Subjective well-being trajectories of international migrants
A longitudinal study using German panel data

Nico Stawarz, Andreas Genoni, Andreas Ette & Heiko Rüger
Does International Migration Make People Happy?

- Internationalisation of individual life courses (Erlinghagen et al. 2021)
  - Voluntary migrations in many countries worldwide each year

- Such international migrations should be meaningful for individuals’ pursuit of happiness
  - Individuals are assumed to migrate in order to improve their living conditions
  - They act to maximise and maintain their happiness/subjective well-being (SWB) (Ormel et al. 1999)
It is not as simple as that...
Does International Migration Make People Happy?

- International migrations are critical life events.

- Irrespective of motives, they can have positive (e.g. income increase) but also negative effects across life domains (e.g. „loss“ of relevant others). (e.g. Wingens et al. 2011)

- Individuals may accept negative short-term effects of migration in favour of expected positive long-term effects.
Existing Research: Mixed Findings

1. **Similar** or **lower SWB** of migrants compared to destination populations
   (Bălțătescu, 2007; Safi, 2010; Tegegne & Glanville, 2019; Bartram, 2011)

2. **Lower** or **higher SWB** of migrants compared to non-migrants in origin country
   (Bartram 2013; Baykara-Krumme & Platt 2018; Erlinghagen 2012; Guedes Auditor & Erlinghagen 2021)

- Most studies are **cross-sectional**
  - Increased risk for selectivity bias (e.g. happier individuals migrate more)
  - Lack of suitable control groups (i.e. destination population)
  - No information on pre- and post-migration effects (e.g. anticipated change, habituation)
Existing Research: Mixed Findings

1. Similar or lower SWB of migrants compared to destination population
   (Bălţătescu, 2007; Safi, 2010; Tegegne & Glanville, 2019; Bartram, 2011)

2. Lower or higher SWB of migrants compared to non-migrated counterparts
   (Bartram 2013; Baykara-Krumme & Platt 2018; Erlinghagen 2012; Guedes Auditor & Erlinghagen 2021)

3. Higher SWB of individuals after migration compared to before
   (Erlinghagen et al. 2015; Kratz 2020; Erlinghagen et al. 2020; Nowok et al. 2013; Melzer 2011)

- Retrospective questions or longitudinal but for internal migration
  - Measurement errors (e.g. Hipp 2020)
  - Strains and benefits of international migration potentially greater
Our aim is to shed more light on the SWB of internationally mobile individuals through the observation of actual international migration events.
Hypotheses
Hypotheses

Overall effect of international migration on SWB

H1  International migration positively affects SWB
    “novelty effect”; anticipated positive net-returns to migration

Euphoria & rational choice hypothesis
Hypotheses

Subjective well-being

Time around migration

2 years 1 year 0 1 year 2 years

H1
Hypotheses

Overall effect of international migration on SWB

H1  International migration positively affects SWB
    “novelty effect”; anticipated positive net-returns to migration

Complex SWB trajectories in the course of migration

H2  SWB decreases before international migration
    Dissatisfaction with current life. Planning and realising the move causes stress.
    Burdensome anticipation of losses in locational capital (e.g. close friends)

H3  After migration, SWB declines in the longer run to some extent
    Migration-related increase in SWB is only transitory (short-term) because
    individuals quickly cope with life course events and everyday life becomes normal
Hypotheses

Baseline level

Subjective well-being

Time around migration

H1

H2

H3
Hypotheses

Overall effect of international migration on SWB

H1 International migration positively affects SWB

“novelty effect”; anticipated positive net-returns to migration

Complex SWB trajectories in the course of migration

H2 SWB decreases before international migration

Dissatisfaction with current life. Planning and realising the move causes stress. Burdensome anticipation of losses in locational capital (e.g. close friends)

H3 After migration, SWB declines in the longer run to some extent

Migration-related increase in SWB is only transitory (short-term) because individuals quickly cope with life course events and everyday life becomes normal

Different SWB-outcomes by the degree of relative self-determination in the migration decision

H4 SWB particularly increases for singles and leading partners

because international migration involves complex decision-making within couples in particular, and because moving abroad can mainly fit into the life plan of only one partner, typically the “leading partner”.

Euphoria & rational choice hypothesis

Happiness dip hypothesis

Adaptation hypothesis

Self-determination hypothesis
## Expectations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role in the migration decision process</th>
<th>Degree of relative self-determination in the migration decision</th>
<th>Expected effects of international migration on SWB</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Respondent is single</td>
<td>++++</td>
<td>++++</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondent is leading partner</td>
<td>+++</td>
<td>+++</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Migration based on co-decision</td>
<td>++</td>
<td>++</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondent is trailing partner</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Decrease of positive effect*
Data and Methods
Data and Methods

• **Data:** Longitudinal survey of internationally mobile Germans (GERPS) (Ette et al. 2020)
  - Germans with past migration experience who either live abroad or in Germany
  - Probability-based sampling approach
  - 5 waves between 2017 and 2022

• **Methods:** Fixed effects (FE) panel regressions (Allison 2009; Brüderl & Ludwig 2015)

• **Model variables**
  - **Treatment:** Emigration from Germany
  - **Covariates:** Age (in years), pandemic years (w4 & w5)
  - **Outcome:** Life Satisfaction (11-point scale)

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**Analytical sample:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Migrants</th>
<th>Stayers (ref.)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Definition</td>
<td>Emigrated from GE during panel</td>
<td>Stayed in GE during panel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Migr. events</td>
<td>345</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Person-years</td>
<td>1,605</td>
<td>14,896</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Findings: Does international migration make people happy?
SWB and Migration (conventional FE panel regression)
SWB Trajectory in the Course of Migration
(distributed FE panel regression)

Still higher than pre-migration ref. level
& not subst. difference to SWB at previous time point
Does one’s role in the migration decision process matter?
# Emigration and SWB and the Degree of Relative Self-Determination

## Results

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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Respondent is <strong>single</strong></td>
<td>++++</td>
<td>✓ H4 .62 **</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondent is <strong>leading partner</strong></td>
<td>+++</td>
<td>.54 **</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Migration based on <strong>co-decision</strong></td>
<td>++</td>
<td>.44 **</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondent is <strong>trailing partner</strong></td>
<td>+</td>
<td>.18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Decrease of positive effect**

*Note. Results from separate FE panel regressions.*
Conclusion: Does international migration make people happy?
Take-Home Messages

1) **SWB increases during** international migration, and

2) slowly **declines after** migration, but **SWB surplus** tends to remain.

3) **Increases in SWB for all subgroups,**
   - **but** there is **effect heterogeneity:** smaller migration effects for individuals whose migration is arguably less self-determined.
Questions? Remarks?

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References (2)


Appendix
Robustness Check: Do we need to consider individuals’ past migration experience to interpret the findings?
Migration and SWB by Past Migration Experience

![Graph showing the relationship between previous stays abroad and subjective well-being before and after emigration.](image-url)
Migration and SWB by Past Migration Experience

Persons with one previous stay abroad

Subjects well-being

$n\text{(events)} = 98$

Persons with more than one previous stay abroad

Subjects well-being

$n\text{(events)} = 247$
Robustness Check: Is the observed happiness dip related to the upcoming migration event?
SWB Trajectory in the Course of Migration (extended)

Happiness dip seems short-termed. → anticipation effect?

Ette & Erlinghagen (2021), same data: Only 17% of emigrants report dissatisfaction with life in Germany as migration motive.