



Federal Institute for
Population Research

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
(Bălăţescu, 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
(Bălăţescu, 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

to shed more light on the SWB of **internationally mobile** individuals through the observation of **actual international migration events**

Hypotheses

Hypotheses

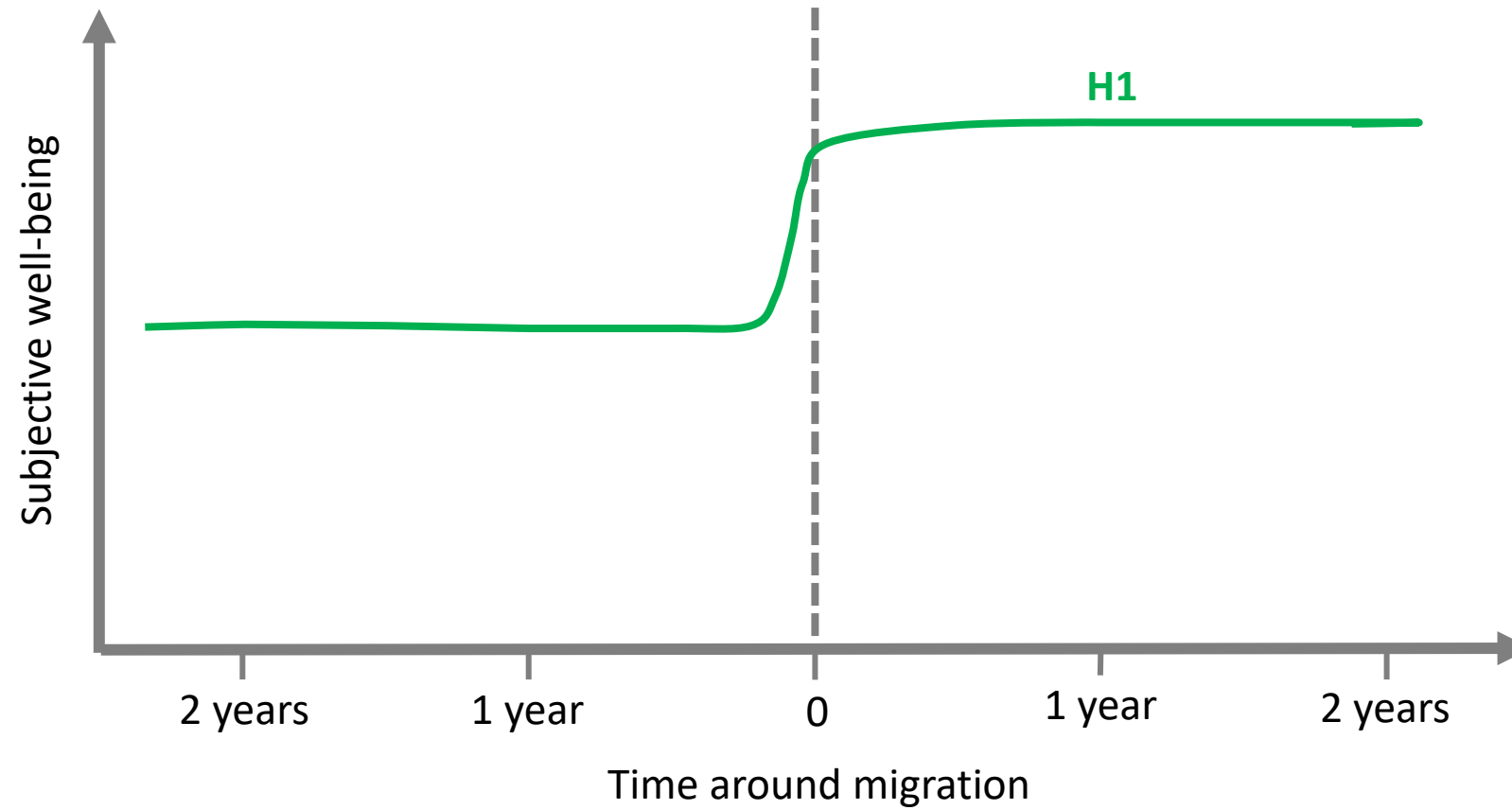
Overall effect of international migration on SWB

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



Euphoria & rational
choice hypothesis

Hypotheses



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

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)



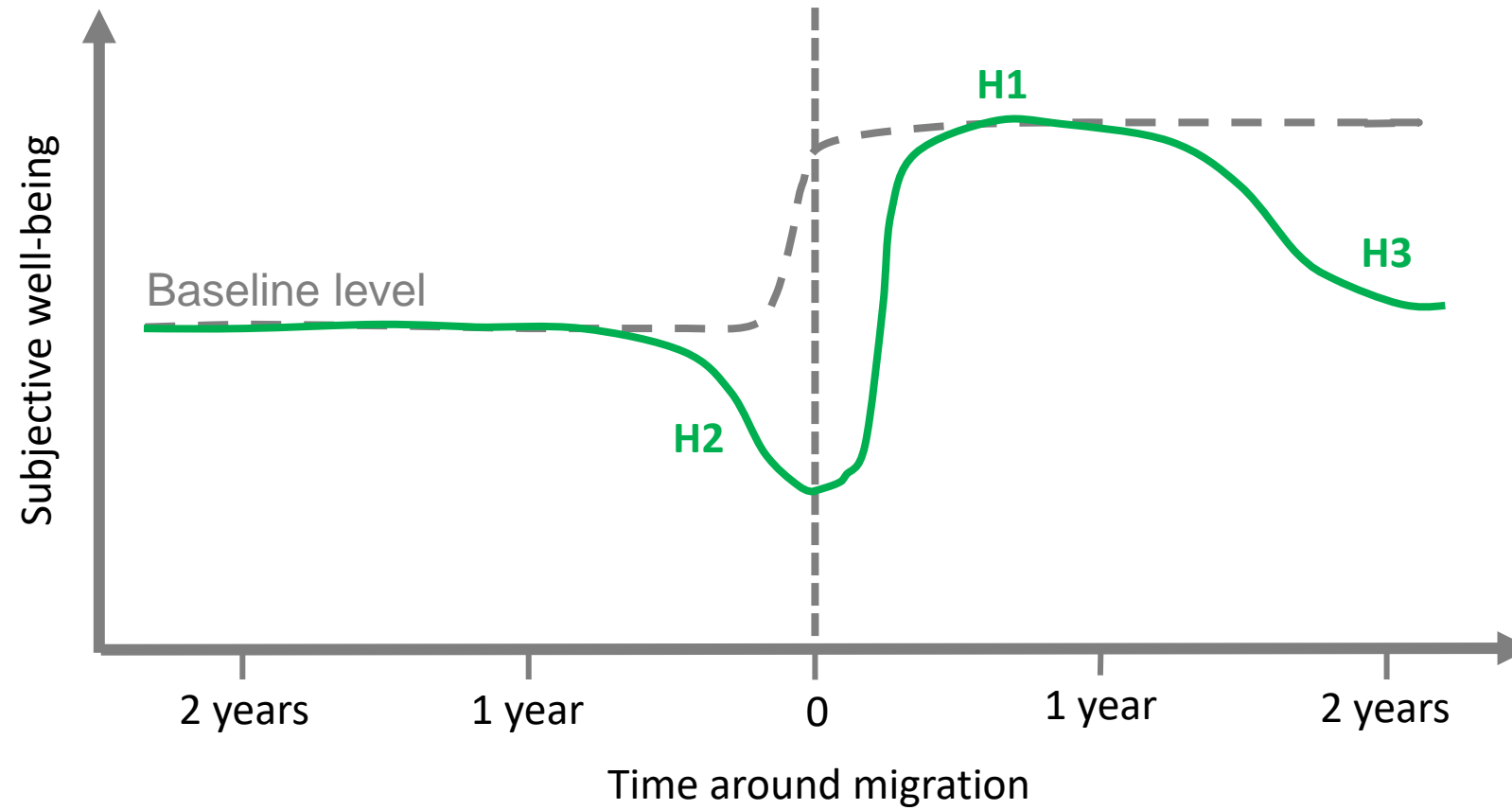
Happiness dip
hypothesis

- 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



Adaptation
hypothesis

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

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)



Happiness dip
hypothesis

- 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



Adaptation
hypothesis

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

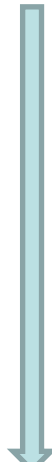
- H4 SWB particularly increases for singles and leading partners**
because international migration involves complex decision-making within
couples in particular, and because moving abroad can mainly fit into the life plan
of only one partner, typically the “leading partner”.



Self-determination
hypothesis

Expectations

Role in the migration decision process	Degree of relative self-determination in the migration decision	Expected effects of international migration on SWB
Respondent is single	++++	++++
Respondent is leading partner	+++	+++
Migration based on co-decision	++	++
Respondent is trailing partner	+	+



*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

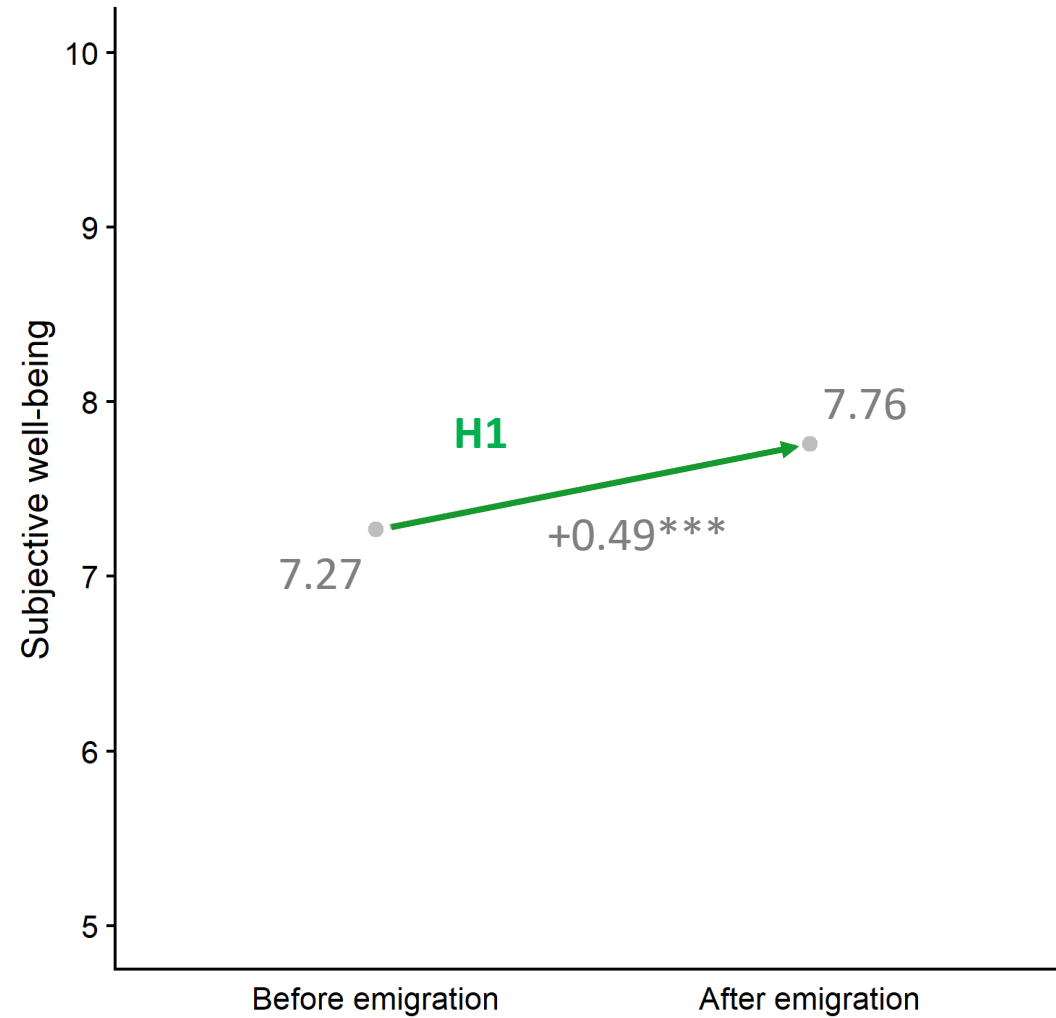
Analytical sample:

	Migrants	Stayers (ref.)
Definition	Emigrated from GE during panel	Stayed in GE during panel
Migr. events	345	0
Person-years	1,605	14,896

- **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)

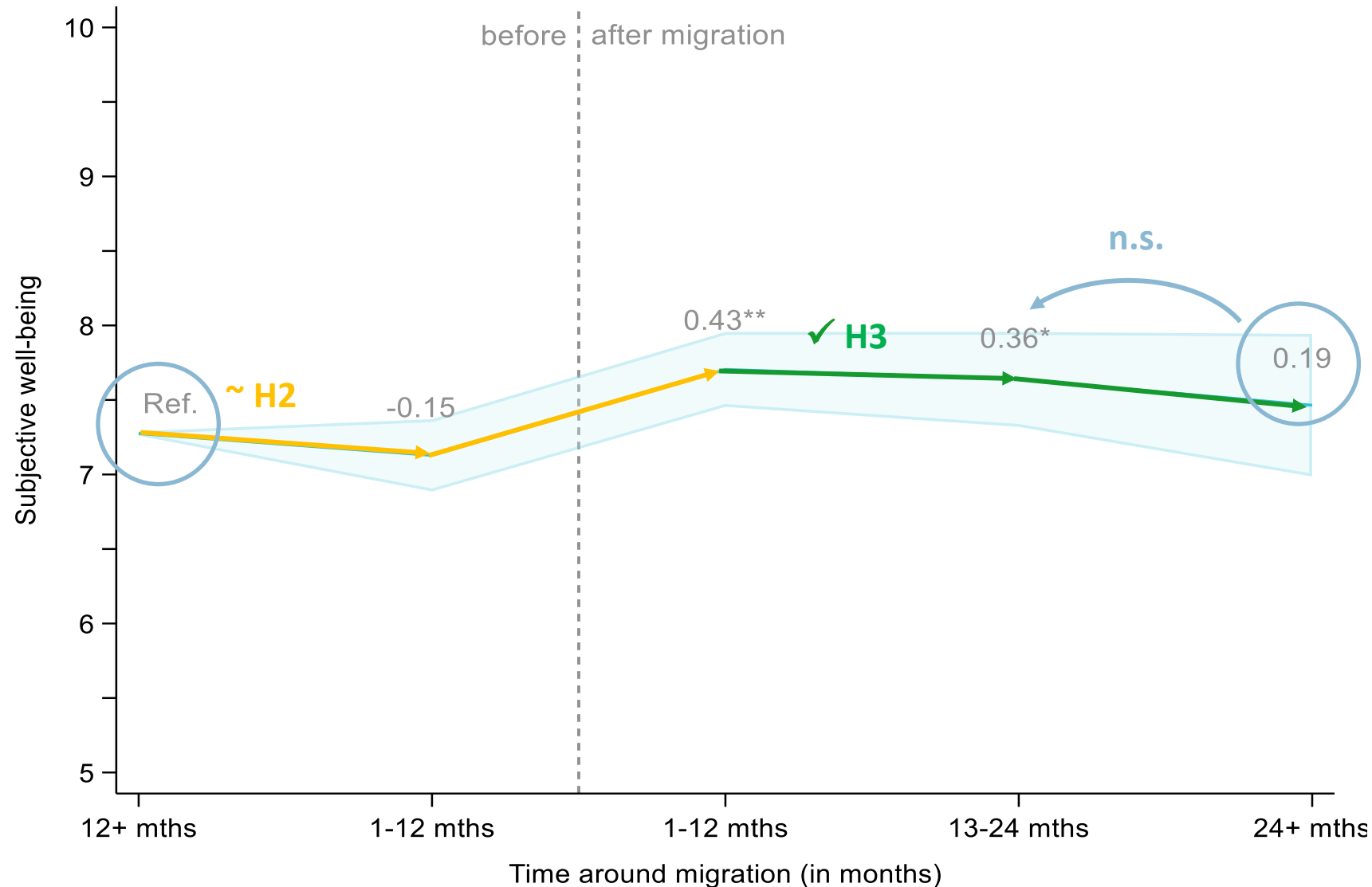
Findings:
**Does international migration make
people happy?**

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

Role in the migration decision process	Degree of relative self-determination in the migration decision	Expected effects of international migration on SWB			<i>Decrease of positive effect</i>
Respondent is single	++++	✓ H4	.62	**	
Respondent is leading partner	+++		.54	**	
Migration based on co-decision	++		.44	**	
Respondent is trailing partner	+		.18		

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?

Andreas Genoni (corresponding author)

Federal Institute for Population Research (BIB)

andreas.genoni@bib.bund.de

Twitter: [@a_genoni](https://twitter.com/a_genoni)

References (1)



- Allison, P. D. (2009). *Fixed Effects Regression Models*. Sage Publications.
- Bălăţescu, S. (2007). Central and Eastern Europeans Migrants' Subjective Quality of Life. A Comparative Study. *Journal of Identity and Migration Studies*, 1(2), 67–81.
- Bartram, D. (2011). Economic migration and happiness: comparing immigrants' and natives' happiness gains from income. *Social Indicators Research*, 103, 57–76. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11205-010-9696-2>
- Bartram, D. 2013. 'Happiness and "Economic Migration": A Comparison of Eastern European Migrants and Stayers'. *MigrationStudies* 1(2):156–75. doi: [10.1093/migration/mnt006](https://doi.org/10.1093/migration/mnt006).
- Baykara-Krumme, H., & Platt, L. (2018). Life satisfaction of migrants, stayers and returnees: reaping the fruits of migration in old age? *Ageing & Society*, 38(4), 721–745. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0144686X16001227>
- Brüderl, J., & Ludwig, V. (2015). Fixed-Effects Panel Regression. In H. Best & C. Wolf (Eds.), *The Sage Handbook of Regression Analysis and Causal Inference* (pp. 327–357). Sage.
- Erlinghagen, M. (2012). Nowhere Better Than Here? The Subjective Well-Being of German Emigrants and Remigrants. *Comparative Population Studies*, 36(4). <https://doi.org/10.12765/CPoS-2011-15>
- Erlinghagen, M. (2021). Love in motion: Migration patterns of internationally mobile couples. *Population, Space and Place*, 27(2). <https://doi.org/10.1002/psp.2382>
- Erlinghagen, M., Ette, A., Schneider, N. F., & Witte, N. (2021). Between Origin and Destination: German Migrants and the Individual Consequences of Their Global Lives. In M. Erlinghagen, A. Ette, N. F. Schneider, & N. Witte (Eds.), *The Global Lives of German Migrants* (pp. 3–20). Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-67498-4_1
- Erlinghagen, Marcel, Christoph Kern, and Petra Stein. 2021. 'Migration, Social Stratification and Dynamic Effects on Subjective Well Being'. *Advances in Life Course Research* 48:100393. doi: [10.1016/j.alcr.2020.100393](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.alcr.2020.100393).

References (2)



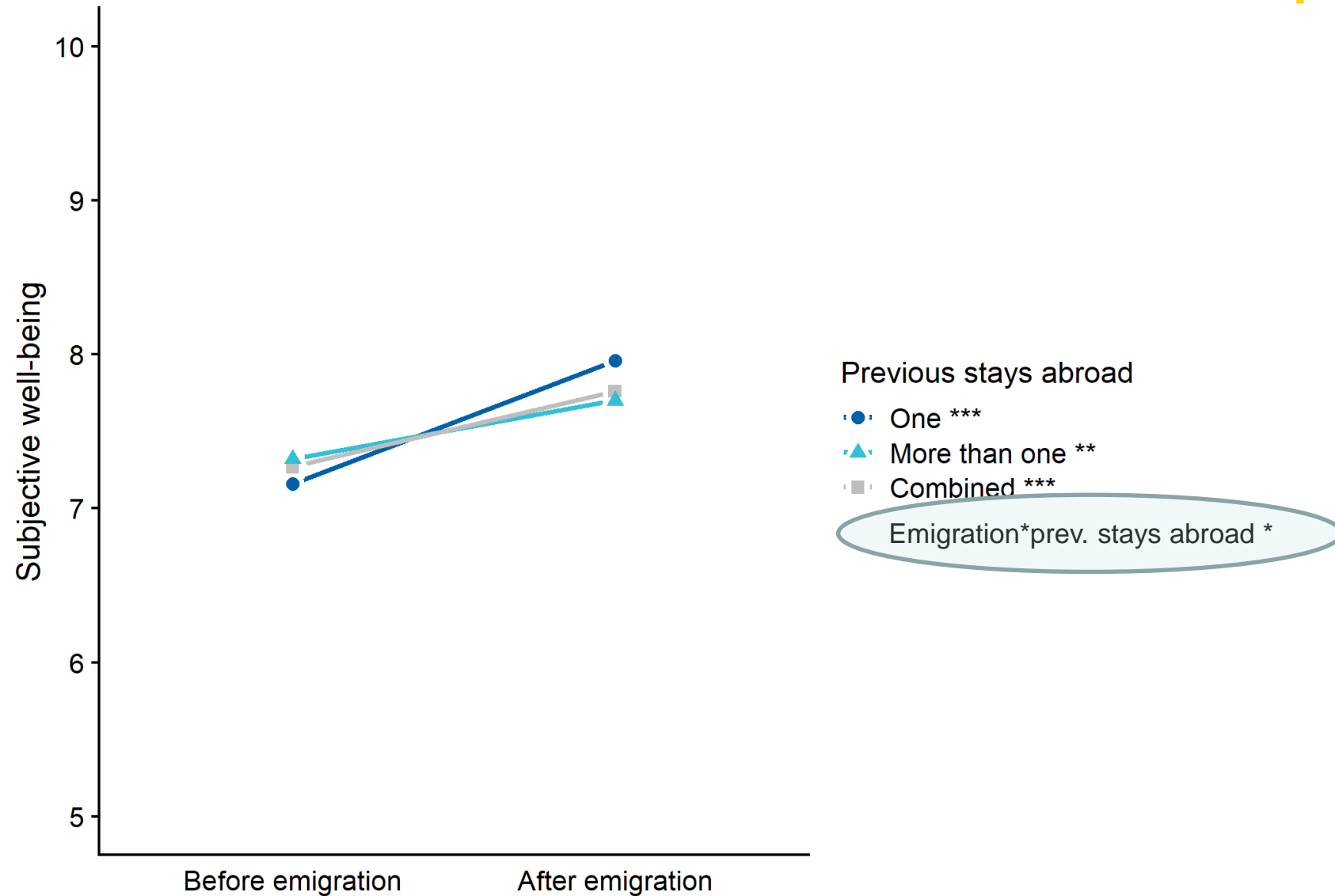
- Guedes Auditor, Jean, and Marcel Erlinghagen. 2021. 'The Happy Migrant? Emigration and Its Impact on Subjective Well-Being'. Pp. 189–204 in *The Global Lives of German Migrants, IMISCOE Research Series*, edited by M. Erlinghagen, A. Ette, N. F. Schneider, and N. Witte. Cham: Springer International Publishing.
- Hipp, L., Bünning, M., Munnes, S., & Sauermann, A. (2020). Problems and pitfalls of retrospective survey questions in COVID-19 studies. *Survey Research Methods*, 109-114 Pages. <https://doi.org/10.18148/SRM/2020.V14I2.7741>
- Kratz, Fabian. 2020. 'On the Way from Misery to Happiness? A Longitudinal Perspective on Economic Migration and Well-Being'. *Migration Studies* 8(3):307–55. doi: [10.1093/migration/mny040](https://doi.org/10.1093/migration/mny040).
- Melzer, Silvia Maja. 2011. 'Does Migration Make You Happy? The Influence of Migration on Subjective Well-Being'. *Journal of Social Research & Policy* 2(2):73–92.
- Nowok, Beata, Maarten van Ham, Allan M. Findlay, and Vernon Gayle. 2013. 'Does Migration Make You Happy? A Longitudinal Study of Internal Migration and Subjective Well-Being'. *Environment and Planning A* 45:986–1002.
- Ormel, Johan, Siegwart Lindenberg, Nardi Steverink, and Lois M. Verbrugge. 1999. 'Subjective Well-Being and Social Production Functions'. *Social Indicators Research* 46(1):61–90. doi: [10.1023/A:1006907811502](https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1006907811502).
- Safi, M. (2010). Immigrants' life satisfaction in Europe: Between assimilation and discrimination. *European Sociological Review*, 26(2), 157–176. <https://doi.org/10.1093/esr/jcp013>
- Teegne, M. A., & Glanville, J. L. (2019). The Immigrant-Native Gap in Subjective Well-Being in Western European Countries: Assessing the Role of Social Capital. *International Migration Review*, 53(2), 458–485. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0197918318769309>
- Wingens, Matthias, Helga de Valk, Michael Windzio, and Can Aybek. 2011. 'The Sociological Life Course Approach and Research on Migration and Integration'. Pp. 1–26 in *A Life-Course Perspective on Migration and Integration*, edited by M. Wingens, M. Windzio, H. de Valk, and C. Aybek. Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands.

Appendix

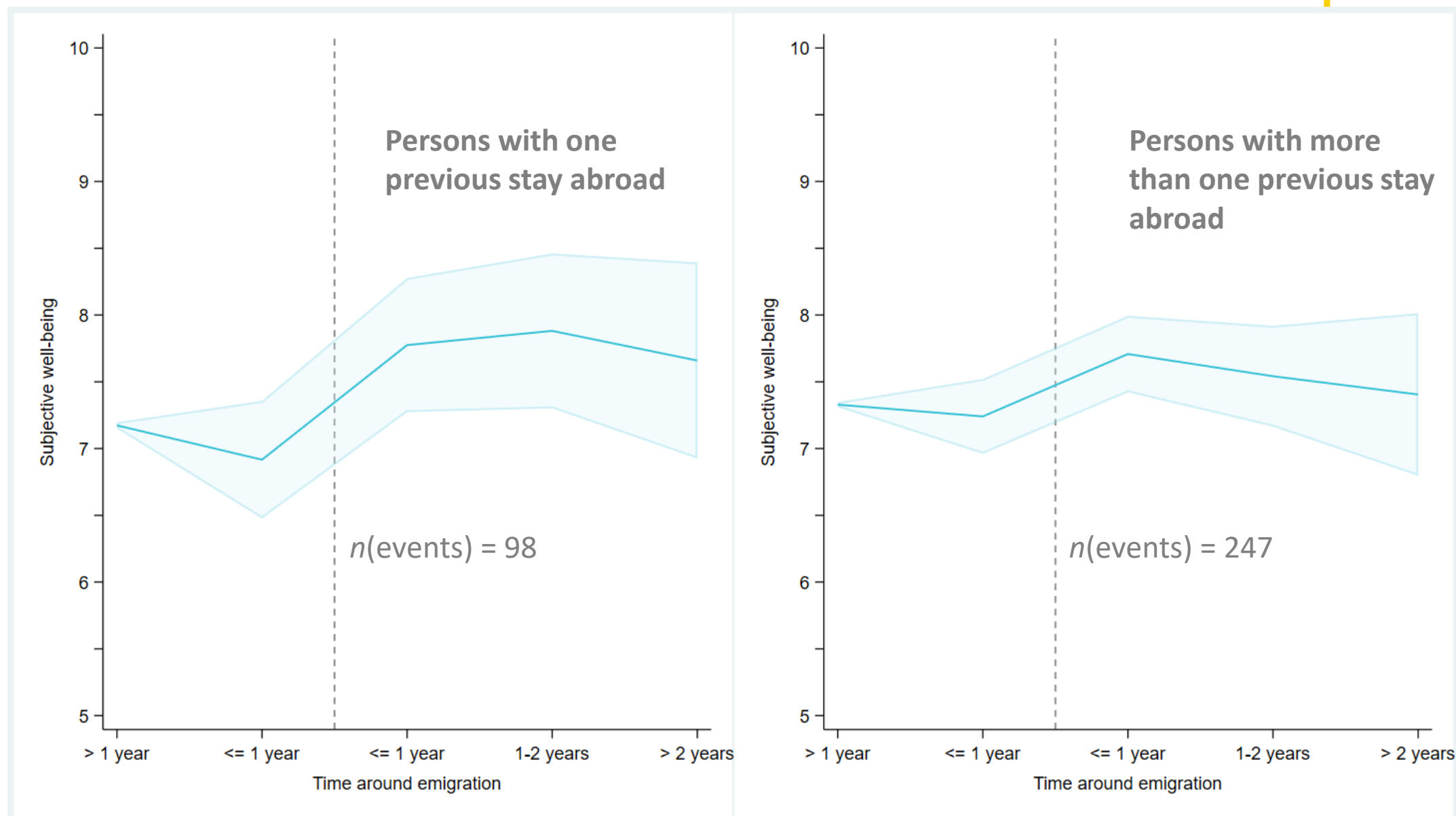
Robustness Check:

Do we need to consider individuals' past migration experience to interpret the findings?

Migration and SWB by Past Migration Experience



Migration and SWB by Past Migration Experience



Robustness Check:

**Is the observed happiness dip related to the
upcoming migration event?**

SWB Trajectory in the Course of Migration (extended)

