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Measuring immigrants' subjective well-being

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Abstract

Subjective components of well-being are receiving a growing attention, because of the rising awareness of the limits of objective indicators in evaluating individual and societal well-being. Among the indicators of subjective well-being, overall life satisfaction is traditionally used. Life satisfaction is commonly used to estimate the apparent quality of life within a country or of a specific social group.

It is very useful to take immigrants' perceptions and opinions about their experience in the country of residence into account in order to include a subjective perspective in the study of immigrants' integration. The aim of this contribution is to discuss the importance of a comparative overview of self-reported life satisfaction, based on a study involving first-generation immigrants living in several European countries and using the Immigrant Citizens Survey (ICS, 2011-2012). In particular, a synthetic indicator of self-reported life satisfaction will be presented, as well as the most important factors associated with it.

By taking the experiences, opinions and expectations of the immigrants into consideration, we believe that studying immigrants' subjective well-being is crucial for receiving countries to implement more effective integration policies.

Introduction: the importance of subjective well-being for migration studies

Research focusing specifically on immigrants' subjective well-being needs to be conceptualized as an integral part of the general determinants of human well-being. Economists, psychologists and sociologists have studied the determinants of happiness; however, migration scholars have not fully recognized the importance to study immigrants' well-being in any discipline. Wright (2011) has pointed out that there are still few studies investigating "the specific needs that migrants themselves identify as important for 'living well' and how these are formed and transformed by the migration process" (Wright, 2011, p. 1471). The reasons behind such a gap in the literature are partly methodological: this contribution aims to highlight and discuss some of them, by proposing two case studies.

As noted by Hendriks & Bartram (2018), subjective well-being could be an alternative and appropriate way to measure migration outcomes, since it overcomes approaches that look at separate domains. Measuring well-being by means of a comprehensive indicator that incorporates a variety of life domains has many advantages. First, overall measures do not exclude any domain *a priori*. Second, the use of self-assessment measures of life satisfaction[i] allows individuals to weight for themselves the importance of different aspects of life. Indeed, in the literature of well-being, it is well recognized that life satisfaction varies across individuals and it is influenced by time and space for the same individual. Third, overall measures of life satisfaction allow individuals to evaluate their own outcomes. Thus, subjective measures of well-being may be more effective than objective measures of outcomes, because they take into account different personal aspirations and expectations. Indeed individuals with similar levels of well-being as assessed by objective measures may report different outcomes in terms of subjective well-being (Hendriks & Bartram, 2018).

Although there is an extensive literature about well-being, specific studies focusing on immigrants are still scant. As a result, can we say that general findings of the existing literature are worthwhile in terms of immigrants' well-being too? Hendriks & Bartram (2018) advise researchers dealing with immigrants' well-being to be aware of four main reasons to differentiate between immigrants and the general population. Firstly, most international migrants are a self-selected population[ii] and as such they are quite different from the general one. Secondly, immigrants' well-being can be shaped by factors that are strictly connected to the migration condition that do not concern the general population, such as acculturation and discrimination. Thirdly, immigrants' well-being can be directly related to the reason for migration. Finally, well-being of immigrants depends to a certain extent on their conditions in the country of origin.

Previous studies and main methodological challenges

Migration scholars have developed three main research strands to study immigrants' well-being according to the aim followed. In the first case, we may want to study differences between immigrants and natives. Previous studies comparing immigrants with natives showed that, because of discrimination, international migration does not imply an improvement in life satisfaction for immigrants (Kirmanoğlu & Başlevent, 2014). Such studies have demonstrated that income plays only a minor role in increasing migrants' life satisfaction, while perceived discrimination and adaptation are particularly important in this context (Bartram, 2011). Other researchers found that the level of well-being of immigrants tends to adjust to the natives' one, even if not completely (Safi 2010). The different findings of those studies are due to three main reasons. 1) In what kind of country people do migrate: when they move to the happiest countries (in the world ranking) migrants tend to be less satisfied than natives. While when they move to countries with lower levels of happiness in the world ranking, migrants have similar or higher level of happiness than natives. Additionally, 2) the life satisfaction of immigrants is dependent somehow on their former lives in their countries of birth. Last but not least, 3) migrants tend to move to countries where the level of life satisfaction is higher in the world ranking, thus their life satisfaction tend to be lower than the one of natives (Hendriks et al., 2018). Assimilation generally occurs in the early years after migration, when an increase in the level of well-being is recorded; however, over time, immigrants develop higher aspirations, since they stop making comparisons between their current living conditions and their country of origin's circumstances, and they start thinking about the host country's situation only (Hendriks & Bartram, 2018). By comparing immigrants and natives and by taking into account also immigrants generation, Arpino & de Valk (2018) found that first generation immigrants' life satisfaction is lower compared to natives' one, while the gap is reduced for second generation immigrants and 2.5 generation immigrants.

In the second case, we may be interested in understanding whether migration improves the well-being of people in respect to their situation in the country of origin (Bartram, 2013). Previous research comparing immigrants with stayers has shown contrasting results: in some cases, immigrants are happier with their life than stayers, in other the contrary is observed (Nikolova & Graham, 2015). Country of origin may have also an impact in differentiating immigrants and stayers.

A third perspective may be to explore all the outcomes of migration, both the positive and the negative ones. In this case, asking immigrants about an assessment of their migration and/or life experience is the most appropriate way to take into account their points of view (Hendriks & Bartram, 2018). Within this framework, the so-called 'immigration variables' have an important impact on life satisfaction: e.g. duration of stay, age at migration and legal status (e.g. Heizmann & Böhnke, 2018; Hendriks & Bartram, 2018; Safi,

2010; Söhn, 2014). Finally, transnationalism and immigrants' well-being are also interconnected (Vaquera & Aranda, 2011). In particular, to have some contacts with the home country, such as occasional visits, and the presence of some confidants increases immigrants' life satisfaction; however, numerous visits to the home country or strong return intentions contribute to decrease life satisfaction.

From the methodological point of view, most of the studies on immigrants' well-being suffer from the limited availability of data to explore the three above-mentioned approaches. More specifically, the first two approaches are the most difficult to implement. This is due to the lack of surveys measuring subjective well-being both among natives in the country of destination and among non-migrants in the country of origin. Consequently, most of the studies addressing subjective well-being of immigrants are based on the third perspective. Another methodological challenge arises in the way to address subjective well-being in the questionnaires. Not all surveys offer comprehensive indicators that incorporate a variety of life domains, therefore, provide an item that rates satisfaction with life *as a whole*, as the literature suggests when measuring, for instance, the concept of life satisfaction (Diener, 1984).

In this contribution, we propose two case studies where such challenges emerge. In the first one, we study self-reported life satisfaction among first-generation immigrants living in seven European countries, using the Immigrant Citizens Survey (ICS, 2011-2012). In particular, as it was not provided in the survey, we construct a synthetic indicator of self-reported life satisfaction; then, we analyze the most important factors associated with it in the countries of residence of first-generation immigrants. In the second one, we focus on Italy, using the survey on "Social Condition and Integration of Foreign Citizens" (ISTAT, 2011-2012) and exploring several outcomes of migration associated with life satisfaction among first-generation immigrants.

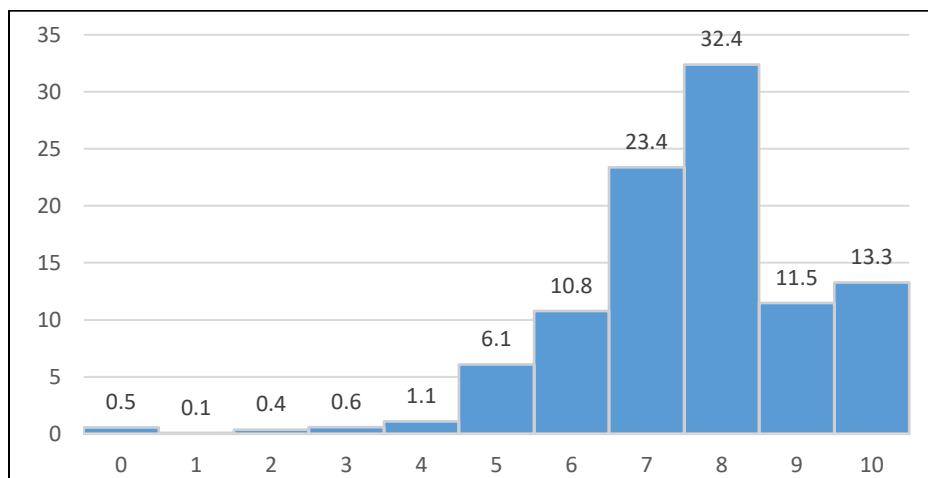**Two case studies: Europe and Italy**

The first study aims at testing the most important factors associated with self-reported life satisfaction among first-generation immigrants living in seven European countries: Belgium, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Portugal and Spain. We use the Immigrant Citizens Survey (ICS, 2011-2012), a cross-national survey aimed at testing whether integration policies matched the hopes and needs of immigrants across Europe. In particular, immigrants were asked for their assessment of whether policies were relevant, whether support and services offered on paper were indeed implemented and used and whether policies had an impact on their lives. The survey also allows us to assess whether policies had intended or unintended effects.

We employ a synthetic indicator of self-reported life satisfaction as a whole, calculated through a Principal Component Analysis (PCA) on the response items[iii] for the following question: could you please tell me on a scale of 0 to 10 how satisfied you are with each of the following items, when 0 means you are very dissatisfied and 10 means you are very satisfied? Each respondent is assigned a life satisfaction score, used as the dependent variable in the multiple linear regression model (Paparusso, 2018). The empirical analysis shows that while there are similarities among countries in terms of effects of age, marital status and perceived financial well-being on immigrants' life satisfaction, other factors differ. For instance, in Germany, immigrants in education are more satisfied compared to immigrants in paid work, while in other countries, the opposite is observed. Compared to work or study immigrants, humanitarian immigrants are strongly less satisfied in Italy and Portugal, while in Germany, they are only slightly less satisfied and in Spain they are even more satisfied. These results provide evidence for the importance of country characteristics and of socio-economic and institutional factors in shaping immigrants' life satisfaction (Paparusso, 2018).

Our second case study focuses on Italy and is based on the national survey on "Social Condition and Integration of Foreign Citizens" (ISTAT, 2011-2012). It analyzes the association between life satisfaction[iv] and several individual factors, through an ordinary least squared (OLS) regression model. Self-reported life satisfaction among first-generation immigrants aged 18 and over is quite high: the 6.1% of them have a life satisfaction equal to 5, and the 10.8% declare a life satisfaction of 6; the 23.4% feel to be satisfied with their life for a score of 7, the 32.4% have a life satisfaction equal to 8, the 11.5% report a 9-level perceived satisfaction and the 13.3% have a self-reported life satisfaction of 10. The remaining 2.7% of immigrants have a life satisfaction lower than 5 (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Percentage distribution of respondents according to their self-reported life satisfaction, N=15,242, Italy, around 2011-2012.

Source: Survey on "Social Condition and Integration of Foreign Citizens", ISTAT

Figure 2. Respondents' mean values of self-reported life satisfaction according to their area of origin, N=15,242, Italy, around 2011-2012.

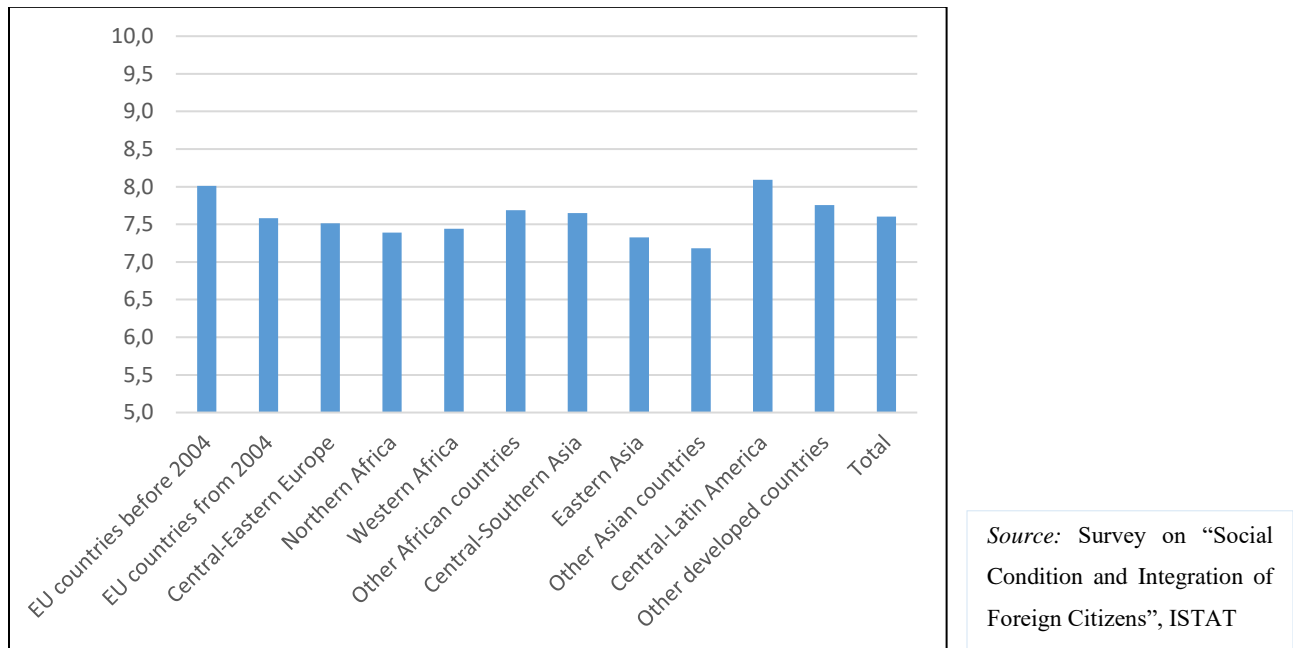*Source:* Survey on "Social Condition and Integration of Foreign Citizens", ISTAT

Figure 2 shows how life satisfaction changes according to the immigrants' area of origin. Immigrants coming from Central Latin-America (8.1), from EU countries before 2004 (8) and from other developed countries (7.8) show the highest mean values of life satisfaction (the mean total value is 7.6). Such results may be explained by the differences in cultural factors (like language and level of development) that characterize the country of origin and the host country. Immigrants' life satisfaction could also be related to migration projects and models, which are different according to the immigrants' country of origin.

Finally, regression results suggest that the main predictors of immigrants' life satisfaction in Italy are socio-demographic and human capital factors, transnationalism, integration and sense of belonging. Gender role attitudes play an interesting role, with immigrants expressing more equalitarian gender attitudes being more satisfied with life. Therefore, the intersection of several factors related both to personal and societal characteristics, contributes to shape the well-being of immigrants in the Italian context.

Conclusions

Subjective components of well-being are receiving a growing attention, because of the raising awareness of the limits of objective indicators in evaluating individual and societal well-being (Bache, 2019). Among the indicators of subjective well-being, overall life satisfaction is traditionally used. Life satisfaction has

been defined as a global assessment of a person's quality of life according to his chosen criteria; therefore, it is commonly used to estimate the apparent quality of life within a country or a specific social group.

The two case studies presented in this short contribution highlight the importance of studying immigrants' self-reported life satisfaction to evaluate the integration process within the country of residence. However, this kind of research suffers of two main limitations. 1) The lack of proper indicators of life satisfaction in the surveys addressed to immigrants, as in the case of ICS, where an overall indicator of self-reported life satisfaction was not provided. 2) The lack of proper data, for instance longitudinal surveys and surveys that allow for comparison with the native population, as in the case of the Survey on "Social Condition and Integration of Foreign Citizens", which is cross-sectional and addressed only to immigrants.

Despite such methodological challenges, studying subjective well-being among immigrants offers an innovative and complementary approach to classical studies of immigrants' integration based on objective indicators. Indeed, since it takes the experiences, opinions, aspirations and expectations of the immigrants into account, it includes a subjective perspective into the study of immigrants' integration. Therefore, it helps receiving countries to improve existing integration policies or to implement more inclusive new ones, boosting social cohesion in our societies.

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[i] Bajwa and colleagues (2018, p. 2) provide a particularly complete conceptualization of life satisfaction: "Satisfaction with life has to do with personal feelings towards oneself, as well one's environment, friends, social life, way of life, psychological conditions, freedom, work, and relationships […]. In a nutshell, life satisfaction refers to acceptance of one's life circumstances or fulfillment of one's life needs as a whole. In essence, life satisfaction is a subjective assessment of one's quality of life."

[ii] The migrant selection process generally singles out younger, more educated and healthier individuals for emigration.

[iii] The items of life satisfaction are: your life these days, your present level of education, your present job, your accommodation, your family life, your health and your social life.

[iv] Life satisfaction was measured with an 11-point Likert scale from 0 to 10. The question was: "Could you please tell me how much are you satisfied with your life on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 indicates not satisfied at all and 10 completely satisfied?"