

# Older migrants' life satisfaction

## What role does migration play?

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### Abstract

The paper focuses on older migrants' life satisfaction. We inquire what lies behind their life satisfaction and what role the satisfaction with the migration decision plays in their general life satisfaction. The paper draws on 56 in-depth interviews with older Italians and Germans in Switzerland. Research participants were generally satisfied with their migration decision. Sources of life satisfaction were family, social relations, professional career, and financial stability. The same themes emerged in discussions of the satisfaction with the migration decision and overall life satisfaction, revealing that migration is a means to achieving life goals. Yet, respondents did not explicitly refer to migration when reflecting on their life satisfaction.

### Key words:

older migrants; life satisfaction; satisfaction with migration; qualitative methodology

## **Introduction**

The paper focuses on life satisfaction among older migrants. For many migrants, international migration is a strategy employed to improve their well-being and that of their families. Often, migration results in improved conditions like bettered economic circumstances (Nikolova & Graham, 2015), improved educational opportunities for children (Zuccotti et al., 2017), and the possibility of sending remittances to family (Joarder et al., 2017). However, gains in objective well-being measures do not always imply increases in life satisfaction (Bălțătescu, 2007; Bartram, 2012), so one can lead an objectively good life but still be unhappy or dissatisfied (Graham, 2009). Although migration may lead to important objective improvements, it also introduces certain potentially consequential costs in the lives of migrants, such as separation from social networks in the country of origin, discrimination, or lower socio-economic status in the destination country (Hendriks et al., 2018; Hendriks & Bartram, 2019), which may subsequently influence migrants' well-being and the overall evaluation of their life. Moreover, particularly older migrants are often portrayed as experiencing double or even triple jeopardy because of age-related issues, migration background (Dowd & Bengtson, 1978), and an accumulation of disadvantaged situations throughout their lifetimes (Norman, 1985) that may impact their general life satisfaction. Although abundant research has been done on the objective consequences of migration, like economic circumstances (e.g. Hanson, 2009; Nikolova & Graham, 2015), health (Goldman et al., 2014; Hamel & Moisy, 2018; Thomas, 2016), and living conditions (e.g. Cabieses et al., 2012; Walther et al., 2020), there is still a shortage of literature on how older migrants evaluate their life as a whole (Barbiano di Belgiojoso et al., 2020; Baykara-Krumme & Platt, 2018), how they evaluate their migration decision (Baykara-Krumme & Platt, 2018; Mara & Landesmann, 2013), and what role the migration decision plays in their overall life satisfaction (Barbiano di Belgiojoso et al., 2020).

Prompted by these gaps in the literature, in this paper we inquire about the following: (1) What role does satisfaction with the migration decision play in overall life satisfaction among older migrants? (2) How do older migrants think about and evaluate their lives? and (3) How are the characteristics of research participants like sex and country of origin reflected in their satisfaction with life and with the migration decision?

### **Life Satisfaction Through the Lenses of Migration**

There is an established interest in migrants' well-being. In recent years, migration scholars have moved beyond analyzing the objective measures of well-being like economic circumstances, health, and living conditions, to evaluating individuals' subjective well-being (Barbiano di Belgiojoso et al., 2020; Bartram, 2012; Hendriks, 2015; Hendriks et al., 2018; Hendriks & Bartram, 2019; Paparusso, 2019). Generally, subjective well-being is defined as how people feel about and evaluate their lives, which includes "people's emotional responses, domain satisfactions, and global judgments of life satisfaction" (Diener et al., 1999, p. 277). More specifically, subjective well-being is divided into two components: an affective component and a cognitive component. The first refers to the extent to which a person experiences pleasant emotions and moods, while the second refers to the degree to which a person positively evaluates the overall quality of their life, often referred to as life satisfaction (Veenhoven, 2012). In this paper, we focus specifically on the cognitive component of subjective well-being: life satisfaction.

#### *General Life Satisfaction Among Migrants*

Over the last few years, migration researchers have become interested in investigating the extent to which, and under what circumstances, migrants are better off because of migration. Quantitative studies revealed that, when comparing life satisfaction of international migrants to

that of natives in the destination countries, migrants report lower life satisfaction scores than natives (Bălăţescu, 2005, 2007; Bartram, 2011; Hadjar & Backes, 2013; Sand & Gruber, 2018). Some researchers have criticized this comparison, as migrants who move from countries with low life satisfaction levels to countries with higher life satisfaction levels may experience increases in life satisfaction, while remaining below the 'satisfaction levels of natives (Bartram, 2015). Researchers have thus compared migrants to stayers in their country of origin and found that migrants report higher levels of life satisfaction than nonmigrants back home (Baykara-Krumme & Platt, 2018). But even this kind of research poses certain challenges: Migrants are a self-selected group that tends to be less risk-averse than stayers, they have higher motivation for achievement, and they differ in terms of premigration skills and wealth. These premigration differences may thus influence the estimated impact of migration on life evaluation (Hendriks et al., 2018). To account for these shortcomings, Hendriks et al. (2018) compared the life evaluation of migrants to their presumed evaluation had they not migrated. They did this by matching migrants to demographically similar persons in the country of origin who expressed a desire to migrate as well as with demographically similar stayers who had no desire to migrate. Their results showed that, globally, most migrants reported higher life evaluations after migration, and that these life evaluation levels tend to converge with those of natives in the destination country. However, they also found that there are several groups of international migrants whose life evaluation does not improve after migration; the reasons for this need further investigation.

Other studies on specific aspects of the migration experience found that assimilation in the destination country plays a role in the life satisfaction of migrants (Angelini et al., 2015), and that, for first generation migrants, the gap between their life satisfaction and that of natives can be in part explained by lower levels of social embeddedness among migrants than among natives (Arpino & de Valk, 2018). Similarly, marital status was shown to be a significant

predictor of life satisfaction, with migrants uninvolved in a serious relationship reporting lower levels of life satisfaction (Fugl-Meyer et al., 2002; Paparusso, 2019). Moreover, research has found a positive (although weak) association between income and life satisfaction among migrants, particularly among economic migrants from poorer to wealthier countries (Bartram, 2011). Finally, perceived financial well-being is also correlated to life satisfaction: Migrants in difficult financial situations report lower levels of life satisfaction (Paparusso, 2019).

### *Life Satisfaction Among Older Migrants*

Studies focusing on the life satisfaction of older migrants are scarce. The few that do exist are devoted to individuals who migrated earlier in their lifetimes and are now aging in place, but they tackle different migration trajectories. Baykara-Krumme and Platt (2018) focused on international labor migrants from Turkey to Western Europe, Sand and Gruber (2018) used the SHARE dataset to analyze older individuals who moved to Europe and within Europe, while Amit and Litwin (2010) used SHARE data to focus on migrants in Israel. Finally, Calvo et al. (2017) study older Hispanic migrants in the United States. Although these studies mostly confirmed the aforementioned findings on migrants of all ages – namely, that socio-economic status, social support, and social networks are associated with higher levels of life satisfaction – there are also some important differences. For instance, Calvo et al. (2017) revealed that older Hispanic migrants in the United States report higher levels of life satisfaction than both non-Hispanic natives and Hispanics born in the U.S., which is a stark contrast to most of the literature comparing migrants to natives. Moreover, Sand and Gruber (2018) found that the difference in life satisfaction between older migrants and natives varies depending on region of origin. These inconsistencies in the literature thus highlight the importance of further exploring life satisfaction among older migrants.

Apart from the previously mentioned quantitative studies, there is a paucity of research on these topics adopting a qualitative approach. Within these scarce qualitative studies, most dealt with

specific aspects of well-being, like loneliness (Cela & Fokkema, 2017; Ciobanu & Fokkema, 2017, 2020), successful aging (Conkova & Lindenberg, 2020), and vulnerability and coping strategies (Bolzman et al., 2004; Ciobanu & Hunter, 2017; King et al., 2014, 2017). However, to the best of our knowledge, only one has dealt specifically with life satisfaction (Silveira & Allebeck, 2001). In this study among older Somali men in East London, some of the factors perceived to influence satisfaction with life included family support and feelings of adequacy or inadequacy in access to health and social services. Ethnicity was often reported as being a contributing factor to disadvantage in access to services. Most participants who received social services and lived without family in Britain reported being unhappy with the assistance provided, as some had higher expectations of what could be provided by social services in the absence of family (Silveira & Allebeck, 2001). The authors highlight the importance of individual and cultural factors on perceptions of life satisfaction, as participants had certain expectations of support and respect in old age that went unmet, which in turn influenced their sense of life satisfaction. Silveira and Allebeck's (2001) research effectively highlights the importance of a qualitative approach to the study of life satisfaction among older migrants: It allows for an in-depth analysis of the different perceptions of life satisfaction that may be influenced by cultural factors and life course experiences – aspects that may not be uncovered with a quantitative approach.

### *Life Satisfaction: Culture, Sex, and Age*

The link between culture and life satisfaction is particularly relevant in migration research. When reviewing the scholarship on migration, we find culture is embedded within a geographical location, though culture also goes beyond national borders. How we think and feel about our lives is a result of cultural and social interactions, it is contextually intertwined, and it is shaped by characteristics like class, sex, sexualities, race, and so on (Cieslik, 2017; Thin, 2018). Life satisfaction and the concepts associated with the evaluation of one's life thus reflect

individuals' contexts during their lifetime and the environment to which they are currently exposed. In the case of migrants, this means that the evaluation of their lives may be influenced by their migratory experiences and the different situations and conditions they have encountered both in their country of origin and their destination country.

When it comes to the relationship between sex and life satisfaction, research has produced mixed results. Certain analyses have found that women have slightly higher levels of life satisfaction than men (Blanchflower & Oswald, 2004; Joshanloo & Jovanović, 2020; Jovanović, 2019; Stone et al., 2010), others found that men are slightly more satisfied than women (Helliwell & Putnam, 2004; Pinquart & Sorensen, 2001), whereas others found negligible differences between the two sexes (Kong et al., 2015). In terms of the predictors of life satisfaction, gender differences are small, but generally, employment and education-related variables are more important in determining life satisfaction in men, while variables related to marital status and interpersonal relationships are more important for women (Joshanloo, 2018). In addition, migration can impact gender roles and family relationships, thereby affecting how individuals evaluate their lives (Jibeen & Hynie, 2012).

Furthermore, age should also be considered when studying life satisfaction. In the case of both migrants and nonmigrants, age has been shown to have a U-shape relation with life satisfaction (Blanchflower & Oswald, 2004; Safi, 2010). A young and an older person may report high life satisfaction levels on the same scale, but what this satisfaction actually refers to empirically may differ for each age group.

From the above emerged a need to conduct further research examining the nuances behind life satisfaction among older migrants.

### *Satisfaction with the Migration Experience*

To the best of our knowledge, only a few studies have focused on satisfaction with the migration experience, and this was done quantitatively. Ying (1996) studied immigration satisfaction among Chinese Americans living in San Francisco (USA) and found that those who experienced social isolation, discrimination, and language problems were less satisfied with their migration experience, while those who had a mix of Chinese and non-Chinese friends and participated in more Chinese as well as mainstream "American-oriented" activities were more satisfied (Ying, 1996, p. 12). Moreover, Mara and Landesmann (2013) studied Romanian migrants in Italy and found that migrants who stay longer in the destination country have higher levels of life satisfaction, and that as satisfaction with the migration experience increases, intentions to permanently stay in the host country also increase. Although both of these studies explore the concept of satisfaction with the migration experience, and Mara and Landesmann (2013) also analyze general life satisfaction, neither of them analyzes the role of satisfaction with the migration experience in general life satisfaction. There is thus a need to explore the importance that migrants give to their personal migration decision and following experiences when evaluating their overall life satisfaction, as migratory experiences, as well as different cultures and contexts, may influence the way migrants think and feel about their lives.

This paper, therefore, contributes to the existing research in several ways: In addition to adding to the scarce literature on life satisfaction among older migrants, it adopts a qualitative approach to better understand how migrants evaluate their migration decision and experience, to investigate the role that the satisfaction with the migration decision plays in overall life satisfaction, and to discern the concepts and interpretations that lie behind the overall life satisfaction of older migrants.



## Method

The paper draws on 56 interviews with Italian and German migrants aged 63 and over residing in Switzerland in the cantons of Geneva, Basel and Ticino. These three cantons cover the linguistic diversity of Switzerland, have large migrant populations, and are border cantons with France, Germany and Italy. We opted to study Germans and Italians because they are among the largest older migrant groups in Switzerland (FSO, 2018). The Italian respondents in our sample migrated to Switzerland between the 1940s and 1970s, with one exception of a man who arrived for work in 1998, and at retirement opted to stay in Geneva. The German respondents residing in Geneva and Basel migrated between the 1950s and 1970s, while those residing in Ticino are a rather heterogeneous group, with the first arrivals in our sample in the 1960s, and the latest in the 2000s. The particularity of the canton of Ticino is that some German respondents had ties to Ticino and chose to retire there. In this sense, three of the German respondents in Ticino fall rather in the category of international retirement migrants, rather than older former labor migrants (Ciobanu et al., 2017). While the Italian migrants mainly held low-skilled jobs, the German migrants held more professional and administrative positions. These differences in the sample composition correspond to what we know from the literature: Migration from Italy was marked by the migration agreements from 1948 and 1964 (Piguet 2009), which was mainly a migration of persons with low socio-economic status (Bolzman & Vagni, 2018). The German migration to Switzerland has a long history (Piguet 2009), and since the 1970s, Germans have constituted the majority of highly skilled European migrants in Switzerland (Pecoraro, 2005).

Of the 56 interviews<sup>1</sup>, 30 were with Italians (9 in Geneva, 10 in Basel, and 11 in Ticino) and 26 with Germans (7 in Geneva, 10 in Basel, and 9 in Ticino). Respondents were recruited through

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<sup>1</sup>One interview was with both husband and wife for a total of 57 participants. Interviews with two women were done during one meeting.

migrant associations, local institutions for the elderly, the Italian Catholic church and German Protestant churches, personal networks, among persons who responded to the University of Geneva VLV (Vivre-Leben-Vivere) survey and who had accepted to be re-contacted for other studies, and through snowballing. Interviews with the Italians were conducted in Italian, with one exception where the respondent spoke in French. Interviews with the Germans were conducted in the canton of Geneva in French, in the canton of Ticino in Italian, English and French, and in the canton of Basel in German by a former German MA student from the University of Geneva. All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and the interviews in German were translated into French by the MA student. Both authors speak Italian, French, and English and were able to analyze the interviews independently.

The sample consisted of 34 women and 23 men. Among the Italian respondents, 14 were women and 17 were men, while among the German respondents, 20 were women and 6 were men. Respondents were on average 76 years old, 75 being the average age of the Italians and 78 that of the Germans. The oldest respondent was a 94-year-old Italian man, the youngest a 63-year-old Italian man. The average duration of residence in Switzerland among our sample was 52 years for Italians and 44 years for Germans. In terms of marital status, 21 Italians and 13 Germans were married, 7 Italians and 8 Germans were widowed, 1 Italian and 4 Germans had never been married, and 1 Italian and 1 German were divorced. While most interviews were conducted with persons residing in their private homes, three were done in nursing homes. The data were anonymized, and all participants were given pseudonyms.

This paper draws on qualitative in-depth interviews conducted as part of a larger project and focuses on the following two themes: satisfaction with the migration decision and with life in general. To understand life satisfaction, we asked people how satisfied they were with their life, the aspects that they were most and least satisfied with, and what, if anything, they would

change in their life. The interview guidelines were submitted and accepted by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Social Sciences of the University of Geneva.

The authors adopted an inductive approach and carried out a thematic analysis of the data. They coded the interviews independently with the use of qualitative coding software Atlas.ti and discussed several times the themes they identified in the transcripts. This allowed for triangulation of researchers (Denzin, 1978 in Johnson et al., 2007).

## **Results**

This section addresses the main research questions of this paper: (1) What role does the satisfaction with the migration decision play in overall life satisfaction among older migrants? (2) How do older migrants think about and evaluate their lives? and (3) How are research participants' characteristics like sex and country of origin reflected in their satisfaction with life and with the migration experience?

### *Migration Reasons and Satisfaction with Migration*

When asked about the satisfaction with the migration decision, older migrants mentioned three aspects: the reasons for migrating, their satisfaction with the migration decision, and their migration experience. These aspects were very much intertwined for older migrants, and it was difficult to separate them. The motives for migrating divided respondents into two categories: those who did not make an active decision to migrate and those who made an active decision and migrated for financial reasons or because they came across better professional opportunities. The participants who portrayed migration as a passive experience, as something that *happened* to them rather than an active aim, were mostly women of both Italian and German origin, who followed their husbands to Switzerland.

When he [the husband] finished his studies, he told me that he had applied for a job in Basel. It had nothing to do with me, my wishes or thoughts. He was behind it all. Then he got a job at X [enterprise name] here in Basel in 1963, and so we moved to Switzerland. And I, as his little wife, came with him, until that time I had worked, and I thought I could continue working in Switzerland. [...] So it was my husband's full decision, though I loved to come with him here. It was like winning the jackpot for me. (Luise, F, 88, German, Basel)

On the other hand, most men depicted migration as an active decision. In many Italian men, the presence of family or acquaintances in Switzerland acted as a pull factor that led to the migration decision. Although in most cases this pull factor was accompanied by the necessity to migrate because of economic circumstances, on some rare occasions, participants revealed that migration was not fueled by any particular financial need.

My father was working here. And my father thought that for a young person Geneva was the ideal place to live one's life...To develop a life and a career. *Voilà*. And I arrived as a young bricklayer, and then *voilà*. And then...I didn't want to come because [...] there weren't unemployment problems or anything, because I was born in northern Italy. (Bacco, M, 67, Italian, Geneva)

Most of the Italian men spoke about migration as a solution to difficult economic situations in their hometowns. They referred to poverty, lack of jobs, or insufficient salaries as the drivers behind migration.

It was the best decision I made. [...] Because the economic situation at that time in my region was not very good: There was no lack of work, in fact there was a lot of it, but it was not a decent standard of living, you worked a lot and earned very little.

[...] Every family had 4 or 5 children and barely managed to support them, they all had no future. Most took the road of emigration. (Tiberio, M, 66, Italian, Basel)

This was not the case among older Germans, who viewed migration as a beneficial, but not a compulsory nor indispensable professional choice.

Among the women who depicted migration as an active experience, the Germans particularly talked about migration to acquire new skills or as a professional opportunity. Svea, a German woman, first moved to Neuchâtel to study and then moved back to Germany to continue her education and become a teacher. Years later, health issues brought her teaching career to a halt, so Svea looked at Switzerland for professional openings. She recounted her decision to permanently move to Basel:

I was thinking of going to French-speaking Switzerland or Bern. Basel I didn't even think about it. But Basel was the city with the most professional opportunities. And in the pharmaceutical industry here in Basel, they were looking for female translators. I hadn't studied translation, but they accepted me anyway. I started working at Y [enterprise name] as a French, English, German translator. And during this time, I gave French language lessons in an evening school, because I intended to become a teacher again after two years in Germany. And after a year, I was offered the position of director of the publishing house at Y. (Svea, F, 72, German, Basel)

On the other hand, the Italian women who portrayed migration as an active experience described it mostly as an economic necessity for them or for their family.

Overall, regardless of the differing reasons for their migration, most participants reported being satisfied with their decisions. Generally, respondents tried to justify or legitimize the success of their migration using objective life events, like founding a family, work experiences, and

upper professional mobility. For several respondents, the satisfaction expressed with their migration decision was linked to their reasons for migration: Those who moved to join their partners explained their satisfaction with their migration in terms of family accomplishments; those who migrated for economic or professional reasons expressed it in terms of work and career accomplishments.

Some German women expressed their satisfaction with migration in terms of freedom:

Germany was too hard for me, I always had to work like that, it was too much. [...] I was only a secretary. A secretary. And then when I came to Switzerland they said, "Oh, you can write well", and I became something like a journalist. It was always easier for me in Switzerland than in Germany. And from the very first moment, I liked it better in Switzerland than in Germany. And I had the impression that I was freer. I can breathe better. (Filippa, F, 68, German, Ticino)

A small minority of respondents were not fully satisfied with their migration decision, and this was more the case among Italians rather than Germans. These participants had rather difficult life courses: Ilaria had an alcoholic father and was sent into an orphanage; Eugenio wanted to return to Italy and build a house there, but medical issues for both him and his wife as well as the lack of good medical infrastructure in rural Italy persuaded him to stay in Switzerland.

To conclude, we observed differences between the experience of migration as a necessity, most notably among Italians, and migration as a choice to learn new skills and to have better professional opportunities, which was the case for Germans. Moreover, a look at the intersection between sex and country of origin shows that certain German women talked about migration as a professional opportunity, while Italian women described it mostly as an economic need or as something that passively happened because their husbands wanted to

move. Although some Italian and German women in our sample actively decided to migrate independently, they are less numerous than those who migrated passively.

### *Older Migrants' Satisfaction with Life*

This part looks deeper into the dimensions mentioned by respondents when answering three questions: “Looking back, are you satisfied with the life you lived?” “Which issues in your life are you most and least satisfied with?” and “If you could relive your life, is there anything you would change?” The answers allow us to understand what lies behind satisfaction with life among older migrants from Italy and Germany in Switzerland. We identified four main pillars of life satisfaction for most respondents: financial stability, professional career, good family relations, and – more broadly – good social relations. Delma, a well-off German woman who lives part of the year in Ticino and part of the year in Paris, summarized most of the participants’ sources of life satisfaction in one response:

I do not have any financial worries, I am in good physical condition, I can enjoy life, I have a very good relationship with my husband, I have a satisfying life, I have a very good relationship with my daughter and with my son-in-law, with my grandsons, I have good friends here, I find I live in a part of the world that is very beautiful, the landscape is superb, I have a superb view of Lake Maggiore, there is little I can complain about. (Delma, F, 78, German, Ticino)

Among the other research participants, we found at least one of these different elements mentioned by each of them, forming the puzzle that is life satisfaction. To begin with, *family* – in the sense of having a good relationship with one’s partner, one’s children, their achievements, or just broadly having a family – constitutes one of the essential pillars for life satisfaction in old age. Gelsa, a German woman aged 88 from Geneva, summed it up: “*About which issues in your life are you most satisfied?* My marriage, the children.”

Older Italians also reinforced the importance of a strong partnership. Renata, who is now widowed, recounted her relationship with her husband:

My husband and I, we were always doing things together – always always always – we never argued. And once a woman asked me what my husband told me to vote. What did my husband tell me? I discussed with my husband what I think because I have my own mind and opinions, not those of my husband, and my husband would never tell me do this or do that. [...] And we were always discussing if it is a good thing or a bad thing then each of us was doing what one wanted. [...] The respect is the basis of everything. (Renata, F, 84, Italian, Basel)

Second, broader *social relations* were also very important for older migrants. Several participants emphasized the satisfaction they derived from being needed by others as well as from hosting people in their homes. We observed that social relations are important not only as contacts that one can activate to receive social support, but also from the point of view of being part of a community, having a purpose in life, and giving back to others.

Third, the *professional career* was also important to our participants. This was particularly the case of men, engaged either in high- or low- skilled careers, as well as among some of the women from Germany, but less so for Italian women. Ilka, 75, originally from Germany and now living in Basel, migrated to follow her husband after having met him in Germany. She finished her university studies in Basel and then worked in art conservation.

I've never had a professional life in Germany. I think working life makes a very big difference. And a job that makes you happy is actually the greatest happiness for me. And I have to say that I've found that happiness. (Ilka, F, 75, German, Basel)



Fourth, *financial stability* was also important, although only mentioned by only a minority of respondents. Finances were mentioned both by people who were very well off and by others who lived more modestly, but still felt that they could provide for their families.

When analyzing the aspects older migrants were least satisfied with in their life or that they would change, we found the research participants referred to the same life domains that they had mentioned when evaluating their lives, thus reinforcing their importance. *Family*, most often cited as a source of life satisfaction, was also cited as a source of dissatisfaction and an aspect of the past some wished to change.

*If you could change your life what are the things you regret and would like to change?*

My husband was someone who didn't like contact and it was the opposite of me.

Then I would have chosen another husband. Otherwise I was very happy with him.

So it was only that aspect that I regret very much. (Birgitta, F, 76, German, Geneva)

Similarly, *education, career, and professional achievements* were also evoked as important factors in both life satisfaction and dissatisfaction. For some Italian migrants who came from more disadvantaged economic backgrounds, their own and their families' financial necessities interrupted their educational career. When asked what he would have done differently if he had the opportunity to relive his life, Tiberio said:

I would study. My parents wanted to send me but under certain conditions, because they were farmers and always had work at home, 7 days a week. Other families and other schoolmates did both [...] but I wasn't able to do both, and I preferred to go to work. I regret that I didn't learn anything else to do another job. (Tiberio, M, 66, Italian, Basel)

The importance of the sources of life satisfaction outlined in this section is reinforced by their recurrence in the migrants' narratives. For some older migrants, the same sources of life satisfaction come up in answers about general life satisfaction, regarding the aspects they are most and least satisfied with, and regarding what they would change in their life.

### *The Migration Decision and Satisfaction with Life*

Two common elements that come up in the answers to the questions regarding satisfaction with the migration decision and evaluation of life satisfaction: establishing a family and achieving a certain professional standing. These were mentioned by both older Italians and Germans. In other words, respondents evoked achievements accomplished through migration, and later on they mentioned them again as important to their life satisfaction. A German migrant residing in Geneva exemplified the situation of several respondents, who set up a family through or following migration and for whom having a family was crucial:

I came initially for a year to learn French, got married, had my children here. It became my place to live. I don't regret it.

*At that time, you came only to learn French, but afterward do you think you have achieved your goals in life in general?*

Yes, because my goal was to start a family and that... that fulfilled me. (Birgitta, F, 76, German, Geneva)

The quote from the interview with Birgitta started with an account of the context of migration and her life history, but it moved on to concern what gave meaning to her life: having a family. Later, when she was speaking about life satisfaction, all her answers – both positive and negative – were related to the family.

The professional career is another aspect that appeared both regarding the migration experience and general life satisfaction. Svea was one of the several respondents who linked her migration

decision to the importance of her professional career for her life satisfaction. She came to Switzerland for professional reasons, and when asked about her most important sources of life satisfaction, Svea said:

With my professional career, it's always a privilege for me that I have things to do that give my life meaning. I've had a lot of freedom in doing projects for Y [enterprise name]. I've been very lucky with that. (Svea, F, 72, German, Basel)

Svea's connection between her career and her life satisfaction reinforces the idea that migration is a means to achieve (greater) satisfaction. Participants did not accredit migration as such to their satisfaction with life, though elements of the migration decision and experience did reappear in their overall life evaluation. Only one participant mentioned the migration experience when reflecting on what he would have done differently in life. Armin (M, 70, German, Ticino) recounted his dissatisfaction with the job that had brought him to Switzerland and later explained that, looking back, he might have reconsidered his move.

These common elements, which are often indirect consequences of migration and appear to contribute to one's satisfaction with life, lead us to infer that migration plays a role in individuals' overall life satisfaction, despite it not being explicitly voiced by older migrants.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

We would like to emphasize the contribution this paper makes to the scarce research on life satisfaction among older migrants; we also present its limitations. Finally, we address the policy pertinence and proposes future research directions.

We find that respondents are generally satisfied with their migration decision. This result may partly be because of the length of their stay in Switzerland: On average, the respondents have lived in Switzerland for 48 years, so there is a higher probability of their reporting satisfaction

with the migration decision, as otherwise they would have more likely already returned to the home country (Mara & Landesmann, 2013). In addition, the element of autobiographical memory in old age may come into play: Older adults tend to retrospectively reappraise negative events in a more positive light than younger adults (Comblain et al., 2005; Schryer & Ross, 2014). Therefore, even if participants had negative migration experiences, they may have re-evaluated them more positively, consequently reporting higher satisfaction with their migration decision.

Looking at the differences between respondents regarding their migration decision, three distinctions emerge: First, the distinction between an active migration decision, primarily among men, and migration as a passive experience, primarily among women. This reflects the history of migration, as for a long period of time, women's participation in migration was portrayed as that of following men (Boyd & Grieco, 2003). Second, among the female respondents, Italian women mainly migrated passively or out of financial need; several German women also passively followed their partners, but some spoke about migration for professional reasons rooted not in necessity but in freedom of choice. These differences reflect the gender norms characterized by the male breadwinner model that dominated Italy (Moreno Mínguez, 2005) and Germany (Gottschall & Bird, 2003) during the 1950s and 60s – roughly the years of migration of our respondents. Nonetheless, in Germany, the 1960s saw a large influx of women into the labor force, and there was an increased emphasis on women's training (Harsch, 2015). Third, Italian men migrated mainly out of economic exigency, whereas German men migrated in search of professional opportunities. This difference can be explained by the context of the migration to Switzerland. Switzerland's guest worker program with Italy led to the arrival of mainly low skilled migrants (Bolzman & Vagni, 2018; Piguet, 2009) whereas German migrants in Switzerland are generally highly qualified (Pecoraro, 2005).

Regarding sources of life satisfaction, the analysis revealed four main dimensions, confirming the quantitative literature: family, broader social relations, professional career and financial stability (Arpino & de Valk, 2018; Fugl-Meyer et al., 2002; Papparusso, 2019). The importance of family ties, social relations, and financial situation is mentioned by both male and female respondents. Additionally, we also find gender differences: Professional career is invoked predominantly by men and by a minority of German women, confirming some of the literature on the predictors of life satisfaction across sexes (Joshi, 2018).

When it comes to the relationship between satisfaction with the migration decision and general life satisfaction, migration appears to be a means to achieve satisfaction with life. Through migration, people have reached their life goals, like forming a family, having jobs that allowed them to provide for themselves and their families, and, for some, professional achievements. These aspects were mentioned again concerning their satisfaction with life. Nevertheless, it is intriguing that research participants, with one exception, did not mention migration as such when answering the questions on life satisfaction, when speaking about what they are most or least satisfied with, or what they would change. Reflecting on why respondents did not speak about their migration experience when thinking about their life satisfaction, we propose three possible explanations: First, their migration experience and their life are so intertwined that they may have become one and the same. They migrated with certain goals aimed at improving their lives, and they then attained those goals through migration. The role of migration in their life satisfaction may thus have become so obvious to them, so interwoven in their life, that they do not distinguish between the two.

Second, despite migration being a very important event that impacts all life domains and creates a new identity for those who experience it, in most of our sample, migration took place more than 40 years ago. There is thus a possibility that migration being such a distant event makes it less prominent in participants' reflection on present general life satisfaction.

A third potential explanation is linked to the design of the interview guidelines. The question on the satisfaction with the migration decision is placed at the beginning of the interview and the questions on satisfaction with life at the end of the interview. We could imagine that, because of the distance between the questions and because people have already spoken about one of the issues, they would not repeat it.

The contributions of this paper lie in its study of life satisfaction among older migrants, a topic that has so far received scarce attention in the literature (Barbiano di Belgiojoso et al., 2020). Moreover, the paper adopts a qualitative approach in its understanding of satisfaction with life, a domain largely dominated by quantitative studies. This allows us to better grasp the experiences of migration, to adjudge its embedded role in overall life satisfaction, and to discern the concepts and interpretations that lie behind the 'overall life satisfaction of older migrants. While the findings concerning the factors contributing to life satisfaction confirm the quantitative literature (Arpino & de Valk, 2018; Fugl-Meyer et al., 2002; Paparusso, 2019), the excerpts from our interviews point to more nuanced interpretations. For example, "freedom" is not a variable usually used in surveys, and its association with the migration experience is not talked about in quantitative studies – yet some participants in our research evoke this concept. Also, when asked about their satisfaction with the migration decision, respondents do not limit themselves to this, but rather expand their thought process and link the satisfaction with the reasons for migrating. The respondents' migration stories shed light on the link between the reason(s) for migration and for staying, and general life satisfaction.

When it comes to the research limitations, while we interviewed a large number of respondents and the research covers three cantons in Switzerland, one limitation regards the use of snowball sampling. While the aim was to have a varied sample in terms of sex and level of education, there is some internal homogeneity in the subsamples. Yet, this homogeneity allows us to better compare these two specific migrant groups aging in place in Switzerland. Another limitation

could be that persons who have higher life satisfaction are more open to doing an interview and sharing their life experiences. However, our analysis discussed different sources of life satisfaction, the aspects that respondents were most and least satisfied with, and the role of satisfaction with the migration decision for life satisfaction. Therefore, even if persons more satisfied with their life would have been more inclined to participate in the research, they were still prompted to reflect on aspects they were least satisfied with. Moreover, research participants were consistent in not explicitly mentioning the experience of migration in their responses on life satisfaction, which represents the core contribution of the paper.

The policy relevance of this topic is stressed by the world-wide trend in population ageing and particularly the increase of older migrants in Europe (Ciobanu et al., 2017). Substantial efforts in policy making have gone to healthy ageing, which the World Health Organization states is “about creating the environments and opportunities that enable people to be and do what they value throughout their lives” (WHO website). To promote healthy aging for older natives and migrants, we need further research to analyze how these populations perceive what is valuable to their lives and the resources they mobilize to improve their life satisfaction. Our paper provides some elements regarding the sources of life satisfaction and the role of the satisfaction with the migration decision in general life satisfaction within a particular population: older migrants from Italy and Germany in Switzerland. Looking forward, it would be pertinent to analyze different categories of older migrants and explore whether other contexts of migration, such as forced migration or migration in old age, and satisfaction with migration decisions taken under other conditions might play a role in general life satisfaction.

Other future lines of research could explore the conflicts that can emerge between sources of life satisfaction. For instance, by returning to Italy, Italian migrants may achieve greater financial security. Yet, if their family ties remain in Switzerland, this could lead to a decrease

in life satisfaction. It would be thus important to study how people handle such conflicts between sources of life satisfaction.



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## **Acknowledgment**

The authors are thankful to Julia Sauter who conducted the interviews with older Germans in the canton of Basel as well as transcribed and translated them.

## **Funding**

The data analyzed in this paper was collected during a research project funded by the People Programme (Marie Curie Actions) of the European Union's Seventh Framework Programme (FP7/2007-2013) under REA grant agreement no 328518. The work of both authors on this paper is part of the Professorship Grant 'Transnational Ageing among Older Migrants and Natives: A Strategy to Overcome Vulnerability', financed by the Swiss National Science Foundation, grant number PP00P1\_179077/1.