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Bringing Happiness Into the Study of Migration and Its Consequences: What, Why, and How?

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ABSTRACT

To support migrants and policy makers in making more of migration, the migrant's overall outcome should be at the core of migration research. Effective evaluation of the consequences of migration is impaired, however, by a lack of a clear framework to examine all-encompassing outcomes. This review paper paves the way for a better understanding of whether and under what conditions migration benefits migrants (and others) and lays the foundation for the study of migrant happiness by specifying what insights research on migrants' subjective well-being (happiness) can provide for advancing the study of international migration and its consequences.

KEYWORDS

Happiness; subjective well-being; life satisfaction; migrants; migration outcomes

Migration scholars have a long-standing interest in migrants' well-being. This interest is grounded in a conventional and commonsense view that people seek to migrate to improve their own and/or their families' lives. To what extent—and under what conditions—are migrants indeed better off as a result of migration? This question, alluding to the impact of migration at the broadest level of well-being, remains largely unanswered (Zuccotti, Ganzeboom, & Guveli, 2017) despite abundant research on various domain outcomes for migrants (e.g., economic gains). We argue, however, that this comprehensive evaluation of migrant well-being should be at the core of migration research to foster a better understanding of the overall outcomes of migration experienced by migrants and the *determinants* of those outcomes. Concerning those determinants, a broad measure of well-being can reveal the importance of each individual domain to the overall outcome (i.e., what domains are most important?) and the merits of specific domains (e.g., what acculturation strategy benefits migrants most?), after which trade-offs between domain outcomes can be considered (e.g., how much extra income compensates for a migrant's reduced social status in the host country?). The resulting

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information will reveal which domains deserve priority and under what conditions positive outcomes are achieved. This knowledge is essential for prospective migrants in making informed migration decisions for existing immigrants in developing accurate postmigration orientations and for policy makers in developing policies to support immigrants in achieving greater benefits of migration.

A primary reason for this blind spot, we argue, is that the study of migration generally lacks a clear vision regarding what kind of metric could be used to evaluate migrant well-being in a comprehensive manner. In the broad social sciences, a rapidly emerging metric used to comprehensively evaluate human well-being is how people feel about and evaluate their lives (i.e., their *subjective well-being*), which is assessed via their self-reported happiness and/or life satisfaction.¹ Likewise, the authors of the *World Migration Report* (IOM, 2013) state that to better understand the outcomes of migration for immigrants' well-being, "there is a need for further inquiry into the factors that contribute to subjective well-being" (p. 38). However, this call has not been accompanied by a comprehensive outline of the exact contributions and limitations of a happiness angle in the distinct context of migration, and therefore, it has remained unclear to migration scholars what insights a happiness angle can (and cannot) provide to advance the understanding of migration (outcomes). Some migration scholars have been skeptical about using this framework, and the significant potential of this happiness angle for understanding migrant well-being has remained largely unexploited.

The current paper fills this void by outlining what insights the emerging happiness approach can provide to advance the study of international migration, particularly in relation to the consequences of migration for migrants. This study thereby contributes to the development of a clear framework that facilitates empirical evaluation of migration's consequences at the broadest level of well-being. This paper proceeds as follows. In preparation for identifying how the use of subjective well-being (happiness) can specifically contribute to measuring migrant well-being, the next section provides a brief overview of typical work investigating migrants' outcomes of migration, and we discuss its limitations. In the third section, we introduce the field of happiness studies by discussing *what* happiness is, *why* migrant happiness is important to consider, and *how* happiness can be measured. We engage with the skepticism we would expect to find among migration scholars in particular, and we summarize some of the key findings regarding happiness among migrants. In the fourth section, the challenges to research on migrant happiness are discussed, and we consider possible directions for research that transcend the question of happiness outcomes for migrants. The final section summarizes the value of a "happiness" angle in migration research.

Blind spots in research on the consequences of migration

Migrants naturally anticipate that moving abroad will improve their quality of life and/or that of their families. This notion is evident in earlier work grounded in

neoclassical economic assumptions about rational decision-making and revealed preferences (Harris & Todaro, 1970); it is superficially plausible insofar as one imagines that migration is generally a voluntary endeavor (if it did not make the migrants better off, then why would they choose it?) involving movement from poorer countries to wealthier countries (given the choice, who would not want to live “here”?).

Of course, for many migrants, migration does in fact lead to significant improvements in their lives and/or in the lives of family members and others in the origin country. To a significant extent, benefits come in a straightforward economic form: Many (economic) migrants achieve significant economic success in the destination country (Nikolova & Graham, 2015), their children often achieve educational success (Zuccotti et al., 2017), and family members or others who remain in the origin country benefit primarily via remittances. Migrants moving for other reasons often gain significant benefits as well; for instance, most migrants moving for family reunification satisfy an important social need by living closer to particular family members. Additionally, benefits related to the macro-environment are often evident, such as positive changes in migrants’ (perceived) freedom (Nikolova & Graham, 2015) and gender relations (Pessar, 1999).

There should be no surprise, however, in finding that migration proves nonbeneficial for many migrants. Migration decisions are commonly based on incomplete information about the consequences of migration because most migrants have never previously lived in or traveled to the destination country. They sometimes receive overly positive information from the media or from immigrants in the destination country who are reluctant to reveal their disappointing outcomes to people in their home country (Mahler, 1995). Imperfect decisions may also follow from numerous systematic cognitive biases (Schkade & Kahneman, 1998).

The idea that migration can lead people into situations characterized by challenge and difficulty is deeply embedded in some of the core concepts used by migration scholars—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, a lack of social acceptance, and inadequate knowledge can combine to limit immigrants’ prospects for full participation in core institutions. Immigrants commonly participate less in politics, even after accounting for differences in income and other personal characteristics (Ramakrishnan & Espenshade, 2001). Their incomes are often lower than those of similarly qualified natives because their qualifications and previous experience are discounted by employers. Immigrants often experience increased social isolation, at least temporarily, and the resettlement process is often plagued with conflicts and difficulties (Sluzki, 1979). Depending on context, these disadvantages sometimes persist into the second generation (Portes & Rumbaut, 2006).

Migration researchers have also considered consequences that involve aspects of migrants’ subjective experiences. An important example has to do with migrants’ deteriorating perceptions of their living conditions as their length of stay progresses;

for instance, many immigrants experience declining political trust and declining satisfaction with the host society (Hendriks, Burger, & De Vroome, 2018b). In some ethnographic and qualitative studies, immigrants have given voice to their pain and regret, for example, for leaving children and other family members behind and concern about their well-being, even given substantial remittances (Dreby, 2010).

At a minimum, there are significant *costs* associated with migration (e.g., separation from family and friends, lower socioeconomic position in society, sense of dislocation, and homesickness); one can also easily perceive limits to the benefits of migration (e.g., unmet expectations and adaptation to better circumstances). The growing literature that exposes these issues helps dispel what might be considered a “commonsense” assumption that migration is obviously beneficial for migrants. Potential discrepancies between expected and experienced outcomes of migration imply a need to directly measure migrants’ outcomes instead of relying merely on the information available via revealed preferences.

The literature reviewed above regarding the consequences of migration in separate domains (discrimination, economic mobility, etc.) is valuable on its own terms. However, as a means of evaluating the consequences of migration for migrants more broadly, one can perceive limitations. One might wonder, what do these various positive and negative domain outcomes add up to? Current research on migration contributes *components* of an answer, but it does not generally provide an answer that successfully integrates those components. Overcoming this blind spot requires a good understanding of the strengths and limitations of the approaches that could be taken—and that some pioneering studies have taken—to evaluate outcomes at such an inclusive level. We discuss two common approaches here.

Direct choice evaluations

Several scholars have evaluated whether migration ultimately benefits the migrant by asking migrants themselves to evaluate their own migration decisions, particularly in terms of whether they feel satisfied with the way things have worked out or perceive their current quality of life to be better than their premigration quality of life (e.g., De Jong, Chamrathirong, & Tran, 2002). These are practical approaches because they only require postmigration data, but they also have serious limitations. A major one relates to the human tendency to eliminate the discomfort of dissonance between one’s choice and its outcome by developing overly favorable perceptions of one’s outcome (Festinger, 1957). This self-deception might improve one’s outcome (e.g., by reducing feelings of disappointment and self-blame) but also leads migrants to consciously or unconsciously report positively biased evaluations of their migration outcomes.

Objective situational changes

Another approach to assessing the overall outcome of migration is to objectively compare the migrant’s postmigration living conditions to his or her premigration

conditions. These comparisons are made by tracking migrants across countries or by comparing migrants' living conditions to those of observably similar nonmigrants from their home country ("stayers"). Some studies simply focus on the living conditions that motivated migration in the first place, such as economic mobility for economic migrants and the educational mobility of migrants' children (Zuccotti et al., 2017). It can be misleading, however, to make inferences about whether migration has been successful based only on the achievement of the main goals of migration. For instance, people who migrate 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, however, their main concerns typically come to include social factors such as social exclusion, cultural/identity issues, and status (Piore, 1979). A potential consequence of these shifting preferences is that some migrants experience a negative migration outcome in terms of overall well-being, despite having achieved a more specific migration objective.

Even if we consider a wider range of objective living conditions (e.g., housing and safety conditions), some limitations remain. Scholars who use objective living conditions to make inferences about the overall outcomes of migration generally assume, at least implicitly, that people feel better and perceive themselves as having a better life when they enjoy better living conditions. Good living conditions indeed improve the likelihood that people will feel good. A significant body of research demonstrates conclusively, however, that a significant proportion of people with an objectively good life are unhappy (and vice versa)—a point that Graham (2009) illustrates via reference to the paradox of "happy peasants and miserable millionaires." A key reason for this discrepancy is that objective accounts of well-being do not capture individual differences in the experience and evaluation of objectively similar situations and other subjective factors (e.g., self-esteem). Productive research might emerge via the following questions: Do discrepancies between objectively and subjectively experienced well-being also occur frequently for migrants? If so, how much weight should we put on migrants' objective outcomes relative to their subjective outcomes?

In addition to these conceptual issues, there are important empirical limitations to objective accounts of well-being. It would be difficult to conceive of a single or even a multidimensional measure of objective well-being that summarizes 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 country level (e.g., with the Human Development Index, HDI), it is a significant obstacle at the individual level to such an extent that there is no widely used individual-level index of objective well-being. A key obstacle has to do with the 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 the migrant's own preferences.

In sum, the discussion above suggests the importance of considering what outcomes migrants ultimately care about and, more generally, the exploration of alternative or, at least, complementary angles for evaluating the broad consequences of migration for well-being.

Toward a happiness angle in evaluating migration consequences

Social scientists increasingly consider the concept of happiness to be well positioned to evaluate people's (subjectively experienced) well-being (OECD, 2013). Migration scholars may be skeptical, however, about whether happiness really matters to migrants, especially those who could not meet certain basic needs in their home country. Given that the migration context is distinct in many respects, migration scholars may also wonder to what extent and how happiness can overcome the shortcomings of the approaches discussed above in capturing the overall outcome of migration (by means of the concept or the measure). In this section, we engage with this skepticism and make the case that a happiness angle also merits attention in evaluating migration consequences. This section begins by introducing the concept of happiness and discussing the importance of happiness for migrants. Then, we introduce the most commonly used happiness measures and discuss their strengths and weaknesses. We close this section by clarifying why one cannot simply extrapolate from insights from the general happiness literature and by discussing some initial insights from the literature on migrant happiness.

Concept

Happiness refers to a person's disposition to feel good, which includes the extent to which an individual experiences both affectively pleasant and cognitively satisfying feelings (Veenhoven, 2000). The cognitive component relates to a person's contentment with life and is commonly referred to as life satisfaction. The affective component relates to the extent to which an individual experiences pleasant moods and emotions (e.g., cheerfulness) as opposed to unpleasant ones (e.g., sadness). Happiness thus focuses on how people themselves feel and evaluate their lives on the whole; it is commonly referred to as subjective well-being because it captures well-being in a subjective and comprehensive way.

How important is happiness for migrants?

For migrants whose basic survival needs were already met in the origin country, migration can be understood as a choice intended to result in a better life elsewhere. Voluntary migrants typically refer to specific motives when asked about their reasons for migration, such as improving their financial situation, living in a more "livable" environment, or living closer to family members. Those commonly mentioned motives are not convincingly conceived as goals that are valuable primarily in their own right. Money, in particular, is best considered as having

instrumental value rather than substantive value; skepticism about the contrary view is deeply rooted, extending back to at least the ancient Greek legend of Midas. Whatever specific goal is expressed by migrants, it matters not only whether that goal is achieved but also whether it leads migrants to a better life experience. Conceptually, then, happiness is well suited to providing information about the broader consequences of migration for well-being.

That perspective has merit even when migrants do not express their goals explicitly in terms of happiness. The notion that people are strongly (even if not exclusively) driven by happiness maximization is confirmed in studies by economists who show that happiness expectations are major predictors of choice behavior when making important life decisions such as whether to migrate (Benjamin, Heffetz, Kimball, & Rees-Jones, 2014). These findings are likely to be generalizable to international migrants from both developed and developing countries, given that feeling happy is a core goal in virtually all cultures (even if more in some cultures than in others and even though the road to happiness differs between cultures to some extent; Exton, Smith, & Vandendriessche, 2015).

In this light, some well-being scholars argue that good living conditions constitute individuals' *opportunities* to experience high well-being but are not well-being outcomes in themselves (Veenhoven, 2000). Others argue that objective forms of well-being do have intrinsic value; Nussbaum and Sen (1993) show the deficiency of contentment with the happiness of a "hopeless beggar" who has somehow become reconciled to his or her fate. Even so, if migrants achieve success in an objective sense but feel less happy, caution may be warranted before concluding that migration has led to an overall successful outcome for the migrants. That observation by no means suggests that scholars' concern with migrants' objective situations is somehow misplaced. However, if we cannot dismiss objective gains (and losses) achieved via migration, we should likewise be reluctant to dismiss the consequences of migration for subjectively experienced well-being. Is happiness also relevant when migration is not "voluntary"? The concept of "forced migration" shows that in many instances migration cannot plausibly be seen as purely 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. However, 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 (Betts, 2010); the situations that constitute threats in this regard are quite diverse and include civil wars, severe environmental degradation, and perhaps even economic convulsions resulting from globalization processes (e.g., free trade agreements). Migration is also reasonably considered to be forced in situations in which people *could* meet their subsistence needs but only in ways that amount to violations of their human rights (e.g., via forced labor)—a scenario equivalent to the possibility that persecuted dissidents could avoid persecution not only via emigration but also by ceasing their dissent (Bartram, 2015).

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 establish 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 initially, is only whether the threats to survival are mitigated. Having said that, researchers and others surely care about the happiness of what Betts (2010) calls "survival migrants" *after* their survival has been secured.

Again, however, the scope of "forced migration" extends beyond instances that fall at that end of the continuum. Certain 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, p. 69). In situations of this sort, people who migrate might be able to avoid migration by simply accepting a significant decline in their standard of living. The choice to migrate instead can be understood as resulting partly from the constraints introduced by distant powerful actors and partly from the individual's discretion—that is, 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. Is happiness important when (potential) migrants face this sort of difficult choice? Insofar as the threat to basic well-being is severe (e.g., malnutrition), then perhaps not. However, we can imagine less severe (though still difficult) situations in which the consequences of migrating (versus not migrating) for happiness are indeed important—not least to the migrants themselves. Trade-offs are likely present: Some people might choose migration to avoid impoverishment, but they do so 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, originating mainly in Asian countries where they face very difficult economic situations, could constitute an example. Dismissing happiness as irrelevant to this category of migrants seems an extreme and unwarranted position. Unfortunately, research that focuses specifically on the happiness of refugees/forced migrants is virtually nonexistent—an obvious opportunity for future research.

Are discrepancies between objective and subjective success common among migrants?

The consideration of happiness may not be relevant if it provides similar insights as objective measures do. By referring to the "happy peasants and miserable

millionaires” paradox, we have illustrated that people sometimes experience discrepancies between objective and subjective success. By considering certain common migration motives, we illustrate below that these types of scenarios may also occur frequently for migrants specifically.

When migration is motivated mainly by (absolute) income gain, there are grounds for expecting that migration might not lead to increased happiness, regardless of objective income gains. When someone earns enough income to make ends meet, money matters for happiness mainly because it is connected with status (Graham, 2009). While immigrants initially compare themselves to people back home, their frame of reference partially shifts toward natives and other immigrants in the destination country (Hendriks et al. 2018b). If immigrants increase their incomes in an absolute sense but end up in a lower social position in the destination country, the consequences of migration for their happiness might well be nonpositive, particularly when migration also negatively influences other important factors for happiness. From this perspective, the belief that one would be happier if only one were richer may be a “focusing illusion,” leading to potentially suboptimal decisions.

In family-reunification migration, success with regard to the core motivation might seem obvious because the goal is achieved via the migration itself. There are, of course, secondary benefits (e.g., more “livable” conditions in the destination) and costs (e.g., inferior employment prospects). The complexity of the changes again shows that it would be difficult for the researcher to sum positive and negative changes in an objective sense—thus, it would arguably be better to allow the migrant to give her/his own evaluation of life after migration in a way that circumvents cognitive dissonance biases as much as possible. The advantages of such an approach are apparent upon further consideration of the complexity associated with family reunification. Someone seeking to join a spouse living in another country likely hopes to reestablish the relationship to the state it was prior to migration. That goal is probably achieved in many instances, at least to some extent. However, living in another country—with different institutions, a different culture, and so forth—is likely to change the relationship as well, in part by affecting gender relations (Pessar, 1999). Those changes are not necessarily negative, although migration often strains the relationship, at least initially. But the possibility of negative impacts on the relationship, with consequences for one’s happiness, is worth investigating. We can then contemplate the following question: If family reunification via migration leads to unhappiness, can it be considered successful? That question might answer itself, even if there are 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 migrants’ happiness. These examples show that to know whether migrants succeeded in achieving their goals, we must consider not

only success in an objective sense but also whether success (or indeed failure) in an objective sense brought positive (or negative) changes to one's subjectively experienced well-being.

Happiness measures and its strengths and weaknesses

The most common subjective well-being measures are survey questions that ask how well one's life is going in the form of self-reported happiness or life satisfaction. Typical 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 scales ranging from 0 (completely dissatisfied/unhappy) to 10 (completely satisfied/happy). These life evaluations are strongly related, with correlations typically close to 0.70. A commonly used multi-item scale is the Satisfaction With Life Scale (SWLS). Another set of measures focuses on the affective component of happiness. In its simplest form, research participants report how often in the past few days/weeks they have experienced various feelings (e.g., the PANAS). More intensive methods target people's daily life happiness by repeatedly asking research participants over a number of days or weeks to report their daily affective experiences via "experience sampling" or "happiness diaries," after which the scores of these momentary happiness levels are summed to reflect the person's general level of affective happiness. The findings from purely affective evaluations and the more cognitively oriented life evaluations can diverge, which reflects the notion that happiness is not a unitary construct (Kahneman & Deaton, 2010).

We focus here on life evaluation measures to illustrate a number of qualities that make happiness measures effective in capturing an individual's overall well-being.

Inclusiveness

Due to the open-ended design of subjective well-being measures, no domain is a priori excluded (see, e.g., the reference to "all things considered" and "life as a whole" in the life satisfaction question presented above). While research participants do not necessarily consider all relevant aspects of life at the moment they are questioned, when reporting their happiness, people implicitly form overall life evaluations by drawing on these accumulated feelings and thoughts (OECD, 2013).

Personal preferences

The self-report feature empowers individuals to weigh for themselves the importance of different aspects of life, which means that happiness measures take into account people's own preferences instead of using arbitrarily selected and weighed indicators. This feature allows for well-being functions that differ across individuals and change within these individuals over time and place (i.e., heterogeneous preferences). This characteristic is important because individuals and (cultural) groups have their own ideas about what a good life constitutes, and these ideas may change depending on the situation. For instance, some people prefer living in

close proximity to their relatives more than others do, and economic migrants may gradually care less about economic matters after achieving certain economic goals; other concerns may then become more prominent, such as status and social exclusion (Piore, 1979).

Personal outcome evaluations

The self-report feature also empowers individuals to evaluate their own outcomes. This characteristic is important because objectively similar outcomes can be perceived in quite different ways (as previously illustrated by migrants' faltering perceptions of the host society). Differences in outcome evaluations are often driven by differences in people's aspirations and expectations that result from dissimilar reference points (i.e., social comparison groups and comparisons to the past). Likewise, the impact of events or changing circumstances on a person's subjective well-being typically weakens over time due to adaptation processes (shifting aspirations and reference points; Graham, 2009). A quality of happiness measures is that they implicitly capture adaptation processes and individual differences in aspirations and reference points.

In sum, survey questions about happiness or life satisfaction allow research participants to consider, in an integrated manner, all subjective and objective aspects relevant to their own notion of a good life. Hence, a migrant's happiness evaluation can function as a summary indicator of their experience of the objective and subjective benefits and costs of migration that truly matter to them. Accordingly, intuitively important dimensions in life, such as health, safety, economic security, and social relationships, tend to have the strongest correlations with happiness scores, which reduces the concern that happiness metrics concentrate merely on happiness but ignore other important values immigrants have. On this basis, estimated happiness functions can reveal the relative importance and merit of each considered element with regard to a migrant's (subjectively experienced) well-being. In addition, by capturing the migrant's development of different preferences and perceptions (and, in turn, changing reference points, aspirations, etc.), happiness measures can reveal a richer set of mechanisms that cause changes or differences in well-being compared with objective well-being measures. Measures focusing on the affective component of happiness 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.²

The qualities discussed above suggest that subjective well-being metrics can act as an indicator of migrants' overall migration outcomes in a way that would not be feasible for objective metrics of well-being. However, the basic framework to evaluate the well-being outcomes of migration remains the same—that is, comparing migrants' pre- and postmigration situations. A common issue in studies using such a framework is the rarity of panel data gained from individual international migrants before and after migration. Most existing research resorts to evaluating

migration consequences by comparing immigrants' situations to those of observably similar nonmigrants from their home country ("stayers"). A limitation of this approach is that one cannot fully correct for "migrant selectivity"; people become migrants in part by virtue of being quite different from others—for example, migrants tend to be relatively less happy than nonmigrants with a similar socio-economic profile (see Nikolova & Graham, 2015, and the references therein).

The main advantage of happiness measures in comparison with direct-choice evaluations (e.g., satisfaction with the move) is that happiness measures are less susceptible to self-serving biases (cognitive dissonance) because the respondent's outcome evaluation (self-reported happiness) is, by design, not directly linked to the choice to migrate. However, like direct-choice evaluations, happiness measures rely on subjective evaluations (and feelings). One sometimes encounters concerns regarding the use of subjective measures in general and the methods used to measure happiness in particular. A vast literature testing the validity of happiness measures has emerged, which we briefly summarize below (for a more extensive review and references, see OECD, 2013). Some concerns pertain 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 interpretations 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, these distortions mostly cancel out in large samples because they tend to be nonsystematic, such that they are unlikely to significantly affect findings for specific and carefully selected research questions. A specific concern of migration researchers who compare migrants to people living in or coming from other cultures may be the cross-cultural comparability of happiness measures. Potential sources of bias pertain to the imprecise translatability of happiness measures across languages and cultural differences in response styles (e.g., people in conformist cultures generally avoid answers that are at the extremes of the scale). A related concern when tracking migrants across countries is the comparability of a migrant's premigration and postmigration happiness evaluations because their response styles and interpretations of these measures may become more similar to the host country standards (e.g., migrants moving to less conformist cultures may use the scale extremes more after migration). Initial evidence suggests that linguistic and cultural biases are in most cases small, which allows for meaningful if cautious happiness comparisons across most languages and cultures (Exton et al., 2015). However, the current evidence cannot rule out cultural/linguistic biases in some specific cases.

Subjective well-being measures thus have imperfections of their own. Nonetheless, in the context of migration, we do not see a reason to diverge from the consensus reached by well-being scholars that subjective well-being measures have a sufficiently high signal-to-noise ratio to contribute new insights to research and policy (OECD, 2013).

To what extent does happiness work differently for migrants?

One may wonder whether specific research on migrant happiness is needed or whether one can rely on general insights from the happiness literature. Migrants' happiness functions may differ from those of the general population for four reasons. First, due to "migrant selectivity," migrants are likely to be quite different from the general population. Second, the migration event itself may generate a different happiness function. Compared with nonmigrants, migrants' happiness likely depends more on acculturation, discrimination, and the social skills needed to rebuild a social and economic network; other factors might thus become less important for happiness. Third, the happiness of migrants may depend more strongly on the specific reasons that instigated their move (e.g., the relationship with one's partner for family reunification migrants). Fourth, migrants' happiness continues to depend on their home-country conditions (Akay, Bargain, & Zimmermann, 2017). Hence, it cannot be automatically assumed that findings from the general happiness literature apply to migrants (Bartram, 2011): We need fine-grained information on what matters most for the happiness of this quite distinct group of people.

Initial insights from the literature on migrant happiness

The insights that can be gained from considering migrant happiness appear readily in a number of contributions. A selection of those contributions will be discussed here. Several studies help us understand the conditions under which immigrants are better off. Migrants moving to more-livable countries often become happier (in terms of both life satisfaction and affect), while nonpositive happiness outcomes are observed particularly among migrants moving to less livable countries (Hendriks, Burger, Ray, and Esipova 2018a; IOM, 2013; Nikolova & Graham, 2015). However, there are notable exceptions to this general pattern. For instance, Stillman, Gibson, McKenzie, and Rohorua (2015) analyzed the outcomes of a natural experiment in which Tongan residents hoping to move to New Zealand were entered into a migration lottery. The authors found that some years after migration, the "lucky" migrants felt less happy than the "unlucky" stayers, even though the migrants had achieved sizeable gains in their objective well-being, such as a tripling of their income.³ These findings confirm our proposition that one cannot *assume* that migrants—even those obtaining better living conditions—experience improved *subjective* well-being after migration.

Various studies have explored the determinants of migrants' happiness using life evaluation measures to examine which 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, which means that migrants may be mistaken in placing great emphasis on economic gains in their search for a happier life (Bartram, 2011). The determinants of migrant happiness go well beyond the economic domain; for instance, perceived discrimination

has a strong negative effect on migrant happiness (Safi, 2010), while acculturation has a modest but positive relation to happiness (Angelini, Casi, & Corazzini, 2015).

Several studies have focused on happiness assimilation. The happiness levels of migrants strongly though incompletely assimilate to those of the host country's native-born population (Hendriks et al., 2018a). This finding suggests that happiness measures do not simply pick up cultural differences but that happiness responds to important life events. Most happiness assimilation is experienced within the first few years after migration; migrants' happiness remains fairly stable afterward (Hendriks et al., 2018a; Safi, 2010). This pattern contradicts the assumption of conventional theories (e.g., "straight line" assimilation theory) that migrants' lives improve with their length of stay, as most migrants are believed to psychologically and culturally adapt to the home country and to have objectively improving lives (e.g., rebuilding their careers and social networks). A major reason why immigrants typically do not become happier as their length of stay progresses is that their happiness gain from improving objective circumstances is often suppressed by their faltering perceptions of their conditions in the host society. These faltering perceptions can be attributed to migrants' gradual development of higher aspirations and reference points as they habituate to the better conditions in the more developed host country and compare those conditions less to the typically inferior conditions in their country of origin (Hendriks et al., 2018b). This reasoning corresponds with the key finding of subjective well-being literature that happiness depends not only on one's *actual* living conditions but also on one's *interpretation* of these living conditions (Graham, 2009); the former would remain uncaptured when using objective metrics of well-being.

In sum, the small existing literature on migrant happiness demonstrates original insights on the degree of, and conditions for, successful migration. Specifically, it provides initial evidence for discrepancies between migrants' anticipated and experienced outcomes and between their objective and subjective well-being outcomes. It also highlights the important role of subjective processes (adaptation, changing aspirations, etc.) for migrants' perceived well-being and the potential of happiness measures to reveal the factors that are most important for migrant well-being.

Challenges, other applications, and future directions

The literature on migrant happiness is, however, at an early stage in generating a clear picture of the overall consequences of migration—and the determinants of these consequences—for migrants. Overcoming certain challenges would enable further progress.

A primary challenge is to establish a better understanding of how happiness measures perform in contexts that specifically pertain to migrants. A pressing need is to test the cross-cultural comparability of happiness evaluations (e.g., not answering in one's mother tongue) in specific cases (e.g., Mexicans in the

United States) and to identify which happiness measures introduce the least cultural bias. Additionally, while current research is focused on life evaluations, studies on affective happiness (emotional well-being) can provide a more complete overview of migrant happiness and its determinants.

A second challenge is the collection of better survey data concerning migrants' outcomes in general and their happiness outcomes in particular. Studies lacking premigration data have limited leverage in estimating the causal effects of migration because the "migrant selectivity" problem is only partially solved by methods intended to mitigate bias rooted in potential self-selection issues such as matching procedures (IOM, 2013; Nikolova & Graham, 2015). Another limitation is connected to use of general social surveys, which rarely include specific questions on the issues that are specifically of concern to migration scholars (e.g., identity and acculturation) and represent the migrant population in a limited fashion. Concerning happiness, this issue could be resolved by incorporating a happiness measure into migration surveys that have a panel structure or involve comparisons between migrants and stayers (e.g., the Mexican Migration Project). Yet, inferences need to be made cautiously even when using panel designs covering both the migrant's premigration and postmigration happiness. Migrants may experience a dip in happiness in the years before migrating followed by a temporary peak shortly after migration (Stillman et al., 2015). Preferably, therefore, panel data collection on migrant happiness must cover a range of years before and after migration, while cross-sectional data collection should include measures that are strongly associated with migrant selectivity (e.g., risk propensity).

The happiness of internal migrants, natives, and stayers

The consideration of happiness is equally important in the context of internal migration. For example, Knight and Gunatilaka (2010) highlight that internal migrants cannot be assumed to gain happiness from migration, that improved material and objective well-being does not necessarily lead to improved subjective well-being, and that subjective processes such as excessive expectations, shifting aspirations, and feelings of relative deprivation are vital determinants of migrant happiness. The notion of happiness consequences of migration is also relevant in connection with other migration stakeholders, not just the migrants themselves. Many people move abroad to support the well-being of family members who remain in the origin country via remittances. Migration research is generally quite positive regarding the consequences of migration for the living standards of the remittance recipients. However, they typically experience objective costs in various other domains. Most notably, ethnographic research suggests that happiness lost by family separation might outweigh the happiness gained from money sent as remittances (Dreby, 2010). In addition, some studies document declining educational attainment and

physical health among left-behind children and elderly parents, respectively, as well as changing intrafamily roles such as a greater responsibility for household chores and lower labor-force participation for the spouse who stays behind (Antman, 2013). Happiness regressions can isolate the impact of these various advantages and disadvantages of migration on the happiness outcomes of those who remain in the origin country. Initial evidence suggests that on average, those left behind evaluate their lives more positively after migration, but nonpositive outcomes are documented for various migration streams (see Hendriks et al., 2018a, and the references therein). In addition, those left behind typically experience increased or, at least, no reduced negative affect. Whether the negative consequences of family separation outweigh the economic welfare gains from remittances thus appears to be strongly dependent on the specific context and the considered happiness domain.

At the societal level, destination countries commonly benefit economically from immigration even if there are worries about the cultural, social, and security costs of migration. Subjective well-being evaluations can estimate the overall outcome of immigration for the host country's natives, as natives' life evaluations implicitly capture and weigh the various costs and benefits of migration. Most initial evidence suggests that immigration and the related ethnic and cultural diversity generally have a positive though marginal impact on the well-being of the native population in various European countries (e.g., Akay, Constant, Giuliatti, & Guzi, 2017), but this may not hold in every context or for more local communities (Longhi, 2014). Another stakeholder group for whom happiness has remained unstudied but that deserves attention is the broad population of the sending society; that is, equivalent to the notion of a brain gain/drain, the existence of a "happiness gain/drain" merits exploration.

Happiness and migration behavior

We have argued that attaining greater well-being and happiness is a key overarching goal for the various types of migrants who migrate at least partly voluntarily. By implication, one way to increase our understanding of migration behavior is to consider happiness expectations: To what extent do migrants seek to maximize their happiness by migrating, and what factors drive these happiness expectations?

Moreover, people's premigration happiness *levels* are relevant predictors of migration intentions. Studies of various populations consistently show that relatively unhappy people, given their socioeconomic conditions, are more willing to migrate, and that happiness is also a useful predictor of the migration destination preferences of those with an intent to migrate (Lovo, 2014). It remains unclear, however, whether the role of happiness levels extends from migration intentions to actual migration behavior.

The instrumental role of happiness

Subjective well-being research shows that greater happiness stimulates a range of advantages for individuals and society, such as economic, social, and health benefits including openness toward other values, ideas, and cultures (De Neve, Diener, Tay, & Xuereb, 2013). It would be valuable to explore whether these and/or other advantages hold for migrants specifically; these advantages may range from the greater productivity of migrant workers to reduced social tensions and polarization in society. Alternatively, greater immigrant happiness may lead to greater inflows of immigrants. Whether and how happiness can be used to stimulate better outcomes of migration for the migrants and the host society is thus an important question for future research.

Conclusions

This paper seeks to lay the foundation for investigating the happiness outcomes of immigrants and other stakeholders in migration. To improve the benefits that migrants (and others) can gain from migration, it is essential to know more about these *overall* outcomes of migration and to understand the conditions that foster positive outcomes; this knowledge can provide important input for migration decisions, migrant orientations, and policies targeting migrants' well-being. However, research on the overall outcomes of migration and the determinants of these outcomes is scarce because a clear framework to study these broad outcomes is lacking.

Investigating happiness can enhance the study of migration's consequences due to the unique characteristics of both the concept and the measurement. Conceptually, it is important to target how immigrants themselves feel about and evaluate their lives (i.e., their subjective well-being or happiness) because feeling good is a fundamental goal for all types of migrants (even if the migration of "forced" migrants is not motivated by greater happiness). Hence, happiness is a vital part of well-being. Empirically, happiness measures capture well-being in an integrated manner by allowing individuals to evaluate their own outcomes while taking into account their own preferences. This capability makes these measures valuable in estimating the broad consequences of migration and in discerning the relative importance of specific domains for the overall consequences of migration. Accordingly, research on migrant happiness can stimulate discussions among migration scholars about whether—and under which conditions—migration benefits (or undermines) human well-being. Overall, then, this exploration leads us to conclude that happiness should be at the core of a framework evaluating the overall consequences of migration for migrants.

We have focused here on the happiness outcomes of immigrants. The value of the happiness approach extends to the study of consequences for other migration stakeholders (e.g., the host country's natives), types of migration (e.g., internal migration), types of evaluations (e.g., the effects of migration-

related policies), and migration issues (e.g., causes of migration). A happiness angle is an important new frontier in understanding the consequences (and causes) of human migration.

Notes

1. The terms subjective well-being and happiness are often used as synonyms in the well-being literature because these strongly overlapping concepts both emphasize the subjective experience of life as a whole. For simplicity, we follow this common practice.
2. Mental health is strongly related to the affective component of happiness, and many of the advantages of happiness measures also hold for the typically more demanding mental health measures.
3. This study also shows that migrants' mental-health outcomes can differ from their happiness outcomes, which reflects the notion that these are two related but different concepts.

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