Introduction[1]

Akureyri is home to almost 800 immigrants for a total of 18,000 inhabitants. Research on the immigrant population in Iceland typically focuses on problems, discrimination, prejudice and difficulties; immigration issues in Iceland have been looked at through the lens of unemployment[2], difficult working conditions[3] and negative portraits of foreigners in the media[4]. However, in 2012, in a study conducted on the immigrant population of this town, 82% of 200 respondents displayed high life satisfaction[5]. Drawing on in-depth interviews realised with immigrants in Akureyri, we examine the experiences of well-being of migrants who have come to settle in his town.

Our analysis reveals that well-being is higher among immigrants with strong social capital and with some connections to local networks. Individuals often resort to individual *rationale* to explain their circumstances, their choices and their subsequent well-being. We begin the discussion by very briefly reviewing the literature on well-being and by introducing the context in which the study was realised. In the following section, we examine the relationship between feelings of well-being and the urban environment; then we explore the belief that opportunities are plentiful in this northern town, and finally look at the relationship between the social support of immigrants and their well-being.

Literature on immigration and well-being

The booming economy of the beginning of the 21st century and the subsequent demand for labour, especially in the construction and service sectors, resulted in a rapid increase in the number of foreign nationals coming and settling in[6]. Although the economic crisis of 2008 decreased the political and public interest for immigration issues[7], this significant growth of newcomers has raised interest among social scientists. Being the largest minority group in Iceland, the Polish have received a fair bit of attention in social studies, although social scientists have also looked at other communities such as the Filipino[8] and the Thai[9]. Immigration scholars argue that most immigration to Iceland in the past ten years is labor-related, hence providing a body of literature focusing on employment[10] and the financial crisis[11]. Immigration studies often oppose two groups who either welcome or disapprove of migration[12], and many reports highlight the feelings of discrimination and misunderstanding encountered by the newcomers[13]. The increase in the number of

immigrants settling in Iceland, the financial crisis of 2008 and the following rise in unemployment resulted in a growth of negative attitudes from the host culture[14], and surveys on discrimination and prejudice have been more numerous in recent years[15]. However, there is still a lack of knowledge about the status of immigrants and minority groups[16], and if little is known about the impact of discrimination and prejudice on immigrant's daily lives, even less is known about their wellbeing. Although some effort has been made in the past decade in the field of happiness studies, anthropologists have been particularly silent on the subject of well-being and happiness[17]. Iceland is no exception, despite being every year one of the top countries on the OECD life satisfaction index and other similar inventories. The lists ranking the happiest nations in the world very often lack analysis, and the real experience of well-being and happiness gets lost in the rankings[18]. There is very little social studies and ethnography on well-being in the Nordic countries, and practically none in Iceland[19].

Elsewhere, a few social scientists have devoted research to understand the complexities of emotions and subjective well-being although not many have looked at migration contexts. European research has shown that if immigrants seem to have higher levels of happiness than "stayers", people who display higher levels of happiness are also more likely to migrate[20]. Investigations on the relationship between immigration and well-being typically focuses on measures of well-being such as health, mental or psychological well-being[21] and economic well-being[22]. Happiness experiences and emotions have not been investigated much in immigration contexts, although social sciences could learn much from personal narratives on those topics.[23]

Context, participants and methodology

Located in the north of the country, Akureyri is the second largest town in Iceland. The population has been on a steady increase since the beginning of the XXth century[24], and the foreign population has also grown from 369 in 2004 to 771 in 2015[25]. Representing almost 5% of the population, Akureyri´s immigrants originate primarily from Poland, Denmark, Syria, Germany and Thailand. Akureyri offers a relatively varied labour market consisting of skilled and unskilled jobs in various sectors, including the fishing industry, the research and education sector, the health sector and the tourism and service sectors.

This study uses a narrative methodology. The authors realized interviews with immigrants living in Akureyri and thereafter analyzed them by using discourse analysis, as research has shown that narrative texts are stocked with empirical evidence[26]. Research also shows that qualitative studies are more appropriate to understand social conditions, contexts and emotions[27] in anthropological studies. To gain a better understanding of the experiences of well-being in the foreign community, we conducted thirty semi-structured in-depth interviews with immigrants living in Akureyri. We used snowball sampling to recruit participants of various countries of origin, background, occupation and age group. We required each participant to consider himself an immigrant, to live permanently in Akureyri and to agree to participate in the study. Eighteen women and twelve men were interviewed, mostly originating from Europe; twelve people came from Eastern Europe and fifteen from Western Europe. Two-thirds of the participants were married or in a relationship. Most participants were highly educated and 21 held university degrees. Half of the participants had been in Iceland five years or longer and all of them with the exception of three came entirely voluntarily; the latter group followed their parents as teenagers. The interviews took place in whichever language the participant was most comfortable–English and Icelandic–and a third of the interviews were done in Polish by native-speakers. The interviews were recorded and accurately transcribed, and the interviews in Polish were also translated. The information collected in the interviews was classified in categories and interpreted; we used the discourse analysis method. The participants were assured that their contribution would remain anonymous, and were free not to answer any of the questions.

The emphasis of this project has been placed on people's self-perception of happiness. We followed Neil Thin when he says that scholars should explore "how people develop a sense that their lives are good"[28]. We refer to "happiness" or "well-being" as our respondents understand them and look at what elements are important to them to contribute to "a good life". If "happiness is imagined, generated and expressed"[29] differently by different people, depending on personal, social and cultural contexts, we were able to draw and identify from the interviews three main factors that seem to influence greatly the migrants' vision of happiness: the physical and social environment, the possibility for personal achievement and the feeling of reciprocity.

"Akureyri sé besta staður á Íslandi": When the physical environment influences

social tranquility

If urban green spaces affect health positively[30], studies on the physical environment also reveal that access to nature and the proximity to natural surroundings impact positively the mental wellbeing of individuals[31]. The interviews show nothing but praise about the environment and the city itself:

"It´s close to the nature, you feel like in a luxury society, going to the swimming pool and being almost alone or going to the hospital with no problems, going to the forest and being alone walking." (Excerpt from interview 9 – Male, Western Europe)

According to most, Akureyri is a nice and comfortable place to live. This attitude towards the place becomes obvious when even the winter darkness is seen in a positive light: "I've already fell in love with the darkness" (Excerpt from interview 13, Female, Western Europe), and when asked about the weather, one participant responded: "I actually like it, I like the storms." (Excerpt from interview 10, Male, Western Europe).

Beauty, peace, ease and calm are all attributes associated with Akureyri: "I like Akureyri and its calm atmosphere" (Excerpt from interview 28, Female, Western Europe). No risks, no violence, no stress often associated with their home countries or home towns, the participants talk about it like being the perfect little hub of the polar circle. Nearly all participants refer to the town itself as being the "right" size, rather small yet with everything they need. The feeling of being in a small town, calm and close to nature also enhances the feeling of security[32]. In small towns, "the close-knit community and the feelings of being acquainted with most people in the surrounding community may contribute to a greater sense of living in an area that is secure and trustful"[33]. One participant told us: "It's great because people know you and it's safe and people are watching out for you." (Excerpt from interview 2 – Male, Western Europe).

Feelings of personal and family safety are important, and every parent participating in the interviews makes much of the safety in town and the accompanying feeling of freedom experienced by their children.

"I like it a lot, it's a great place for my boys. I don't know if you have kids, but it's grand and

easy, it's very safe you know, they just wander when they come from school and do their thing. Sort of like my memories of when I was younger. [Everything] is open, […], my boys can wander to school, it's a very safe environment. It's a very carefree existence." (Excerpt from interview 10 – Male, Western Europe)

"There's a lot of safety for my child. I don't know, I don't have to worry about the next day. Mostly, it is safety for my child, the rest I don't care. […] I think that's what keeping me here." (Excerpt from interview 3 – Male, Eastern Europe)

Thus the physical space discourages feelings of anxiety and seems to play an essential role in the immigrants' ability to feel relaxed; the risks and worries associated with towns and cities in the participants' home countries disappears in the midst of the peaceful atmosphere of Akureyri:

"It's a much more beautiful country, cleaner and not as noisy and not as…dangerous. I remember when we were playing we were not supposed to go in alleys that are dark or something, you don't really have to fear about something like that here. When the kids are playing until eight o'clock at night and it's already dark you don't have to worry." (Excerpt from interview 4 – Female, Western Europe)

The safety, simplicity and ease created by the settings leaks out onto all spheres of existence: work, administration, security and business. "The easiness of Icelandic life lies in its lack of formality." (Excerpt from interview 31 – Male, Western Europe). We interviewed a couple who had specifically moved to Iceland to escape the stress following the financial crisis in their home country; although they had a house, good jobs and no financial problems, they "needed peace". The stress-free factor seems to be particularly important in work situations:

"Sometimes […] it's coffee break, everybody is going to the coffee break, but I'm still sitting in front of the computer finishing something, and they are laughing but that's me. The Icelanders are just more… there's not so much stress. […] I can feel I'm much more relaxed here in Iceland. When I go to my hometown for a visit, you can feel the stress." (Excerpt from interview 12, Female, Western Europe)

"What I like about [work] is the atmosphere. It is totally different than in [my home country]. You see when I was working [there] there was always a pressure. Here people seem to be more relaxed […] Here, I was late couple of times and nobody said a word. I was also surprised because at the very beginning my boss told me that I work "too fast" [laughing]. Well now I know that I don't have to be in a rush or put too much effort in." (Excerpt from interview 21, Female, Eastern Europe)

A few people, coming to work in Iceland temporarily, never went back to their home countries and decided to settle in Iceland; their migration became permanent when their original intention was only to move temporarily. Those migrants to Iceland frame their arrivals almost as an apparent random turn of events. A sense of "escape" is more accidental than sought after; the participants are mostly looking for work and a different experience for themselves and their family, and it is merely a coincidence that it happens in a small relaxed town.

The possibilities for achievement

More than half of the participants mentioned work as their main reason for moving to Iceland, and a common global assumption is that people migrate hoping for a brighter economic future[34]. Meckl & Ólafsson's study of 2013[35] revealed that income seemed to have little to do with happiness amongst the immigrant population of Akureyri, as have many studies looking at the relationship between money and happiness[36]. If the sentence "I have everything I need" was heard a few times during the interviews, the participants barely make mention of income, but it is hard to assert whether it is because it is not a determinant factor in their well-being or if people feel uncomfortable when discussing finances. If "more money does not necessarily buy more happiness"[37], the feeling of fulfilment at work, on the other hand, seem to be an important factor in the well-being of the participants. On top of having a job for economic and material purposes, the participants expect work to be a purposeful experience.

Most participants were not entirely satisfied with their professional situation, however coping with a little pain might be the price they accept to pay for reaching greater goals: "Sometimes when you're trying to achieve something you have to go through discomfort." (Excerpt from interview 2, Male, Western Europe). This participant clearly stressed that

while working a job he disliked (the discomfort), he would receive remuneration thereby making it possible to buy a house (the greater goal). The interviews reveal a direct link between feeling good and the belief that there are opportunities available; many participants believe that opportunities open up for them in Iceland, which they never thought possible in their own country:

"You can do things here. In Iceland one of the advantages is that it is small. People can hear about stuff quickly. If this is something really good and people really like it, then people hear it straight away and you will get a lot of possibilities." (Excerpt from Interview 1, Male, Eastern Europe)

"I wouldn't have a job like this anywhere else." (Excerpt from interview 10, Male, Western Europe)

"I think in Iceland everybody gets a chance. In [my home country] you would never get a job in hotel administration or something like that unless you have gone to school for that. Here they give you a chance, you haven't learned it but maybe you can learn it on the job. […] If you really want this, you can put your mind to it and it's possible." (Excerpt from interview 6, Female, Eastern Europe)

In the experience of the Filipino migrants, taking advantage of opportunities, viewed from a different perspective, entails sacrifice, and it is particularly visible in occurrences relative to the women, who moved to Iceland to provide for children and families left behind in the Philippines[38]. One participant told us:

"There's much pressure in my family to educate […] Everyone sends a lot of money to the Philippines so my other relatives can go to school. They probably sent a few millions already so they could go to university." (Excerpt from interview 20, Male, Asia)

Education seems to be highly important in the participant's family; therefore, the sacrifice involved is also seen as an opportunity to improve the whole family's situation. Despite the negative emotional consequences of moving and leaving family behind, they are counter-balanced by the feelings of necessity and doing good (helping relatives to educate and have a better future). The notion of sacrifice generates good feelings at an individual level –

whether you work hard at a job you dislike or you leave your children behind, you do it for greater opportunities in the future. Most participants follow an effort-reward model in which temporary suffering is accepted as long as there is the prospect of greater happiness later on.

Social psychologists and scientists have observed the role of goals and aspirations in personal wellbeing[39]. The self-determination theory proposes that well-being increases in individuals' lives when dealing with intrinsic goals, "those related to personal growth, emotional intimacy and community involvement" giving instant gratification, but decreases when engaged with extrinsic goals because it involves the approval and recognition of others, "e.g financial success, appealing appearance and social recognition"[40]. In the mind of the participants, it seems that the drive is what matters rather than the goal itself:

"There are some people who want to fight, do better, live better, be different, be a better version of themselves." (Excerpt from interview 6, Female, Eastern Europe)

"I make small steps for myself. Now I want to do that, and now I want to get this job, and I want to study here, and get a job with what I study, and I want to do more and more… It's good to have those little steps." (Excerpt from interview 15, Female, Eastern Europe)

This participant decided to have the best life possible here. She learned Icelandic in a year and went back to school to study and get a job in her area of expertise. The emotional outcomes of self-improving and having a purpose positively affected the participant; she experiences pride and feels a real sense of personal achievement, but she already has in mind for herself more "steps" to climb. For many participants, the drive is as important as the goal himself, and "perhaps the good life is not a state to be obtained, as Aristotle's suggests, it is the aspiration and act of becoming, the pursuit, and the journey that gives meaning and fulfilment." [41]

Reciprocity and shared values as a strategy for integration

In 1925, Marcel Mauss described the importance of receiving and giving back in order to establish basic human contacts.[42] Exploring the concept of reciprocity through gifts, his research, which has been used and updated by many social scientists, also makes sense in

our context. Throughout the interviews, we identified several approaches for establishing reciprocity through shared values.

The most obvious seemed to be the acknowledgment of the immigrants of the importance of the Icelandic language for the native population. Some participants mentioned that even though they were far away from being fluent in Icelandic, locals were happy to note that they were trying, and that's all that mattered: "I also saw how Icelandic people were happy when I said something in Icelandic. A single word." (Excerpt from interview 1, Male, Eastern Europe)

Not being able to speak Icelandic in response to Icelandic people can be perceived as a failure:

"It's like going into someone's house, knocking on someone's door and just speaking to them in Swahili, and sitting down on their couch, just speaking to them in a different language. It's rude. Again, if you're a tourist you spend money, so that's fair enough. If you come to a country and you don't integrate, it's rude, and I do feel a bit rude sometimes, especially because I am working with them. […] You should learn. If you live in a place you should learn, and I should learn." (Excerpt from interview 2, Male, Western Europe)

According to the survey by Meckl & Ólafsson 2013, one third of the foreign population is assumed to speak Icelandic well or very well, while two thirds of the foreign population have not achieved this common value. Therefore, stories about situations where newcomers were confronted with their lack of knowledge in the local language are common.

However, speaking Icelandic does not seem to "correlate with […] general satisfaction with living in Akureyri"[43]. The reason for this might be that the lack of knowledge in Icelandic does not mean that reciprocity is not possible or that social contacts are void. For example, the religious communities of Akureyri, comprising both locals and migrants, seem to be a solid way to create contacts and gain support; one participant who had resided in Iceland for a short time came to know many people through Church: "Yes, it's probably going to the Church, I met a lot of people there. […] They will suggest you the right things to do and you can trust them." (Excerpt from interview 13, Female, Western Europe). There is a social element to individual well-being, and the strength of ties within the family, the

neighbourhood and the religious community has a direct impact on feelings of happiness and belonging.

Bringing values that matter in Icelandic society, like hard-work and diligence, is another way to facilitate the integration process:

"And the thing with Icelandic people, if they see someone who is hard-working, they will become your friend. They can't stand lazy people. I'm obviously generalizing now, because it's many people that I know, it's a working nation. […] I think it's the attitude that's important. If you come somewhere, if you have in mind that you are a guest your attitude will be right, but if you come somewhere and you expect people to serve you, then it's not the right attitude. And I knew that straight away, I'm a guest here." (Excerpt from Interview 1, Male, Eastern Europe)

Work is an essential part of the Icelandic way of life and one of the key values in the society[44]. Therefore, being employed and working hard as a migrant is another way to feel valued and accepted.

Family ties are strong and the family viewed as "the cornerstone of Icelandic society"[45]; it is also a determinant factor in how positively you will be perceived as an immigrant. One participant recognised that contacts were friendlier once she had become a mother:

"[People are] asking you how it is, if you have support and family speaking with you, if the grandparents of the child come and visit you. They are nice when they are seeing a child." (Excerpt from interview 5, Female, Eastern Europe)

Sharing moral values seems of greater consequence than any other integration factors; if you contribute in reflecting principles valued by the local society (language, independence, diligence and the importance of family, for example), you meet more easily the requirements of reciprocity, essential to the integration process and the feeling of well-being. Of course immigrants are not always receiving the kind of recognition they would wish for, or have trouble to create and keep contacts within the local community. A few participants blame their personal attitude for not engaging enough in society, like not speaking the language or not joining a social club popular among Icelanders, like a gym or a choir, for example. A few

others blame the cultural differences:

"We are coming from other countries, other cultures, other lifestyles, we have another sense of humor, we are different. […] They are very friendly of course, very kind, polite, but they are serious. […] They are very closed". (Excerpt from Interview 8, Male, Western Europe).

However, the negative experiences of being a migrant in Akureyri seem temporary or conditional; if the participant spoke Icelandic, if he engaged in social activities in town, if his lifestyle was more similar to the local one, he would be better off:

"I've had loads of opportunities, I missed loads of opportunities as well. Being able to speak Icelandic opens you to Icelandic opportunities. […] The longer I stay here the more important I see it is. […] And it is worthwhile and useful. Yeah, I need to get on it." (Excerpt from Interview 2, Male, Western Europe).

This comment shows again, that migrants are willing to allow temporary suffering as long as they foresee a possibility for ending this suffering; it makes the negative experience worthwhile or even necessary as long as it transforms into a more positive experience later on:

"As long as it is part of a greater goal and it's not going to be like that forever, it's fine. I'm not miserable. I'm not super ecstatic. But I have plans and goals. […] It's not going to be forever, so we've put up with it for now." (Excerpt from Interview 2, Male, Western Europe).

In migrants discourses, the difficulties they encounter rather seem like obstacles that can be overcome or transformed into opportunities. Despite the difficulties and their consequences on the participants' well-being, either the positive experiences counter-balance the negative ones, or the prospect of future happiness is at the fore in the migrants' minds, making the overall experience of migrating to Akureyri worthwhile.

Conclusion

This paper focused on the experiences of wellbeing of migrants in Akureyri in Northern Iceland, where most migrants interviewed displayed high satisfaction and made mention of

positive experiences in their discussion with the researchers. More attention would be required to understand the way migrant's chose to portray their lives; does the sample of participants reflect a positiveness specific to European highly-skilled migrants? Do the migrants apply a *rationale* to their experiences that conceal their less favourable ones? Does their relationship with the researchers impair their ability to talk more openly about their negative experiences?

To look at wellbeing and happiness, it is necessary to know what is important for individuals and communities. Although personal attitude is key to happiness, a safe and positive environment, strong social relationships, having goals, sharing values and feeling on equal grounds with locals are essential to the well-being of the foreign population. Identifying how reciprocity can be achieved from both sides seems a crucial element to contribute to individual happiness of migrants in Akureyri. The findings of this research unveil the responsibility of the community to provide a stronger support system to newcomers; to encourage migrants and give them the appropriate resources to learn Icelandic, to offer a support system to enhance social contacts and to ensure that everyone can benefit from going to work or being together with their family.

The debates which have dominated immigration issues have been far from addressing questions regarding well-being and happiness. Focusing on the wellbeing of the immigrants might help to shift the perception of immigrants in the public opinion – from being connected to problems to a positive connotation of possibilities and enrichment.

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Endnotes

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