

Introduction to the Special Issue 'Migration and Happiness'

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In recent years one sees rapidly increasing interest in happiness as a topic for social-science investigation. Happiness research emerged in its modern incarnation among economists; more recently there are contributions from other social scientists such as sociologists and political scientists (of course it also has more ancient roots, e.g. with extended treatment by Aristotle). This research field has also gained attention in public policy discourses, with the Stiglitz/Sen/Fitoussy report (2009) on social progress and well-being (commissioned by French president Nicholas Sarkozy) and a British "National Well-Being Project" embraced by Prime Minister David Cameron. Some academics (and much of the public) no doubt think of books on happiness as something to be found in a bookstore's "self help" section, but that perspective is increasingly inaccurate (or at least incomplete).

Happiness studies starts with a distinction between objective well-being and subjective well-being. Examples of objective well-being include income (and other material resources), health, social ties with friends/family, etc. In a conventional perspective rooted in neo-classical economics, one *assumes* that the various forms of objective well-being (particularly income) have favorable subjective consequences (a rough way of referring to the more precise term: utility). The distinctiveness of happiness studies is that it rejects this idea as an axiom, instead treating the relationship between objective factors and subjective consequences as an empirical question. Higher incomes might make people happier, but in articulating the possibility we also indicate the opposite possibility: perhaps higher incomes *don't* make people happier – in which case, we can do empirical research to determine the answer.

Some of the conclusions established in happiness research are quite striking, at least with respect to conventional economic perspectives. At any given point, people with more income are happier than those with less – but increases in income over time do not lead to greater happiness. This idea (known as the "Easterlin paradox", viz. Easterlin, 1974, 2001) rests on the notion that the association between income and happiness works primarily through income's function as a marker of status: people who have higher incomes compare themselves favorably with those who have less. These status comparisons, however, do not change to anyone's advantage when income increases for all – so economic growth generally does not contribute to greater happiness. Even upward mobility might not contribute to happiness if one then develops aspirations for further increases (Clark et al., 2008); a folk wisdom advising us that money does not buy happiness might hold some truth (at least for those with an income above a basic threshold). Other key findings are perhaps less surprising: characteristics that contribute to happiness include having close relationships, good health, not being unemployed, and religiosity (see e.g. Dolan et al., 2008).

The distinctive approach of happiness studies has been applied to a great many theoretical questions and specific social groups in recent years. It has not, however, been applied in much research on migration (exceptions include Safi, 2010, Amit, 2010, Bălăţescu, 2007, Knight & Gunatilaka, 2010). Most migration scholars focus on various objective forms of well-being, e.g.

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asking how well integrated immigrants are, the degree to which they can achieve citizenship, the security of their legal and/or residential status, etc. All of these questions are of course important in their own right. But it would be unwise to assume anything about the subjective consequences of the objective situations most migration scholars study; instead of making assumptions, we can learn much more from treating the question as an empirical one. The articles in this special issue are unified via their adoption of this mode. Sometimes the value of the exercise becomes apparent when common-sense ideas work out not to be empirically supported; in other instances we find empirical support for ideas that were hitherto “merely” common sense.

Two articles here (Melzer and Graham & Markowitz) address the question of whether migrants gain happiness from migration. This question might strike many readers as one for which an answer provided by common sense ought to be sufficient, particularly when the migrants are moving from a poorer country to a wealthier one. Even so, one might wonder: if higher incomes in general do not generally bring greater happiness, perhaps a higher income accomplished via migration is no more effective than other means of increasing one’s income (Bartram, 2011).

The issue poses a significant challenge in relation to data, one that arises for the study of migration more generally: to perform quantitative analysis, one would want panel data on migrants collected before and after migration. Data of this type are at best uncommon, and the instances that do exist do not include variables on happiness. Melzer’s work is then very interesting and compelling for its use of German panel data to gauge the consequences of migration for individuals moving from eastern to western Germany. The fact that contemporary Germany was in relatively recent years two separate countries means that east-west migration in the post-reunification period is plausibly considered an instance of international migration at least in certain key respects.

Melzer finds that German East-to-West migrants generally experience an increase in happiness. The main reason, at least for men, is that they have better employment prospects in the west: migrants find more secure jobs offering better wages, with positive consequences for happiness. This finding is convincing not least for the high quality of the statistical analysis. Perhaps not all readers will be convinced that this migration flow is a typical instance of international migration more generally – in which case one might wonder whether the findings here from the German case support a more general claim about the happiness consequences of international migration. Even so, Melzer’s article is valuable precisely for leading us to that sort of comparative thinking: instead of looking for very general assertions (“international migration leads to happiness”), we would want to consider how the happiness consequences of migration very likely depend on the contextual conditions in which it is undertaken. The value of that point extends well beyond research on migration and ought to be particularly attractive to sociologists who study happiness.

Graham and Markowitz investigate migration flows from Latin America to the US and Europe (primarily Spain), thus taking place in a context quite different from that experienced by German migrants. Here the empirical research is shaped by the constraint noted above: there are no panel data on these migration streams. One implication of this constraint is that when there is an association between two variables it is difficult to determine the direction of causation (if any): if migrants are less happy than non-migrants (stayers in the origin country, natives in the destination), one cannot know definitively whether migration made the migrants less happy or whether less happy people were more inclined to migrate.

Graham and Markowitz address this issue by investigating differences in happiness among people expressing differing intentions regarding migration. Their main finding is that people who intend to migrate are generally less happy than those who don’t. More broadly, potential migrants are “frustrated achievers”, people who have relatively high levels of objective well-being (e.g. income) but who are nonetheless dissatisfied with their situations and seek to improve them (e.g. via migration). Of course, even if migration improves their situations in objective terms, there is no guarantee that they will then experience greater levels of happiness or satisfaction.

The article by Félix Neto and Joana Neto examines SWB among returned emigrant adolescents

in Portugal. This is a topic where even common sense doesn't lead to an obvious prediction: as Neto and Neto indicate, one might expect that returning "home" would be relatively easy (particularly in comparison to outward migration), but perhaps holding that expectation renders returning migrants ill-prepared to cope with the inevitable challenges that follow a prolonged period of absence and residence elsewhere. They address this question by the comparing life satisfaction of returned migrants to that of Portuguese adolescents who do not have migration experience (stayers). Their main finding is that there is no significant difference between the two groups – perhaps lending support to the notion that return migration is in fact an easier process than outward migration. They also explore a range of factors accounting for variance in life satisfaction and find that psycho-social factors (e.g. contact with peers, feelings of mastery/control) are much more important than demographic factors.

Elizabeth Vaquera and Elizabeth Aranda investigate happiness and migrant integration as well, focusing on the experiences of immigrants in south Florida. Their article asks about the subjective consequences of transnationalism: in part because of the decreasing cost of communication and transportation, immigrants in recent decades are increasingly likely to maintain contact and involvement with their communities of origin, sometimes even returning for visits on a regular basis. Vaquera and Aranda find that subjective well-being is enhanced by transnationalism, but only if contact and involvement are maintained at a moderate level. If visits "home" are too frequent or if all of one's confidantes are in the country of origin, consequences for emotional well-being and life satisfaction are negative.

Migration is a hugely complex topic, and there are vast possibilities for research making connections between migration and happiness. A significant recent trend in migration research is to consider the migration of people who move between relatively poor countries (as against migration from poorer to wealthier countries); it would be particularly interesting to see investigation of happiness in contexts of that sort. Measurement of happiness among migrants also raises questions relating to culture, particularly when one is comparing the happiness of immigrants to that of natives; these questions are familiar in discussions of international comparisons, and research on migrants might help advance our understanding of them more generally.

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