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Returning to the country of origin in later life: Longitudinal evidence from the German Socio-Economic Panel

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Although migration literature has largely explored the determinants of the intention to return to the country of origin, older migrants have only more recently become the focus of scientific interest. Building on the literature related to return migration, well-being and ageing, we investigate quantitatively the determinants of return intentions in later life. We draw on longitudinal data from the German Socio-Economic Panel (GSOEP) for the period 1984–2013 to address the role of subjective and objective well-being in shaping later-life (im)mobility intentions. Our findings highlight the key role of different dimensions of well-being (economic and psychological factors) whose effects on return intentions are greatly shaped by gender; men are more influenced by economic conditions than women, for whom more intimate and subjective considerations seem to play a major role. Satisfaction with life in Germany plays a major role in permanent settlement for both female and male migrants. Other factors related to integration and to the (transnational) family structure significantly affect the desire to return to the country of origin.

KEYWORDS

ageing, Germany, longitudinal data, migration, return

1 | INTRODUCTION

After several decades spent in the host countries, first-generation guest workers are approaching retirement age, which might be considered an appropriate moment to head back to the country of origin (Cela, 2017; De Coulon & Wolff, 2010; Hunter, 2011; Klinthäll, 2006; Rodriguez & Egea, 2006). Second generations born in Europe around 1960 will be approaching retirement age too (White, 2006) and might share the desire to relocate to their parents' country of origin. Notwithstanding that, in a globalised world, return migration is likely to be embedded within a broader concept of household transnational living arrangements where migration, return and re-emigration often become circular (Baykara-Krumme, 2013; Black & King, 2004; Bolzman et al., 2006; King et al., 2014, 2016; Klinthäll, 2006; Rodriguez & Egea, 2006; Waldorf, 1995). Migration literature has widely explored the determinants of the intention to return to the country of origin (Cassarino, 2004; King, 2000) and older migrants' attitudes in this respect have been addressed by growing empirical research (for an overview see Ciobanu & Ramos, 2016; Percival, 2013).

Less investigated is, however, return migration through the lens of well-being, a multidimensional concept that has been considered by a variety of disciplines (Wright, 2012). Well-being is usually assessed through both objective indicators, related to living conditions, as well as subjective ones regarding relational, emotional and mental aspects of everyday life.

All these aspects might have a key role in the stay/return dilemma as migration and re-migration represent the continuous and dynamic search for a better life in order to satisfy individual and family aspirations (Cela, 2017).

Several studies analysed the well-being of migrants and demonstrated that they are less satisfied than the native-born in the host country (see, among others, Baykara-Krumme & Platt, 2016; Nesterko et al., 2013; Safi, 2010). In this paper, we explore the role of well-being in triggering migrants' intention to return to the country of origin in later life by analysing a sample of foreign individuals surveyed in the German Socio-Economic Panel data.

Our approach is quantitative in nature since we can rely on data collected from interviews carried out with German households on a yearly basis that have been coded using numerical scales. Although the information at our disposal might be considered less exhaustive when compared with qualitative in-depth interviews, such data allow the estimation of a general model that encompasses migrants from almost 70 different countries of origin. The large number of observations, therefore, makes it possible to test and quantify the effects of several factors related to both objective and subjective well-being, and to individual and household socio-economic characteristics.

The paper is structured as follows. In the following section, we present some theoretical and empirical considerations on return migration in later life and its link with individual well-being. Then, we describe the methodology and the data employed in the quantitative analysis and discuss the main results. In the conclusions the empirical findings are related to the existing literature in order to offer a few concepts and indications for further research on the topic.

2 | “SHOULD I STAY OR SHOULD I GO?” DETERMINANTS OF RETURN DECISIONS IN LATER LIFE

The number of studies about ageing populations with migration background and their return experience is growing as the first cohorts of migrants in Western countries become old (for an overview see Ciobanu & Ramos, 2016).

When analysing return migration, one must bear in mind that it is part of the dynamic process of migration and, far from being its endpoint, it is embedded within a broader concept of return mobilities, where migration, return and re-emigration become circular (Cela, 2017; King & Christou, 2011; Vathi & King, 2017). Within this conceptualisation of migration and return as a transnational ongoing process, the nexus between ageing and migration has become a crucial research area (Baykara-Krumme, 2013; Horn & Schweppe, 2016; King et al., 2014; Percival, 2013; Rodriguez & Egea, 2006; Walsh & Nare, 2016), likewise the relation between well-being and (re)migration in later life (Cela, 2017; Percival, 2013).

The literature on return migration and well-being (Fuchs-Schündeln & Schündeln, 2009; Lapshyna & Düvell, 2015; Mara & Landesmann, 2013) suggests that the intention to stay permanently, to move to another country, or to return to the country of origin is strongly influenced by migrants' assessment of their life (life satisfaction). Nevertheless, these studies focus mainly on working-age individuals, whereas little attention has so far been given to the impact of well-being on the decision-making process of ageing migrants. In this paper, we aim to fill this gap in part by addressing the return intentions of migrants in later life and by mobilising the concept of well-being as a key focus within the ageing–mobility nexus. Following Wright (2012), well-being is a multi-dimensional concept that regards both objective and measurable conditions related to income, employment, housing and health and subjective feelings of perceived well-being, which is declined in an affective component (mental health) and a cognitive one (life satisfaction). Life satisfaction is related to how individuals appraise their life as a whole and it reflects the outcome of the migrants' efforts to achieve a better life by the process of moving to another country, by staying abroad or by returning to the country of origin. Existing literature shows that migration decisions (both emigration and return) are not driven only by economic conditions, but also by the level of life (dis)satisfaction (Lapshyna & Düvell, 2015; Mara & Landesmann, 2013).

More generically, return decision/migration is influenced by a complex interplay of different aspects (King, 2000). Although economic factors, like (un)employment status, financial situation, housing and property ownership have a relevant influence on the decision to stay/return (Bolzman et al., 2006; Yahirun, 2014), such a plan is often driven mainly by non-economic considerations. In general, integration in the host country, represented by factors like family reunification dynamics, language and citizenship status, reduces the propensity to return to the country of origin (Bolzman et al., 2006; King et al., 2014; Yahirun, 2014). At the same time, psychological factors and social ties play an important role in shaping the decision to migrate and to return in later life (Cela, 2017; Fuchs-Schündeln & Schündeln, 2009; Rodriguez & Egea, 2006). The location of children and grandchildren in Europe, together with the high quality of Western social and health care services, often prevent older migrants from a definitive return (Bolzman et al., 2006; Cela, 2017; Ganga, 2006; King et al., 2014; Razum et al., 2005). The presence of relatives and social networks in the country of origin and the possibility of free mobility across borders, on the other hand, act as pull factors in attracting migrants, along with lower costs of living,

economic and political conditions and other factors related to the quality of life (Cela, 2017; Fokkema et al., 2016; Yahirun, 2014).

Our study stands at the intersection between return migration in later life and the well-being literature and aims to provide new insights into the role of well-being on return intentions of ageing migrants.

3 | THE GERMAN SOCIO-ECONOMIC PANEL DATA AND THE EMPIRICAL METHOD

The following analysis is based on data from the German Socio-Economic Panel (GSOEP), which is a longitudinal survey that has been carried out since 1984 through yearly interviews of a large representative sample of households residing in Germany. Interviews are based on both individual- and household-level questionnaires in order to obtain substantial information on demographic and socio-economic characteristics.

Immigrants are classified as foreign-born individuals who have immigrated to Germany since 1948. Our sample includes 1,823 ageing immigrants over 50 who have responded to the GSOEP for at least five years. Of course, migrants who have returned to their place of origin are automatically excluded as we are able to follow them only as long as they are living in Germany. Data covers the period from 1984 to 2013 and 68 different countries of origin worldwide. At the beginning of the study in 1984 only those nationality groups¹ with a longer tradition of immigration to Germany were included in the sample of interviewees, whereas from 1995 onwards the immigrant subsample was significantly increased to include all other nationalities.

The purpose here is to investigate quantitatively the determinants of ageing migrants' return intentions and shed light on the role of well-being in determining such plans. The dependent variable is a binary variable that takes the value 1 if during the interview individuals stated they planned to go back either within 12 months or after a few years, and 0 if they stated they want to stay in Germany.

Our main variables of interest are indicators of well-being. In order to measure objective well-being, we first consider characteristics related to economic status (Wright, 2012): household yearly inflation-adjusted net income, home ownership, employment and retirement status. Given that these variables are likely to be highly correlated one with another, we use the Principal Component Analysis in order to build a synthetic indicator for economic well-being. Second, we consider health status, proxied by the number of individual visits to a doctor in a year (Angelini et al., 2015). Subjective well-being is captured by an index of life satisfaction (Wright, 2012); following Angelini et al. (2015) and Kóczán (2016) who investigate the determinants of life satisfaction of immigrants in Germany by means of GSOEP data, we consider a measure of overall life satisfaction, recorded on a 0–10 scale, where 0 means “Completely dissatisfied” and 10 “Completely satisfied.”²

In addition, we include in our model a set of socio-demographic characteristics and migration-related variables. Among the first, we consider age, gender, marital status, number of years of education, household size and the presence of children. Among the migration-related factors, we take into account the length of stay in Germany, citizenship status (whether immigrants are German citizens or not), presence of either parents,³ siblings, partners or children in the country of origin and whether the immigrant has a partner with no migration background (i.e., mixed family).⁴

Methodologically, we estimate a Probit model whose design best addresses the binary nature of the dependent variable. The pooling of multiple observations for the same individuals over a period of up to 30 years is managed through panel data techniques. Differently from a simple Ordinary Least Square estimator, panel models allow to control for individual unobservable characteristics, which remain constant over time (Wooldridge, 2016).⁵

4 | THE WELL-BEING IMPACT ON THE STAY/RETURN DILEMMA

Looking at some descriptive statistics, Figure 1 clearly shows how return intentions decreased over time in the GSOEP sample. In 1984, 70% of ageing migrants stated that they had plans to return to their countries of origin, while in 2013 those wishing to return were slightly more than 14% of the sample. This reinforces the evidence provided by empirical studies on the negative impact of the length of permanence in Germany on return intentions (Kuhlenkasper & Steinhardt, 2017).

Objective well-being, on the other hand, improved under several aspects: the average household income rose from 20,000 to 34,000 Euro over the period 1984–2013, the average number of visits to a doctor per year constantly decreased from a maximum value of 24 in 1994 to 11 in 2013, while the incidence of house owners and pensioners⁶ increased

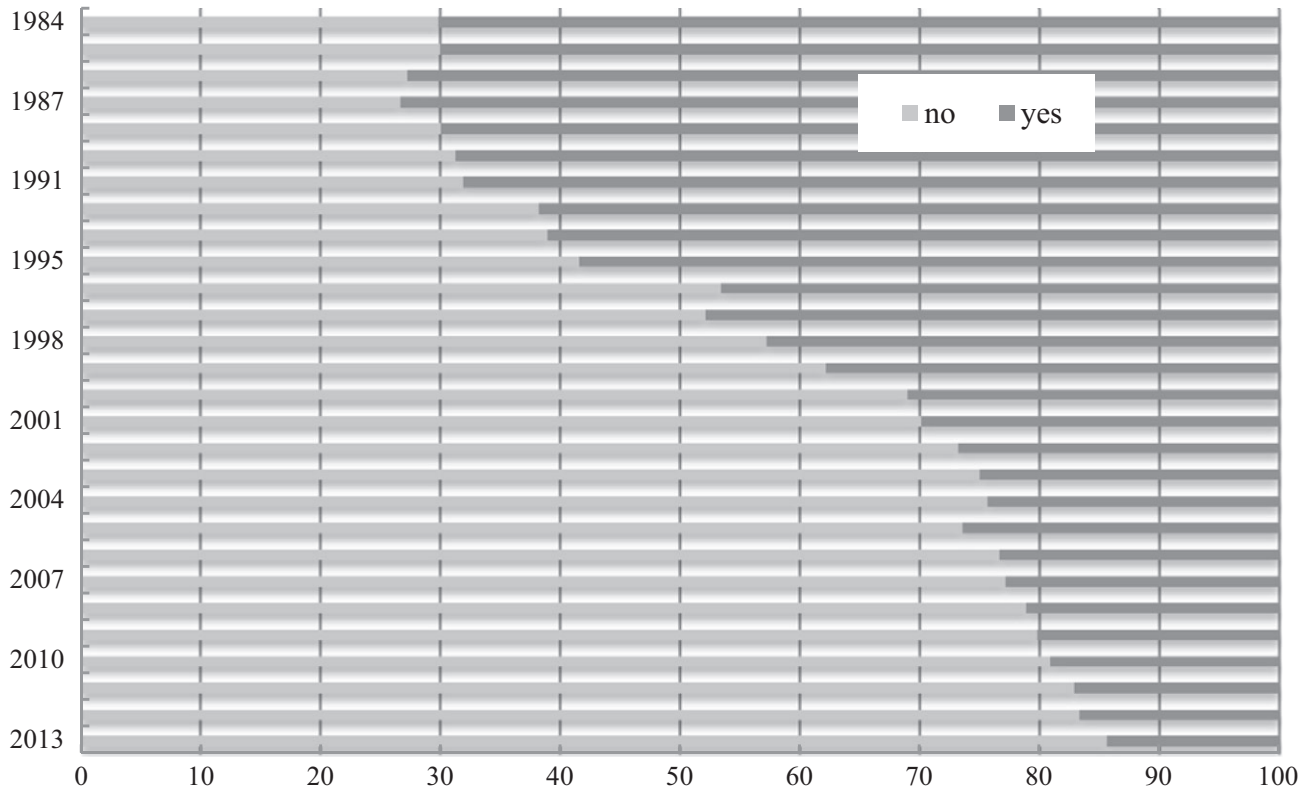


FIGURE 1 Migrants' return intentions, 1984–2013.

(Figure 2). Such a clear trend cannot be identified when considering subjective well-being. Overall life satisfaction showed a very unstable pattern over time, with the lowest average level of satisfaction associated with the strongest economic concern (Figure 3).

Estimation results are reported in Table 1. The key variables are the selected indicators of well-being. In terms of objective well-being, the intention to return is significantly and positively affected by migrants' economic situation in Germany (Bolzman et al., 2006; Hunter, 2011). This might suggest that return needs economic resources to be realised but also that

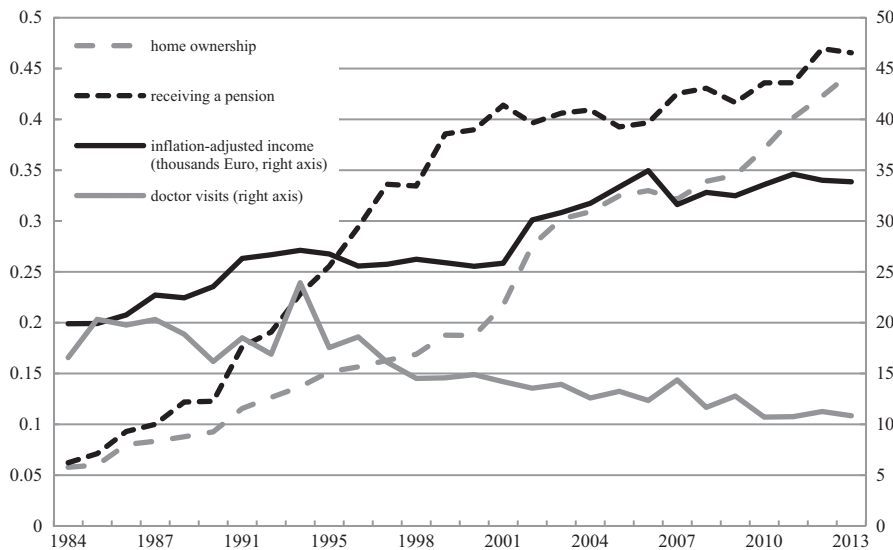


FIGURE 2 Objective well-being, 1984–2013.

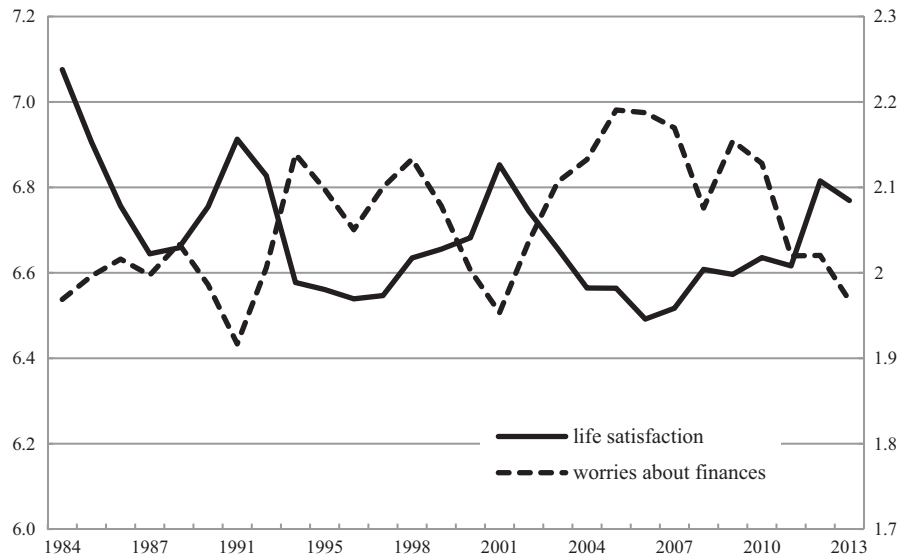


FIGURE 3 Subjective well-being, 1984–2013.

migrants in later life often wish to enjoy a higher standard of living in their countries of origin, where costs (and price levels) are not as high as in Germany. In addition, such results support the NELM view of economic success as a major trigger for return. A precarious health status, on the contrary, discourages the decision to return; deterioration of health in later life might trigger the necessity to stay close to (grand)children located in Europe and to access better healthcare services compared with those in the countries of origin (Fokkema et al., 2016; Klok et al., 2017).

When moving to subjective well-being, a higher life satisfaction diminishes the willingness to return. Enjoying life in the host country is probably related to a better social integration that translates into a life-long migration project in Germany (Mara & Landesmann, 2013). The effect of integration in the host country is indirectly conveyed also by migration-related variables such as the length of stay in Germany and the acquisition of German citizenship, both strong deterrents against return plans. One possible interpretation may be related to the fact that the most integrated migrants and those who have decided to settle permanently apply for German citizenship. National rules require non-EU migrants to renounce their citizenship in order to obtain the German one; this fact transforms return into an irreversible event that might have severe consequences if the return project fails.

Household structure (and its potential transnational nature) significantly determines return plans too. Migrants with no children have weaker ties where they currently live and therefore aim at returning to their country of origin (Bolzman et al., 2006; Ganga, 2006). The same holds for those who have a partner in the origin country (De Haas & Fokkema, 2010), whereas migrants with a German partner are more likely to settle permanently. As in Rodriguez and Egea (2006), migrants' siblings living in the country of origin hardly play any role in affecting return decisions.

A minor role in affecting the intention to return is played by individual characteristics. Higher age seems to hinder return plans (Bolzman et al., 2006). As shown in Ciobanu and Ramos (2016), return intentions change according to the life stage of individuals at the time of the interview; the younger-old seem to have a stronger desire to return while the older-old may have already decided for a definitive settlement in the host country, especially those with a precarious health status as previously discussed. A similar discouraging effect is associated with migrants' educational attainment; for highly educated individuals it is often easier to integrate in the host society, learn its language and build social ties and capital that become a relevant (sunk) cost if planning to go back (De Coulon & Wolff, 2010; Yahirun, 2014). Marital status does not seem to matter much in return intentions. If we take married individuals as reference group, being widowed represent a higher incentive to return, while being single or separated/divorced does not seem to exert any additional effect.

Gender significantly affects return intentions in our sample. Empirical findings on return migration in different European countries⁷ suggest that men have usually a stronger desire to return to the country of origin. Male migrants in the GSOEP too display stronger return attitudes compared with their female counterparts. Moreover, interesting differences emerge when analysing the effect of the independent variables separately for male and female migrants (Table 1, columns 2–3). In terms of objective well-being, the economic status hardly plays any significant role for

TABLE 1 Estimation results

	All sample	Males	Females
Objective well-being			
Pension	0.035*	0.067***	-0.010
Health status	-0.002***	-0.002**	-0.003***
Subjective well-being			
Life satisfaction	-0.051***	-0.057***	-0.045***
Worries about finance			
Migration-related variables			
Years since migration	-0.035***	-0.027**	-0.042***
German citizenship	-0.938***	-1.031***	-0.924***
Household characteristics			
Household size	0.001	-0.003	0.014
No kids	0.146**	0.122	0.162
Mixed family	-0.588***	-0.566***	-0.638***
Partner at home	0.648***	1.141***	-0.451
Children at home	0.000	0.065	-0.207
Parents at home	0.011	0.262*	-0.396**
Siblings at home	0.177	0.374	0.092
Individual characteristics			
Male	0.187*		
Age	-0.012*	-0.012	-0.016*
Education years	-0.053***	-0.071***	-0.026
Marital status: single	-0.096	-0.142	0.066
Marital status: widowed	0.480***	0.463*	0.534***
Marital status: divorced	0.167	0.219	0.194
Marital status: separated	0.146	0.364	-0.181
Observations	15,907	8,597	7,310
Number of individuals	1,826	967	859

Random effects Probit panel estimates. The dependent variable is equal to 1 if individuals stated they planned to go back either within 12 months or after a few years, or 0 if they stated they want to stay in Germany. Each coefficient conveys the effect of the respective variable once the effects of other variables have been taken into account.

*Significant at 10%, **significant at 5%, ***significant at 1%.

females, while being a strong predictor for male return plans. Indeed, in line with previous research, non-economic considerations, related to networks and subjective well-being, may be more decisive in women's reluctance to return, as for example leaving children and grandchildren settled in Europe (Bolzman et al., 2006; Cela, 2017; De Coulon & Wolff, 2010). When taking into account both health status and life satisfaction, we do not observe any gender difference in their effects on return intentions.

Differences instead arise in relation to family ties in the country of origin: parents who are still alive act as a pull factor for males and as a repelling force for females, for whom the return to the country of origin, especially in patriarchal societies, would mean losing the status and independence gained abroad (Bolzman et al., 2006; De Haas & Fokkema, 2010). By contrast, male migrants' return intentions are strongly related to the presence of their spouse in the country of origin. When moving to individual characteristics, educational attainment and age play a significant and negative role for male and female migrants, respectively. Women in our sample are on average older than their male counterparts and this may reinforce their intention to stay in Germany, close to their family and networks.

5 | FINAL REMARKS

This paper has focused on return intentions of older migrants in Germany, linking different strands of literature related to migration, well-being and ageing. By using quantitative longitudinal data we were able to test the effects of factors related to well-being and life satisfaction that had barely been analysed in previous studies. Our findings show that multiple domains of well-being significantly affect the stay/return dilemma, although gender differences matter in such a decision. Objective well-being in terms of economic status is of course a key ingredient not only of the desire to return but also of the capacity to realise such an intention, as re-locating back to the origin country is a project that necessitates mobilisation of resources. Men are, however, more influenced by economic conditions than women, for whom more intimate and subjective considerations seem to play a major role. Other factors related to family networks (being close to children and grandchildren) have a direct impact on the women's life satisfaction and negatively affect their desire to return to the country of origin.

Our analysis also suggests that it is the “younger-old” who wish to return, which means that age and health are key elements in depressing migrants' mobility in later life; the desire to leave Germany gets weaker for the less healthy and older individuals, regardless of their gender. We think that this latter aspect has several important implications for policy makers who have the capability and responsibility to ensure a “good old age” for an increasing number of retired migrants. However, as shown by Vathi and King (2017), this has been completely overlooked in policy-making on return both in the host and origin countries. Regardless of the definitive choice of the final resting place, political efforts on both sides of migration should aim at sharing financial and social responsibility (international co-responsibility) for providing healthcare to older migrants (Sun, 2014) in order to guarantee ageing individuals a good quality of life during their old age and facilitate transnational living arrangements.

On one hand, many older migrants are not returning to their countries of origin (Constant & Massey, 2003) and they are more vulnerable compared with native peers (Fokkema & Naderi, 2013); on the other hand, the possibility of being mobile and able to freely cross borders in later life increases individuals' well-being, which has a positive feedback also on other life aspects (Cela, 2017). As King et al. (2016, p. 263) highlight, “contemporary migration and family life take place against a backdrop of *increased and diversified mobilities*” which disclose themselves in many different forms, transforming the meaning of migrants' engagement in return migration into a more fluid conceptualisation of “return mobilities” (King & Christou, 2011). Many practices of transnational and cross-generational family life are deeply embedded in such mobility, and have important impacts on migrants' well-being, both at an individual and family level. This urges us to rethink the theorisation of return migration by including factors related to subjective well-being alongside the more traditional instrumental aspects as drivers of return migration, given that each individual is not just a *homo economicus* but first and foremost a *homo socialis*. In this reconceptualisation of return, we must consider transnational living as a theoretical mobility option in order to achieve multi-dimensional well-being in later life.

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ENDNOTES

¹ The immigrant groups surveyed from 1984 were Turks, Greeks, Italians, Spaniards and Yugoslavians.

² This self-reported level of satisfaction is captured through the question “How satisfied are you with your life, all things considered.”

³ In our sample, all transitions from 1 to 0 in the dummy for the presence of parents in origin country refer to the death of the migrant's mother or father, since we do not have any case in which parents moved to Germany.

⁴ We also included immigrant's nationality grouped in nine main groups: Turkey, Italy-Greece-Spain, Ex-Yugoslavia, Other EU-15 or OECD rich countries, EU new Eastern Member States, Ex-USSR, Africa, Latin America, Asia. However, we do not report and discuss results in detail given that the focus of the paper is on the impact of objective and subjective well-being.

⁵ In such a context, we prefer a Random Effects over Fixed Effects setting, as the latter would reduce interesting determinants of return intentions whenever they do not vary with time (such as gender, or years of education).

⁶ Clearly, the increasing number of retirees that receive a pension from the German government is related to the time effect of ageing people in our sample.

⁷ These findings regard men of Turkish (Böcker & Balkir, 2012), Albanian (Cela, 2017), Italian and Spanish origin (Bolzman et al., 2006; Ritcher, 2004), as well as men migrants in Sweden (Klinthäll, 2006) and France (De Coulon & Wolff, 2010).

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