

Life satisfaction of immigrants across Europe: The role of social contacts and country of origin

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Introduction

Research on immigrants' assimilation is widespread both in the United States and Europe. While it has been extensively studied how immigrants behave compared to natives in terms of employment, earnings, educational levels and other objective socio-economic indicators, few studies have focussed on immigrants' perception of their status and their subjective wellbeing. This is even more the case for Europe where migration, health and well being have been rather understudied (Rechel et al. 2011). This is unfortunate as growing shares of European populations are of migrant origin. Not including them in analyses on wellbeing does not do justice to the growing ethnic diversity in many European countries (de Valk et al., 2012).

In this study we focus on the immigrants' life satisfaction across Europe. Human perception is fundamental to the definition of wellbeing and it can be argued that the only person who really knows whether a person is feeling well is the person itself (Layard, 2005). Better health, quality of work and relationships, freedom of choice and political participation, a higher degree of trust in one's community are all reported to contribute to higher life satisfaction (Kahneman and Riis, 2005).

How these aspects are relevant for immigrants and their descendants is still only partially understood. Many studies based on socio-economic indicators have shown that immigrants assimilate to natives over time (e.g. Heath et al., 2008). However, this seems to be less the case for norms and values (Lesthaeghe 2006). Also the scarce existing studies on life satisfaction suggest this seems not to happen (Safi, 2010). Therefore, the paradox Easterlin (1974) described at the country level (for instance in the U.S.) that despite rising GNP, life satisfaction stagnates or even declines, seems to apply also to immigrants. In this regard life satisfaction is an interesting aspect of immigrants life as it may show also how they perceive their live in the country they live and how this balances with the country they come from. As such it may therefore be a better proxy of immigrants' conditions or at least it can integrate traditional objectives indicators of assimilation.

Few past studies have addressed the question of whether immigrants feel happy or satisfied with their life as compared to natives in the society of residence. Safi (2010) showed that immigrants report significantly lower levels of life satisfaction than natives and this gap does not disappear considering immigrant generation and length of stay. She partially explained this by discrimination suffered by immigrants in the country of destination. The limited existing research has in particular concentrated on understanding increases in levels of happiness after migration as a consequence of realised expectations of better economic and social living standards (Bartram, 2013).

In this paper we focus on life satisfaction of immigrants and natives across European countries by taking a comparative approach. We introduce three innovative aspects that have been largely overlooked in studies so far. First, we assess to what extent immigrants (from different origins and generations) have different levels of satisfaction with their lives that the native majority group in the country of residence. Second we aim to explain differences between immigrants and native by looking at the social embeddedness of the person. Previous work has reported the important role of social networks of immigrants economic performance (Kanas et al., 2012) as well as for their choices in the family domain (Huschek et al., 2011). In fact, gaps in life satisfaction levels between immigrants and natives may be in part explained because for immigrants the protective factors for loneliness of social embeddedness in family and social support are less strong. Also the size of the immigrant communities and their spatial segregation are factors that can contribute to explain variation in life satisfaction and risk of loneliness. Third, we will consider differences across immigrant origin groups by including specific characteristics of the immigrant country of origin background and their interaction with the context of destination in influencing life satisfaction. Previous work in other domains of immigrant incorporation has shown the relevance of including both origin and destination characteristics as well as their interactions (e.g. Van Tubergen 2004; Holland & de Valk 2013). This might however just as well be relevant when studying life satisfaction. The latter will be done by looking at the diversity in origins of immigrant communities in a specific country of destination, which are extremely heterogeneous in terms of language, cultural background and (main) motives of migrations (Van Tubergen et al 2004). By using indicators of cultural distance between countries of origin and destination we are better able to capture the extent to which perceived distance and negotiating between origin and residence country may affect life satisfaction of individual migrants.

Data and methods

The European Social Survey (ESS) is a repeated cross-sectional survey implemented every second year since 2002. The ESS has been developed by fully adopting a comparative perspective and great effort has been made in the translation of questionnaires to ensure comparability. 30 European countries have participated in the survey.

Life satisfaction was measured by using a standard question: *All things considered, how satisfied are you with your life as a whole nowadays?* In the ESS, this variable has been measured with a 11-point scale where 0 means extremely dissatisfied and 10 means extremely satisfied.

This information is available in each round of the ESS. Starting from the second round, the country of origin of the father's and mother's respondent if born in a country different from the country of the survey has been collected in detail. This will allow us to avoid grouping immigrants in wide areas of origin and consider the full heterogeneity related to the immigrants' context of provenience.

Social embeddedness within the family will be measured by partnership status, number of children and living arrangements (whether the respondent co-reside with partner, children, other persons). All these indicators were shown to be important for life satisfaction among the majority population. Risk factors for loneliness will be measured by considering the following three questions: *how often do you meet socially with friends, relatives or work colleagues?* (Never =1, Less than once a month = 2, Once a month = 3, Several times a month = 4, Once a week = 5, Several times a week = 6, Every day = 7); *Do you have anyone with whom you can discuss intimate and personal matters?* (yes = 1, no =0); *Compared to other people of your age, how often would you say you take part in social activities?* (Much less than most = 1, Less than most = 2, About the same = 3, More than most = 4, Much more than most = 5). Another important explanatory factor we consider is subjective health measured with a 6-point scale ranging from 1 = Very good to 5 = Very bad. We inverted the scale so that higher values correspond to better perceived health.

We will use random effects cross-classified models so that heterogeneity among immigrant groups can be modelled through a single random effect and both characteristics the country of origin and destination can be included in the model. In this way, not only is there no limitation on the number of immigrant origins that can be included, but also small immigrant groups can be considered since they are appropriately weighted in the estimation, depending on the immigrant group sample sizes.

Preliminary analyses

In table 1 we compare life satisfaction of immigrants and natives. Results are obtained from regression models that adjust for wave, country of residence and age at the time of interview and gender. In the first part we distinguish the effect of different immigrant generations, while in the second part we consider the effect of the length of stay in the country of destination. Immigrants show statistically significantly lower levels of satisfaction than natives for all the considered indicators. Differences tend to reduce with length of stay and for second generations. These preliminary results further suggest that the disadvantage of immigrants in terms of satisfaction may be partially explained because of higher exposition to the risk of loneliness. Social embeddedness in this regard seems to be crucial for life satisfaction. The extent to which also the size of the own community and levels of segregation are relevant in terms of social embeddedness will be studied in the next steps of the analyses to be carried out.

Furthermore, the analyses will be expanded by focusing on the migrant population in specific and include indicators covering origin effects and in particular cultural distance between origin and destination of the migrant.

Table 1 – Regression estimates comparing immigrants and natives life satisfaction (Reference category = natives; standard errors in parenthesis; n = 184,610).

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
<i>Generations (reference: natives)</i>						
Generation 1 (n = 15,842)	-0.34*** (0.02)	-0.30*** (0.02)	-0.30*** (0.02)	-0.29*** (0.02)	-0.28*** (0.02)	-0.22*** (0.02)
Generation 2 (n = 4,642)	-0.25*** (0.03)	-0.24*** (0.03)	-0.25*** (0.03)	-0.22*** (0.03)	-0.19*** (0.03)	-0.18*** (0.03)
Generation 2.5 (n = 9,016)	-0.15*** (0.02)	-0.15*** (0.02)	-0.16*** (0.02)	-0.14*** (0.02)	-0.12*** (0.02)	-0.12*** (0.02)
Age	-0.01*** (0.00)	-0.01*** (0.00)	-0.01*** (0.00)	-0.01*** (0.00)	0.01*** (0.00)	0.01*** (0.00)
Female	-0.02* (0.01)	0.00 (0.01)	-0.03** (0.01)	-0.04*** (0.01)	-0.09*** (0.01)	-0.08*** (0.01)
Intimate discussion		0.92*** (0.02)				0.58*** (0.02)
Social contact			0.21*** (0.00)			0.11*** (0.00)
Social activities				0.40*** (0.01)		0.21*** (0.01)
Subjective health					0.76*** (0.01)	0.68*** (0.01)
Constant	4.99*** (0.03)	4.08*** (0.03)	3.80*** (0.04)	3.69*** (0.04)	1.88*** (0.04)	0.32*** (0.04)
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	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
<i>Length of stay (reference: natives)</i>						
< 5 years (n = 2,054)	-0.37*** (0.05)	-0.32*** (0.05)	-0.28*** (0.05)	-0.26*** (0.05)	-0.37*** (0.05)	-0.23*** (0.04)
5-10 years (n= 1,884)	-0.44*** (0.05)	-0.39*** (0.05)	-0.36*** (0.05)	-0.38*** (0.05)	-0.40*** (0.05)	-0.29*** (0.05)
11-20 years (n = 3,576)	-0.37*** (0.04)	-0.33*** (0.04)	-0.32*** (0.04)	-0.31*** (0.04)	-0.30*** (0.03)	-0.23*** (0.03)
> 20 years (n = 8,328)	-0.24*** (0.02)	-0.22*** (0.02)	-0.23*** (0.02)	-0.22*** (0.02)	-0.18*** (0.02)	-0.15*** (0.02)
Age	-0.01*** (0.00)	-0.01*** (0.00)	-0.01*** (0.00)	-0.01*** (0.00)	0.01*** (0.00)	0.01*** (0.00)
Female	-0.02* (0.01)	0.00 (0.01)	-0.03** (0.01)	-0.04*** (0.01)	-0.09*** (0.01)	-0.08*** (0.01)
Intimate discussion		0.92*** (0.02)				0.58*** (0.02)
Social contact			0.21*** (0.00)			0.11*** (0.00)
Social activities				0.40*** (0.01)		0.21*** (0.01)
Subjective health					0.77*** (0.01)	0.68*** (0.01)
Constant	4.96*** (0.03)	4.05*** (0.03)	3.78*** (0.04)	3.66*** (0.03)	1.86*** (0.04)	0.30*** (0.04)

Note: all models include fixed effects for wave and country of residence.

Table 2 – Regression estimates comparing immigrants and natives on key explanatory variables (Reference category = natives; standard errors in parenthesis).

	Subjective health	Social contact	Intimate discussion	Social activities
<i>Generations:</i>				
Generation 1	-0.08*** (0.01)	-0.18*** (0.01)	-0.37*** (0.03)	-0.13*** (0.01)
Generation 2	-0.06*** (0.01)	0.03 (0.02)	-0.01 (0.05)	-0.07*** (0.01)
Generation 2.5	-0.04*** (0.01)	0.03* (0.02)	-0.04 (0.04)	-0.03** (0.01)
<i>Length of stay:</i>				
< 5 years	0.00 (0.02)	-0.43*** (0.03)	-0.74*** (0.07)	-0.27*** (0.02)
5-10 years	-0.05** (0.02)	-0.39*** (0.03)	-0.75*** (0.07)	-0.17*** (0.02)
11-20 years	-0.09*** (0.01)	-0.22*** (0.02)	-0.46*** (0.06)	-0.14*** (0.02)
> 20 years	-0.08*** (0.01)	-0.06*** (0.02)	-0.21*** (0.03)	-0.06*** (0.01)

Note: We estimated linear regression for all indicators but “Intimate discussion” for which a logit model has been used. An increase in each one of the variables that we considered indicates a better condition. In the regressions we controlled for age, gender, country and wave.

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