International Migration, Open Borders
Debates, and Happiness

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Abstract:

Proposals for ‘open borders’ typically assume that migration from poorer countries to wealthy countries generally makes the migrants themselves better off; indeed, many discussions of ethics concerning immigration policy depend heavily on this assumption. But there are several grounds for wondering whether it is at least partly unfounded for economic migrants (if not for refugees). Drawing on recent research concerning happiness, we can consider how certain psychological processes (e.g. adaptation, aspirations, and comparisons) might operate in counterintuitive ways for immigrants, perhaps inhibiting happiness despite ostensible economic gains. For example, even if migration to a wealthy country raises one’s income, it might also create an even greater increase in one’s wants, thus a higher level of frustration and deprivation. Arguments against immigration restrictions might therefore need to focus more on the dysfunctions of restrictions themselves and less on putative benefits to migrants from immigration.

keywords: international migration, ethics, happiness
Does migration to wealthy countries make immigrants themselves better off? Many people, particularly those advocating ‘open borders’, appear to assume it does; some probably think the answer is obvious and the question absurd. On its face, this assumption seems uncontroversial enough: if it were false, why would millions continue to try to gain entry in the face of considerable resistance, often taking on mind-boggling levels of debt and sometimes even significant risk of injury or death? More basically, wealthy countries are, almost by definition, taken to be good places to live, certainly in comparison to poor countries – so who in their right mind would not want to live ‘here’?

This paper exposes some weaknesses in the foundations of this assumption. I do not go as far as to conclude that migration generally makes immigrants worse off. But I argue that the assumption that migration generally makes immigrants better off is more an article of faith than an established empirical proposition, a likely consequence of reducing ‘better off’ to its narrowest economic connotation. I then consider some consequences of this point for debates on immigration policy.

The focus here is on labor/economic migration, as distinct from some other forms where the benefits to migrants would appear to be less open to question. In many cases the primary purpose of migration is family reunification, and I am less inclined to contemplate a sustained critique of the notion that families are better off when united (living in the same place). Likewise, the very concept of refugee migration would seem to necessitate the conclusion that those who succeed in finding refuge from persecution
and danger of death are indeed better off; when the starting point is risk of torture or
death, almost anything else is an improvement.

But when migration is reasonably a matter of choice and the migrant’s goal is
simply to improve his or her well-being, we might wonder: is that goal usually achieved?¹

Again, a definitive general answer is not offered here. Instead, I will argue that a
definitive general answer is probably not possible – a significant conclusion, to the extent
that it means a definitive ‘yes’ is not possible, contrary to a widespread belief that
migration is usually beneficial.

This conclusion comes from consideration of recent research on happiness
emerging primarily in the intersection of economics and psychology. As against the
behaviorist premises of neo-classical economics, happiness research (or the study of
‘subjective well-being’) works with a notion of intrinsic utility that cannot simply be
deduced from observed behavior in the market. It thus enables exploration of the
common-sense notion that gaining more money (or possessions) does not necessarily
make one happier. By extension, we will consider the possibility that moving to a
wealthier country does not necessarily make one happier. We will also entertain a more
pessimistic proposition: some findings of happiness research can be used to derive the
implication that migration might make some immigrants less happy than if they had
stayed put. The conditions under which that implication is plausible are by no means
general for all immigrants – but they are perhaps common enough to temper enthusiasm
for the notion that immigration generally improves one’s well-being.

We know a great deal about the relative economic and social positions of
immigrants in various societies. In some, the average immigrant is a low-level worker

¹ I am not asserting that international migration is explained by migrants’ attempts to increase
their happiness. Explanations pointing to structural factors (e.g. Massey et al. 1987; Sassen
1988), rather than individual motivations, are more appropriate, especially from a sociological
perspective. The focus here is simply on the outcome of migration, i.e., that portion of the
outcome captured by the word happiness.
who can at best hope that his or her children might one day join the middle classes. In
others (e.g. Canada), many immigrants enjoy an economic position that comes close to
rivaling that of the average native-born Canadian (Frenette and Morissette 2005). But
from the immigrant’s own point of view, these comparisons are not necessarily the
primary measure of success or failure. Instead (or in addition), what matters is whether
migration has brought improvement over one’s life in the country of origin. There
appears to be little scholarship that directly addresses this question – probably because it
poses significant methodological difficulties. Appreciating those difficulties, however,
turns out to be a useful exercise to the extent that it leads us to question a common-sense
presumption that improvement is the natural outcome.

In certain respects, connecting happiness research to international migration might
simply sharpen a set of insights already present in some of the sociological and
anthropological research on the latter. We know that many immigrants face very difficult
circumstances. Filipina domestic workers around the world, for example, experience
some pervasive ‘dislocations’ (Parreñas 2001), including family separation, partial
citizenship, and alienation from the migrant community. Disruptions to family life can be
particularly traumatic; some Mexican immigrants in the US, wary of American culture,
send their adolescent children back to live with grandparents in Mexico, creating what
Smith describes as a ‘transnational disaster’ (2006:237). There are two relevant
implications one may draw from studies in this vein. One might conclude that, however
difficult the circumstances of immigrants in wealthy countries, life in their country of
origin must have been worse. The alternative possibility is that, contrary to hopes and
expectations, migration did not result in the desired improvement. The former option is
implicit in many discussions of the ethics of immigration policies; this paper proposes
consideration of the latter as a plausible alternative in some cases and suggests some key questions for future research.

**Assumptions and Omissions in ‘Open Borders’ Discussions**

The issue of whether migration is beneficial to immigrants is important for discussions of migration policy and ethics – particularly those considering the ‘open borders’ proposition. A significant strand of migration scholarship asks whether restrictions on immigration are justified. Often the answer one gives to that question depends on whether one perceives that immigration is beneficial or costly for citizens of the receiving country. In most discussions of the ethics of immigration policies, however, the question turns on what sort of consideration to give to the migrants themselves. Arguments in this vein are marked by their insistence on distinguishing between interests and ethics (Isbister 1996). While many discussions of policy focus on the interests of receiving countries, writers engaging with the question of open borders treat that focus itself as part of the question: to what extent must we also consider the interests of the migrants themselves, as ‘outsiders’? For some observers, it is illegitimate for citizens of wealthy countries to preserve their advantages by excluding others whose poverty and deprivation results primarily from the accident of birth/geography (or, in Tushnet’s formulation (1995): the ‘lumpy’ distribution of resources across arbitrary borders). Alternatively, some writers, sensitive to the challenge posed by that view, believe it is nonetheless legitimate for citizens to place priority on their obligations to one another.

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2 While acknowledging that this aspect of the question is the one many observers find most compelling (see Riley 2008 for a very recent contribution), I do not treat it at any length here. One could write a different paper asking whether immigration increases the happiness (as against the incomes) of existing citizens in the receiving country. The focus here is on the immigrants themselves.
The point here is that the question itself is worth posing in this way only to the extent we are confident that migration is indeed beneficial to those who migrate. If there are significant doubts about that idea, the question itself appears in a different light.

The notion that migration is beneficial appears readily in a number of contributions. In some instances, this view is explicitly recognized as an assumption: ‘in most cases one assumes that the benefits [to immigrants] substantially outweigh the costs…’ (Trebilcock, 1995:221). In other contributions, one encounters statements that are bolder, less cognizant of the assumption being made. Harris (2002), for example, views unrestricted migration as embodying a ‘right to work’ and thus a basic means of eradicating global poverty.

In a watershed article, Carens argues on Rawlsian grounds that immigration generally ought to be unrestricted – in large part because ‘[c]itizenship in Western liberal democracies … greatly enhances one’s life chances’ (1987:252). There are other reasons individuals might want to migrate – Carens specifies love, religion, and cultural opportunities – but the emphasis is typically on the economic benefits migrants expect to enjoy, benefits that current citizens of wealthy countries can reserve for themselves alone only by ignoring the position they would adopt under the ‘veil of ignorance’. Only the threat of being ‘submerged’ might legitimately limit the point (Dummett 2001) – a threat that Dummett at least takes to be currently non-existent with respect to existing wealthy societies.

This position, commonly described as ‘liberal egalitarianism’, emerges from two basic principles: first, equal opportunities for all, and second, ‘all’ really means all, globally, not just the members of a particular political entity (cf. Dummett 1992; Cole 2000). (The term itself arguably does not apply to Rawls in relation to migration, particularly

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3 Carens has modified his views in more recent years, so that some degree and types of restrictions are considered permissible (e.g. 1992, 1999).
given his brief comments on migration in *The Law of Peoples* (1999); as several commentators have noted (e.g. Kymlicka 2001), Rawls’s core argument treats borders/membership as fixed. In this perspective, wealthy societies, confronted with global poverty, have two choices: provide enough foreign assistance to reduce inequalities, or, ‘[i]f we cannot move enough money to where the needy people are, then we will have to count on moving as many of the needy people as possible to where the money is’ (Barry and Goodin, 1992:8)⁴. The equivalence of these two options is significant: foreign aid and freedom of movement are both taken to be effective means of enabling people in poor countries to improve their life circumstances.⁵ We have a moral obligation to mitigate gross inequality of opportunities, and so we must grant freedom of movement (or, if that is politically impossible, significantly increase foreign aid budgets). Again, this argument makes sense only to the extent that immigration actually enables immigrants to improve their quality of life.

In a theory of justice (as against rights – see below), migration is sometimes considered a second-best option for addressing distributional concerns. To the extent that motivations for migration are economic, Seglow states ‘bluntly[:] it is better to shift resources to people, rather than permitting people to shift themselves towards resources’ (2005:329). One reason, of particular interest here, is that we need to consider ‘non-economic sources of well-being’ (Seglow 2005:327) as well as ‘resources’. In the end, however, Seglow does not pursue implications of that intriguing suggestion – i.e., the implication that a direct investigation of well-being and migration might be instructive – and returns instead to a conclusion that seems to embrace a standard version of the open-borders position: until deep inequities in life chances are addressed through redistribution, ‘rich states have substantial duties to admit poor outsiders’ (2005:329). Others (e.g.

⁴ cf. Ugur 2007; Pogge 1997; and Kymlicka 2001. The latter two clearly prefer redistribution over open borders. However, while open borders is described by Kymlicka as ‘hopelessly naïve’ (2001:250), redistribution on the proper scale is ‘wildly unrealistic’ (2001:271).

⁵ In a critique that has some parallels with this paper, some observers also doubt that foreign aid is beneficial to recipients (e.g. Maren 1997).
Bader 1997, 2005) dispute the notion that migration would be effective in alleviating global poverty; at best it would likely benefit only a relative few. Nonetheless, even in this perspective migration is indeed beneficial to those who can accomplish it.

The view that migration is beneficial is held not only by those who advocate open borders but by some restrictionists as well. Restrictionists generally feel obliged to defend their position precisely because they acknowledge (if that is the right word) that migration would allow immigrants to improve their lot. In other words, if we in wealthy societies are to adopt policies that have the effect of preventing people in poorer countries from enjoying our standard of living, then we had better have good reasons for doing so, beyond simple self-interest. It can no longer be taken for granted that exclusion is self-evidently legitimate (Booth 1997); Carens writes simply: ‘Exclusion has to be justified’ (1999:1083; cf. Whelan 1988). For Walzer, the question arises because ‘[a]ffluent and free countries are, like élite universities, besieged by applicants’ (1983:32) – besieged no doubt because they are affluent and free, or rather because would-be immigrants hope to enjoy the affluence and freedom those countries provide. Walzer accepts that wealthy countries cannot escape obligations to the destitute and stateless, but where those conditions do not hold he finds grounds to permit restrictions that will prevent many from enjoying membership in desirable societies (cf. Miller 2005). But the point here is that the need to defend this position arises because of the notion that immigration is beneficial to someone who wishes to undertake it and can therefore be prevented only with good reason. Miller as well, in defending the right of a state to restrict immigration, is cognizant of ‘those whose position is worsened by the boundaries [the potential receiving state] defends…’ (2007:221). And both Tamir and Tan, who consider immigration restrictions important to a defense of liberal nationalism, argue that such a defense is
legitimate only to the extent that the deprivations of people in poorer countries are
addressed (Tamir 1992; Tan 2004).

In some instances, the restrictionist case is mounted without a great deal of
explicit attention to the interests of would-be migrants. But those interests are
nonetheless implicit in the form of the question some authors address: is it legitimate to
give preference to compatriots (e.g. Meilaender 2001)? This question implies another
clause, one that refers to the entity that is not to be accorded highest preference. That is,
it asks whether it is legitimate to give priority to the interests of existing citizens over the
interests of would-be migrants. Even when those latter interests are not specified, they
are an essential component of the question – and perhaps, more than that, they are the
reason it is worth addressing.

It goes too far to state that all scholars who write about ethics and immigration
policies believe that migration benefits immigrants. Many writers do not address that
aspect of the question at all – perhaps assuming that anyone who wants to migrate must
have adequate reasons for doing so, such that it is not for anyone else to second-guess the
validity of those reasons or intentions. That assumption is surely sufficient from a
libertarian point of view (Steiner 1992) and perhaps from a natural law perspective as
well (Dummett 1992).

Indeed, some writers seem to reject entirely the notion that we should be
concerned with consequences of migration; instead, the right to migrate is simply that: a
right. In an extensive analysis of liberal political philosophy and borders, where he
argues that immigration controls are in fundamental contradiction with the liberal
emphasis on equal moral worth of individuals, Cole refers only in passing to the impact of
such controls on the ‘welfare of the non-citizens who wish to enter’ (2000:50). Consider
also Sutcliffe: ‘Free, and ideally completely free, movement of people is desirable in
itself because it would represent an immense expansion of freedom of people to be, live, and work where they choose’ (1998:328). In a similar vein, Hayter (2000) argues that the freedom of movement we take for granted within (most) countries should be extended to encompass a right of free movement across borders; while she too gives passing mention to the notion that migrants are often motivated by a desire to improve their economic circumstances, the overall thrust of her argument is simply that migration is a fundamental human right (cf. Barsky 2001).

But this is a rather empty way of looking at the question. In assessing whether a particular right should be restricted, we would want to assess the nature of the action to which individuals are said to have a right, in relation to the individual’s own goals or interests. People generally don’t move simply because they want to move; migration is usually a way of accomplishing some other goal. It then makes sense to ask: does migration generally enable people to accomplish those goals?

**Economics, Psychology, and Happiness**

Those goals typically relate to income: essentially by definition, the core purpose of labour migration is to increase one’s income by working in a different (typically wealthier) country. But does the extra income gained this way produce greater happiness? This question as it relates to international migration has received very little attention, but a brief survey of happiness research more generally suggests some possible answers. Some of these answers have a deep affinity with folk wisdom: more money does not necessarily bring more happiness. As Oswald notes, ‘Economic performance is not intrinsically interesting’ (1997:1815); well-being at a deeper level is.

Happiness is generally defined as ‘subjective well-being’, so that survey respondents are free to define it in their own terms when reporting their own happiness levels (Easterlin 2001). Two considerations help contain the ostensible anarchy of that
definition and associated modes of measurement. First, it has been extensively validated (Kenny 1999; Frey and Stutzer 2002), in part via brain scan research confirming that, when people report they are happy, the relevant (predicted) areas of their brains are more active (see Layard 2005 for a summary). Second, responses are generally comparable, even among individuals from very different contexts: most people have high levels of agreement about the sources of happiness, such that people’s use of the word points generally to a shared understanding of its referent (Easterlin 2001). There are of course different approaches to measurement: surveys can ask questions about life satisfaction, or about positive affect, for example. However, I can think of no way in which these different approaches would lead to different conclusions for the question posed here, i.e., the connection between migration and happiness.

There are some key differences between this approach and ideas implicit in conventional economics. In an earlier tradition of economics, happiness was a central concern (Kenny 1999; Frey and Stutzer 2002); utilitarian theory, in particular, was premised on the notion that happiness was the ultimate goal. In the twentieth century, however, a core principle of this perspective was jettisoned, particularly in the frame of ‘revealed preferences’: instead of considering intrinsic (or cardinal) utility, conventional economics simply assumes that, for any income level, the choice to engage in one transaction instead of another means that one is in fact better off for having chosen the former (thus ordinal utility). Neo-classical economics thus rests on deeply held behaviourist assumptions (Layard 2005; cf. Kahneman et al. 1997). As Easterlin notes, ‘A major implication of this theory is that one can improve well-being by increasing one’s income’ (2005a:30).

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6 There is a significant irony in using Layard for a critique of the assumption that immigration makes immigrants better off. He writes: ‘The main argument in favour of immigration is of course the gain to the migrants’ (2005:180). However, there is no elaboration on what those benefits are.
Happiness research, by investigating happiness directly instead of deriving it from behaviour, treats that implication as an empirical matter rather than an axiomatic assumption. Evidence on the question is mixed. In research on the relationship between happiness and income (as well as other economic matters), it has indeed turned out that wealthier people are, at a very broad level, happier than poorer people – and people in wealthy countries are in general happier than people in poorer countries (e.g. Diener 2008). But that cross-sectional point exists alongside a longitudinal finding that proves to be more relevant to the connection between migration and happiness: *increasing* income does not necessarily lead to greater happiness (Easterlin 1974). Frey and Stutzer (2002) as well note that average levels of happiness in Japan were unchanged between 1958 and 1991, despite a six-fold increase in per capita income – a pattern found more generally for nine European countries by Oswald (1997; see also Lane 2000). Moreover, the aggregate cross-sectional relationship between country-level income and happiness levels, while robust in certain specifications, coexists with substantial variation around the various trend lines. In particular, some countries (e.g. Nigeria and Mexico) have much higher levels of happiness than their incomes (and other measures of development) would predict, and others (e.g. Russia and Ukraine) have much lower levels (Leigh and Wolfers 2006).

There is some limited evidence (particularly from Eastern Europe) that demonstrates an effect of income in a longitudinal sense: life satisfaction in East Germany rose following reunification, a finding Frijters et al. (2004) attribute in part to increasing income (see also Ferrer-i-Carbonell 2005). A small percentage of changes in life satisfaction in Russia can be similarly explained by shifts in income (though in this case the movement was downwards until 1998) (Frijters et al. 2006; see also Ravallion)

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7 Hagerty and Veenhoven (2003) disagree with Easterlin’s earlier reading of data on the effects of changes in national income. For his rebuttal, see Easterlin 2005b.
and Lokshin 2002 who, while acknowledging the role of income, emphasize the large
effect of other factors. And while some happiness scholars believe that wealthy-country
politicians’ fixation on economic growth is misplaced, it is less common to find
arguments that economic growth in poorer countries would bring no increases in
happiness; such effects are likely to be stronger in poorer countries than in developed
countries (Clark et al. 2008), and some observers find significant effects in developed
countries as well (Di Tella et al. 2003, but see Kenny 1999 on the possibility that
happiness leads to growth). On balance, however, there is still significant skepticism
concerning the notion that increases in income generally bring increases in happiness.

To understand the apparent contradiction between the cross-sectional and
longitudinal findings (the ‘Easterlin paradox’), three psychological processes are
particularly relevant. One is adaptation: a repeated or continued stimulus produces a
diminishing response (Frederick and Loewenstein 1999). We might initially gain
pleasure from a newly purchased item, but that pleasure then diminishes, often rapidly
(Scitovsky 1992). Adaptation applies directly to the experience of earning a higher level
of income, in particular (Easterlin 2001).

Second, happiness or satisfaction is achieved not by a ‘high’ income per se but by an
income that matches our aspirations. One’s aspirations increase with one’s income,
perhaps as a consequence of adaptation to earlier gains (Easterlin 2001; Frey and Stutzer
2002); aspirations also rise in line with the average aspirations of the community in which
they live (Stutzer 2003; cf. Hagerty 2000). In general, people might match their
aspirations to their income rather than vice versa (van Praag and Frijters 1999). And as
folk wisdom suggests, people who emphasize material aspirations over other types report
The third issue is comparison and relative income: happiness is affected by the degree to which one considers oneself better off than others in a particular reference group (Clark and Oswald 1996; Clarke et al 2008). Again, wealthier people are happier on average than poorer people – but a key reason is that they can perceive themselves as being superior in status to others (as opposed to the enjoyment of more or better consumption opportunities). However, at any particular income level, much depends on how one defines the relevant reference group; there are advantages to comparing downwards rather than upwards (Layard 2005; cf. Falk and Knell 2004).

These considerations reinforce the notion that, as long as one’s material circumstances fall above a certain minimum, increases in income do not necessarily bring sustained increased happiness. Life circumstances in general do matter for happiness (as against strong versions of ‘set-point theory’), but the circumstances that matter most relate to family/community and health (Frank 1999). Given limited time, actions that prioritize material goals over family and health are in general misguided (assuming happiness as the fundamental goal). Many individuals do give priority to material goals, sometimes despite repeated disappointment, but this tendency is perhaps best described simply as a mistake – or rather part of a series of mistakes that are ‘lawful, regular, and systematic’ and moreover can be explained in the perspective of evolutionary psychology (Gilbert 2006:xvi). To hold that the prevalence of such choices proves otherwise, in the face of extensive survey evidence, is to reproduce that error at the scholarly level via a return to ‘revealed preferences’.

It bears emphasizing that one’s happiness is of course determined not just by income but by a variety of non-material factors as well: family relationships, community, health, meaningful employment (for its own sake, not simply for income), freedom, etc. (Layard 2005). That much is obvious; but a point particularly relevant here is that, in
many cases, higher incomes might be achieved only with sacrifices in some of these other areas (a point well worth considering in relation to migration, as we will see). Clark et al. refer to the pursuit of growth as an ‘arms race’; ‘at the individual level, these kinds of status-races can lead to suboptimal outcomes if they crowd out non-status activities’ (2008:102), for example leisure time and family activities.

**Implications of Happiness Research**

As noted above, labor migration refers to the attempt to increase one’s income via migration (relative to what is available in the origin country). The discussion in the previous section indicates that attempts to increase income in general, even if successful, might not result in increased happiness. On the other hand, recent research showing a longitudinal relationship in poorer countries between income and happiness implies that labor migration might be a sensible strategy after all. But that relationship emerges from evidence relating to events/processes within countries. Can we extrapolate to the notion that migration to a wealthier country typically increases happiness? This section explores some theoretical implications that add up to a pessimistic answer to that question.

In a conventional economic view, the benefits of migration are obvious. Given that labor/economic migration typically (though not always) involves movement from poorer countries to wealthier countries, it would be implausible to imagine that migrants do not succeed in increasing their income. Of course, there are costs that might be harder to measure: dreadful housing conditions (the import of the lyrics from *West Side Story* appearing at the beginning), separation from family, etc. Regarding an earlier era,

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8 From a *Washington Post* story on remittances by migrants from El Salvador: “‘Last week, my husband came for a visit to see the new house, and he said to me, ‘My love, we are living our dream!’’ Alvarez recounted, dabbing tears from her eyes. ‘But this is not my dream. My dream was to live my life with my husband.’” (Aizenmen 2006) On the other hand, I am assuming here that separation from family and friends is generally experienced as a cost. This is not necessarily the case. In fact, some people might migrate in part precisely to put distance between oneself and
Handlin (1973:95) writes about the ‘shattering loneliness’ and alienation experienced by immigrants in the US. But among more recent temporary migrants, a significant proportion in some migration systems make repeated trips over several decades (Massey et al. 1987), which suggests that many who migrate in this mode are in no doubt themselves about the benefits of doing so. Many of those who remain rooted in their country of origin certainly do succeed in increasing their income – as evidenced in the building of larger houses, acquisition of imported consumer goods, investment in local businesses, etc.

As discussed above, however, assessment of benefits in relation to immigration ought to dig deeper and not rest content with a putative equivalence between extra income and increased welfare or well-being. There are but few efforts to draw on ‘happiness studies’ for this purpose. Vohra and Adair (2000) investigate variation in life satisfaction among immigrants in Winnipeg, but their question is cross-sectional rather than longitudinal. In a conference paper that has an affinity with the arguments presented here, Borraz et al. (2007) ask about the impact of migration on the family left behind and find (on the basis of data similar to those of the World Values Survey) that their happiness is decreased, even after accounting for the effect of remittances.

First, we might consider not only the fulfillment of aspirations enabled by the extra income but also the trajectory of the aspirations themselves. Even in relation to temporary migration: a two-year spell in the US might make it possible to build or purchase a larger house and to acquire some nice consumer goods – but it might also entail exposure to a level of affluence that leads ultimately to the feeling that one must have even more. It is possible the overall result is not greater satisfaction but rather greater discontent and envy; indeed, this might be the reason for making repeated trips –

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a parent or spouse whom one considers overbearing, etc. All the same, it seems reasonable to assume that in general separation from family is undesired.
so that the initial trip is the first step onto an ever-accelerating treadmill. Or one’s urge to migrate might have been spurred in the first instance by watching one’s neighbors return from the US and proceed to build larger houses and to acquire some nice consumer goods. In this instance migration is not a path to greater happiness than one had before but is necessary simply to preserve or restore a pre-existing level. Even if one is first in one’s village to pursue this path, the benefits from doing so might prove temporary to some degree, if the added welfare comes in part from an increase in relative position that is then eroded by emulation. In both cases the notion that migration has produced benefits acquires a degree of ambiguity.

These points might hold to an even greater extent for people who settle in a wealthy country. The extra income might be sufficient to achieve purchasing power greater than one’s income in the source country, but that purchasing power might quickly come to seem inadequate, once one has absorbed some of the consumption expectations common in wealthy societies. An immigrant might experience a sense of gratitude for any increase in standard of living. But a sense of deprivation is also possible. The outcome – gratitude vs. deprivation – probably depends in part on the personality or temperament of the immigrant, not only on the magnitude of the change in income (cf. Diener et al. 1999). It seems worth considering that a sense of deprivation is the more likely outcome, at least to the extent that the migration was motivated in the first place by a sense of deprivation (or unmet aspirations) in the country of origin.

Second, migration leading to settlement raises the question of reference groups for comparison. Two possibilities arise: first, the immigrant continues to compare him- or herself to those who remain in the sending country and therefore experiences satisfaction from having achieved a higher position. The other possibility is that the reference group
changes to include citizens of the destination country.\textsuperscript{9} In the latter case – which is surely the more likely outcome as time passes – we need to consider the various trajectories of the comparison, stylized in Figure 1. Relative position may remain unchanged (paths A and B), may increase (path C) or may decrease (path D). Only in path C will migration produce an increase in the component of happiness that comes from comparison. This seems the most improbable outcome: immigrants need resources to accomplish migration and often do not come from the most deprived sectors of their societies, and it is hardly the norm for immigrants to achieve a higher economic position than average citizens of the destination country. If migrants held a relatively low position at home, it seems even less likely that they will achieve a relatively high position in the destination (particularly if, being relatively poor, their educational attainment is low), and their experience will likely follow path B. Immigrants do sometimes reach a relatively high position in the

\textbf{Figure 1: Comparison Trajectories}

\begin{center}
\begin{tikzpicture}[scale=0.8]
\filldraw[fill=white, draw=black] (0,0) -- (3,3) -- (6,0) -- cycle;
\filldraw[fill=white, draw=black] (0,0) -- (3,-3) -- (6,0) -- cycle;
\filldraw[fill=white, draw=black] (0,0) -- (-3,-3) -- (0,-6) -- cycle;
\filldraw[fill=white, draw=black] (0,0) -- (-3,3) -- (0,6) -- cycle;
\node at (0,0) [above] {A};
\node at (3,3) [above] {B};
\node at (6,0) [above] {C};
\node at (3,-3) [above] {D};
\node at (-3,-3) [above] {A};
\node at (-3,3) [above] {B};
\node at (6,0) [above] {C};
\node at (-3,0) [left] {Low};
\node at (3,0) [left] {High};
\node at (0,6) [left] {Position in destination country};
\node at (0,-6) [left] {Position in sending country};
\end{tikzpicture}
\end{center}

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{9} An additional possibility is that the reference group for migrants already includes citizens of wealthy countries, even prior to migration. This is perhaps one of the motivating factors for migration in the first place. However, comparisons are typically quite local (Galbraith 1984), though perhaps less so as globalization progresses.}
destination, but those who do so seem likely to have already held a relatively high position at home, in which case migration does not increase that relative position (Path A). Path D describes the trajectory of immigrants who were middle-class in their ‘home’ country but achieve a relatively low position in the destination (because of unrecognized qualifications, language barriers, discrimination, etc.).

It would be very surprising indeed if the experience of many migrants followed Path C. Opportunities for upward mobility within wealthy countries (i.e., for citizens) are limited, particularly in the US and the UK (Macleod 1995; Hertz 2005). No doubt there are some immigrants who achieve a higher relative position in the destination country – but this can hardly be the modal outcome.

Third, as discussed above, the increase in consumption of many types of goods typically brings only a temporary increase in pleasure or satisfaction, because of the process of adaptation (Scitovsky 1992). Extra income generally brings lasting benefits only if spent in specific ways – particularly if that spending enhances health and longevity or reduces stress, in other words not consumption in the normal Western materialist mode (Frank 1999). If the primary goal of migration is to acquire a bigger house and some nice consumer goods, the process of adaptation is likely to erode the experience of satisfaction associated with those acquisitions – just as it does for natives.

Fourth, in addition to the economic consequences of migration, we must also consider a variety of social consequences, e.g. in relation to community, family relationships, etc., as noted above. Wealthy countries are different from poorer countries not only in terms of wealth but in a host of other ways. Countries like the US might be better places to live (more conducive to happiness) than poorer countries in some ways, but perhaps they are worse in other ways. Income and other economic factors receive a great deal of attention in the migration literature – probably because many people assume
that income is the biggest influence on individual motivations to migrate. But the fact that immigrants might sometimes overlook other dimensions does not mean that scholars must follow suit.

For instance, we might ponder the fact that wealthy countries have significantly higher rates of mental illness than poorer countries, even after accounting for differences in resources for diagnosis (Schwartz 2004). We might then wonder whether immigrants who integrate more fully into a wealthy society increase the chances that they will experience a mental illness such as depression.

Even in this regard, what matters most for immigrants is not some sort of overall average for a country but the trajectory of immigrants in regard to these dimensions. In other words, the fact that the US has a higher incidence of mental illness does not by itself mean that immigrants will themselves experience an increased incidence of mental illness after arrival. Here (and in general) we need to avoid an ecological fallacy. To know whether immigration benefits immigrants, it is not sufficient merely to compare the source and destination countries in terms of averages for the various dimensions. Instead, one must gauge whether immigrants generally experience an *improvement* or a *deterioration* on those dimensions.

The complexity of this kind of longitudinal analysis in empirical work is enormous. But this difficulty leads us directly to the main argument of this paper: it is very difficult to know whether immigration is on the whole beneficial to immigrants, and our confidence in the notion that it does generally bring a positive balance of benefits is unjustified. It bears emphasizing that my goal here is not to conclude that migration is in fact detrimental; instead the point is simply that easy judgments to the effect that it is beneficial because destinations are wealthier are not terribly helpful or robust without further analysis of the type I am suggesting here.
It seems worth entertaining a pessimistic proposition, however – even if only as a counterpoint to the implicit optimism of the ethical discussions reviewed earlier. A great deal of sociology has been devoted to the sustained critique of modern western societies, which are said variously to be marked by narcissism (Lasch 1977), individualism (Macpherson 1962), suppression of individuality and ‘true needs’ (Marcuse 1964), social isolation (Putnam 2000), corrosion of character (Sennett 1998), dependency (Tanner 2003), lack of opportunity for mobility (Macleod 1995), godlessness (various fundamentalist clergy) – once we start with critiques of this sort, it quickly becomes apparent the list will be very long indeed. Two points seem especially compelling, particularly for migration to the US. One is the culture of long work hours, which can interfere with other goods such as family and other close relationships (Layard 2005). The other is the impoverished sense of community in many wealthy societies. And while it is tempting to believe that immigrants might recreate strong communities in ethnic enclaves in the destination country, Mahler (1995) argues to the contrary: at least under certain conditions, some immigrants adapt quickly to their new circumstances and tend to exploit one another, no less than natives do.

The point is that migration might bring greater income/wealth, but it might also bring much more: wealthy societies are not only wealthy, they have a host of other characteristics, some of which might be experienced as relatively undesirable. I do not mean to romanticize poorer societies, which might themselves have characteristics (beyond poverty) that are experienced by many as undesirable. In fact it would be difficult for any individual to know enough about a large number of other countries to enable a meaningful general judgment. But that point brings us back again to the main argument of this essay: in assuming that life is better in a wealthy country, we assume too much, and we know very little. In particular, we should probably conclude that we know
too little about the situation of immigrants prior to their departure (cf. Sayad 2004). As noted above, scholars have shown more interest in how immigrants compare to existing citizens of destination countries, while an immigrant might care more about how his or her life has improved (or not) as a result of immigration.

In sum, a consideration of lessons from happiness research implies that immigration might erode happiness for some rather than enhance it: it might increase the gap between aspirations and achievement, it might place migrants in a lower (or at best unchanged) relative position, and it might feed expectations about the joys of consumption that remain unfulfilled. It might also bring negative social consequences that the migrant had perhaps not considered, particularly if the primary motivation for migration was economic. None of these outcomes is inevitable or universal. But surely it is unwise simply to assume that migration makes immigrants better off.

The correlation between income and happiness needs further comment in relation to migration. As noted above, wealthier people are, quite generally, happier than poorer people. This correlation exists both at the level of individuals and the level of countries. But again it is a cross-sectional finding, and it is not sufficient to establish the proposition that increases in income (either at the individual or country level) lead to greater happiness. Given that average levels of happiness in wealthy countries are higher than in poorer countries, perhaps an individual can indeed increase his or her happiness by moving from a poorer country to a wealthy country. However, while that is a possibility, simply inferring it from the correlation would amount to an ecological fallacy.

It is sometimes asserted that immigrants are well aware that they will not achieve economic salvation in the destination country, but that their real goal is to enable their children to attain a more prosperous and secure life. Even for the second generation, however, we might wonder whether life is better in a wealthy country such as the US than
it would have been in the country of their parents’ origin. Addressing this question is even more difficult for the children than it is for the parents, because it is harder to know what sort of life the children would have had if their parents hadn’t left. We can start with the observation that some children of immigrants do quite well while others do poorly (i.e., segmented assimilation (Portes and Rumbaut 1996) – though Boyd (2002) argues that this concept does not necessarily transfer well to non-US destinations such as Canada). But that judgment is inherently cross-sectional and does not in itself help us to compare the actual situation of immigrant offspring with the counterfactual situation of how they would have done given no migration. Members of wealthy societies might find it difficult to imagine that their own children would be better off growing up in poorer countries, but that does not necessarily mean that the children of immigrants are better off here. Once again, the point is simply that it is difficult to know and that we probably assume too much.

Finally, if migration doesn’t make immigrants better off, then we might ask: why don’t they go home, and why don’t they advise their friends and relatives not to follow in their footsteps? We can start by remembering that a significant proportion of immigrants do return to their country of origin (while some move on to a third country). Whether return represents success or failure is not always clear – it depends in part on one’s original intentions, and it is very difficult to interpret changes in intentions (Piore 1979). But it is surely not uncommon for some to return because they have not encountered the life they had hoped for.

Mahler (1995) describes a more insidious process. Migrants sometimes do not return despite disappointment because they cannot face the reality of having held ‘false hopes’ or, what is worse, having simply ‘failed.’ For some, the belief in America in particular as a ‘promised land’ is deeply held and abandoned only with great difficulty.
And while an immigrant might have no choice but to face the reality of disappointment, it can be even more difficult to convince friends and relatives back home. The need to maintain ‘face’ with those at home can lead immigrants to perpetuate a myth of success, telling false stories of accomplishments that convince others to embark on the same path.

There are grounds, suggested by Pajo, for characterizing the hopes of some immigrants as ultimately illusory (2007; notably, the subtitle of his book refers to ‘Social Demotion’). Pajo discovered that a common motivation for Albanians to move to Greece was simply the belief that Greece is a ‘better’ country, in ‘a social imaginary of the world as a hierarchy of countries’ (2007:192). Unfortunately for many of the migrants, Greece worked out not to be better for them – a painful object lesson on the ecological fallacy. In Albania, the frustrations that led to a decision to migrate centred on the absence of opportunities for consumption that would allow individuals to raise (or mark) their relative status. While consumption opportunities were indeed higher in Greece, the fact of being an immigrant paradoxically reinforced the sameness of the migrants: ‘Emigrants’ sameness among themselves, forced upon them by their being emigrants in Greece, equated the emigrant experience to that of the Albania that they had left behind’ (Pajo 2007:199). The problem of homogenization was reproduced on a different dimension, in a way no individual immigrant could have predicted.

This finding dovetails with a key claim of Gilbert (2006): some of the actions we undertake to increase our happiness simply do not work, and we systematically repeat many of those mistakes. It is tempting to believe that the simple facts that people migrate in the first place and then sometimes move again must mean that they are better off. However, as noted most happiness research definitively rejects the ‘revealed preferences’ premise underlying that belief (Frey and Stutzer 2000; more generally, Sen 1977, 1973). The implication here is that continued migration (in the sense of repeated episodes and/or
permanent settlement) does not by itself constitute definitive evidence of improvement in well-being; at best, it is evidence of expectations or hopes of such improvement.

**Brief Reflections on Method**

This paper is limited in scope to theoretical reflection. But it nonetheless might be asked: how could we *know*, through empirical research, whether immigration generally makes immigrants better off? In particular, does the continuing demand for entry constitute sufficient evidence that migration is beneficial to migrants? Or is it appropriate to invoke an outsider’s perspective in forming a judgment?

In addressing these issues, we need to be clear about the precise nature of the question. The main difficulty is that it invokes an unobservable counterfactual (indicated in the subjunctive/conditional tense that follows): after migration, is the migrant better off than he or she *would have been given no migration*? While it might be useful to compare migrants to non-migrants in the sending country, that comparison will not answer the question directly. Even a comparison of the migrant’s situation before and after migration is useful only if there is some way of addressing the question of how his or her situation might have developed given no migration.

There are also issues relating to measurement. Psychologists and others are confident of their ability to measure happiness, and the primary means for doing so is simply to ask respondents (with appropriately worded questions) to report their levels of happiness (Frey and Stutzer 2002). So it would seem that, to determine whether migration to a wealthy country makes people better off, we simply need to ask immigrants whether they are happier after migration, and to ask potential migrants whether they would be happier if they could gain entry to a wealthy society.

There are at least two problems, however. In relation to the latter point (predictions): people generally do a poor job of predicting what will make them happy
In particular, Gilbert argues there is a strong tendency to overestimate the happiness that a course of action will bring (and to underestimate its costs and risks), even for something we have already experienced. One specific problem is that we premise our actions on ideas concerning what would make us happy now, but the action will only be completed later and we are usually unable to predict what will make our future selves happy (Kahneman, Wakker and Sarin 1997; cf. Rabin 1998). As already noted, we are simply mistaken in believing that certain things bring us happiness, and we then engage in many actions that make us definitively less happy. So it is by no means possible to say that a widespread desire to migrate is sufficient to establish that it is beneficial.

More generally, as indicated above the notion that benefits can be deduced from actions (‘revealed preferences’ again) simply replicates the behaviorism of the neo-classical economic perspective. While that perspective might be useful for certain kinds of economic questions, there is no reason to allow it to colonize other domains of social science. There are grounds for wondering whether there is a good fit between one’s intentions, one’s actions, and one’s judgments concerning whether the actions have led to the fulfillment of the intentions: individuals construct coherent narratives to make sense of their lives, but reality is not identical to those narratives (Archer 1998). The assertion that individuals have limited insight into their circumstances smacks of paternalism, but it is well grounded in psychological research (Gilbert 2006). It is also a core principle of sociology (rejected by some, to be sure) that there are deeper structures of societies that transcend the intentions of individuals and the understandings people have about what they do (as when a person with an annual income of $200,000 fervently believes himself to be ‘middle class’).

These critical comments do little to construct a method of research that could help us answer the question, does immigration make immigrants better off. At best, they help
us to appreciate the difficulties empirical research of this sort would bring. It hardly needs repeating that my goal in this paper is simply to highlight difficulties associated with the easy assumption that migration is beneficial to migrants.

**Conclusion**

As demonstrated above, the assumption that immigration makes immigrants better off is implicit in many discussions of the ethical dimensions of immigration policies. Some writers believe that (potential) immigrants must be allowed to benefit from gaining access to a wealthy country, even if the interests of existing citizens would be harmed as a result. Others believe it is acceptable to deny those benefits to potential immigrants and to allow citizens to prioritize their obligations to one another over those to non-members. In both cases, the arguments are heavily inflected by the notion that immigration is beneficial to immigrants. What happens to those arguments if we are no longer so confident in this assumption?

A straightforward answer is that one way of defending less restrictive policies is undermined to a degree. A liberal-egalitarian vision of justice requires that people living in poor countries be allowed to seek their fortunes in wealthy countries – but the analysis here suggests that seeking one’s fortune in a wealthy country might result in disappointment. If disappointment is indeed a common result, then this is perhaps not a terribly compelling vision of justice.

I have attempted to phrase the point carefully. I am not claiming to be certain that migration is harmful to immigrants, and skepticism concerning benefits on its own is by no means sufficient to necessitate adoption of a restrictive policy. There are many reasons to be unhappy with immigration restrictions. Efforts to limit immigration can result in public backlashes against existing immigrants. And even if immigration itself is sometimes not beneficial to immigrants, effective enforcement of restrictions requires
actions that clearly do harm immigrants: incarceration, loss of resources invested in migration (resulting in inability to repay debts), frustration from unfulfilled aspirations, creation of a market for smuggling/trafficking, etc. (cf. Hayter 2000; Johnson 2003; Wihtol de Wenden 2007). Restrictions are also costly for the receiving society – Martin (2003) estimates a direct annual cost of $25-30 billion for enforcement for the world’s 25 richest countries. There are indirect costs as well, arising from the inevitable failures of control policies and the consequent illegality (e.g. Pécoud and de Guchteneire 2006).

Above all, it does not follow from the arguments presented here that governments in wealthy countries can claim to protect the interests of would-be immigrants by keeping them out\(^\text{10}\) – a self-serving stance that would inevitably be exploited by hard-core nativists. In free societies, individuals are free to make mistakes, to engage in actions that might be bad for them. The bar for intervention is set very high in some cases: if the certain harm that results from smoking is not sufficient grounds for a prohibition, then surely we cannot say that the possibility that one might fail to achieve happiness via migration is by itself sufficient reason to prohibit it.

In other words, arguments emphasizing rights of migrants are not impaired by the notion that migration might not increase migrants’ happiness. A perspective focused on rights generally holds that individuals ought to be free to do what they want unless there is good reason for a prohibition. The possibility that migration might not produce the desired outcome does not amount to such a reason from within a liberal-egalitarian discussion of rights. It also does nothing to reinforce the notion that it is legitimate to put priority on the rights of wealthy-country citizens over the rights of would-be migrants.

\(^{10}\) Weiner (1996) suggests some scenarios in which open borders could result in harm to potential migrants and others in poorer countries – but in those scenarios the harm does not arise from actually gaining entry to a wealthy country.
The point is simply that we are perhaps misguided in thinking that putative economic benefits for immigrants are an important factor that we must weight heavily in considering the interests of the various parties affected by immigration. If happiness is reasonably considered the fundamental goal, then economic gains following from migration might be less important than is commonly believed. Empirical research about the relationship between migration and happiness is of course essential for attempts to resolves the question – though as with other issues connected to happiness a single empirical study is most unlikely to suffice.

The issue of reference groups is particularly salient and worthy of research. To the extent that migrants’ reference groups shift to include people in the destination country, the comparison element of income-related happiness is likely to work in their disfavor. If, on the other hand, migrants remain focused on their standing in relation to people in their country of origin, migration might well enhance happiness – though of course there are a variety of other consequences of migration that will inevitably be relevant to that outcome.

The assumption that migration is beneficial is no doubt true for some immigrants, even beyond the categories of refugees, the desperately poor, and reunifying families. Conditions in many countries are extremely difficult, such that migration to a wealthy country might at least bring a degree of security. At this point, however, the notion that migration is generally beneficial is more an assumption than an established empirical proposition, and there are reasons to doubt it, at least for a certain proportion of immigrants in some countries. A higher income for people in poor countries might indeed increase happiness – but whether happiness increases with a higher income achieved via migration might well be a very different matter.
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