assessing the broad consequences of migration using subjective well-being is an important new frontier in better understanding the consequences of migration and beyond.

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