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# Working Your Way to Remain: Subjective Well-Being and Employment of Migrants in the United Kingdom

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## ABSTRACT

This article examines how the relationship between employment and migrants' subjective well-being (SWB) varies according to their initial reason for migration: work, study, family or asylum. We argue that employment does not affect all migrants' well-being in the same way and use the UK Annual Population Survey (2012–2022) to provide novel empirical evidence on this issue. First, we find that employment is positively associated with the SWB of work, study, and asylum migrants, but not of family migrants. This difference for family migrants is consistent with unique gendered barriers to their employment in the country. Second, the expected decline in the strength of the association between employment and SWB with length of residence is only partially observed. Study migrants show stronger associations between employment and SWB over time, which may be linked to particularly precarious transition from study to work visas that many migrants experience in the UK and in broader migration contexts. Building on these findings, we draw conceptual insights by linking these patterns to overlapping social and structural mechanisms—including labour-market conditionality, legal precarity, and domestic responsibilities—that likely sustain the observed relations between migrants' work and well-being. Together, the findings provide evidence to guide policy debates on migrants' access to, and dependence on, employment in destination countries.

## 1 | Introduction

The benefits of employment for individuals' subjective well-being (SWB) are well documented (Frey and Stutzer 2002; Bayer and Juessen 2015). Employment increases individuals' SWB through different channels, such as ensuring financial stability (Frijters et al. 2004), providing opportunities for self-fulfilment (Warr 2011) and satisfying societal norms and expectations regarding labour market participation (A. E. Clark 2003; Stam et al. 2016). This said, employment contributes in different ways to the SWB of individuals in a population.

The central argument of this article is that migrants' initial reason for migrating to a country (i.e., work, study, family or asylum) shapes the association between employment and their SWB. There are several reasons for this. First, migrants are subject to different legal, institutional, and social conditions depending on their migration pathway, with implications for their life in the destination country (Bauböck et al. 2006; Van Der Klaauw 2009; Wong and Celbis 2019). Second, for those who migrated for work reasons, expectations about life in the destination country are intrinsically tied with labour market participation, as is the right to residence, while this link could be

weaker for other migrants (Zikic and Richardson 2016; Leopold et al. 2017). Third, the support, both formal and informal, available for periods without employment varies substantially across migrant groups. For instance, family migrants move as part of a family unit that can provide emotional and financial support in the event of unemployment (Herman 2006; Haug 2008).

This article explores the relationship between migrants' SWB and employment, disaggregating migrant groups by initial reason for migration. The focus is on the United Kingdom (UK), an important case study for two reasons. First, the UK is one of few countries collecting systematic SWB data with the explicit purpose of using it to inform policy (Dolan et al. 2011; Hicks et al. 2013; Allin 2021). To date, however, research drawing from UK SWB data to provide insights on migrants' experiences is limited and no study has explored issues related to employment. Second, the UK has implemented substantial changes to its immigration policies in recent years, which affect migrants differently based on their reason for migrating to the country, and which could therefore be associated with differences in SWB (Sumption 2017b, 2019; Portes 2022).

In this context, the remainder of the article is as follows. Section 2 provides an overview of the relevant conceptual and empirical literature, as well as the main hypotheses. Section 3 outlines the data and methodology, and Section 4 describes the main results. Before concluding and discussing policy implications of these findings, Section 5 reports the results of two robustness checks.

## 2 | Conceptual and Empirical Literature

This section discusses different strands of the literature in order to inform the posterior analysis: first, on the overall relationship between employment and SWB (2.1); second, on the role of reason for migration in shaping the relationship between employment and SWB (2.2); third, on how this relationship evolves with years of residence in the destination country (2.3); fourth, on the implications of employment for migrants' life satisfaction and happiness (2.4).

### 2.1 | Employment and SWB

SWB measures how positively individuals experience and interpret the life they lead (Veenhoven 2011; Myers and Diener 2018). Two key components of SWB are evaluative and experienced well-being (Kahneman and Riis 2005; Waldron 2010).

Evaluative well-being is a cognitive assessment a person makes about how their life is going, all things considered (Diener et al. 2013). In reflecting on their sense of satisfaction with life, individuals factor in a number of key domains, such as employment, family, and health (Cummins 2005; Dolan et al. 2008). In parallel, experienced well-being refers to individuals' emotional states, which fluctuate in the short term (Kahneman et al. 2003; Haybron 2016). These emotions could be positive, such as happiness and excitement, or negative, such as anxiety and sadness. Although correlated, positive and negative emotions are considered relatively independent (Diener and Emmons 1984; Watson and Clark 2013).

Literature exploring the link between employment and SWB suggests a positive association between the two (Frey and Stutzer 2002; Bayer and Juessen 2015; Hussam et al. 2022). A key related debate is whether employment increases SWB, or whether higher SWB increases the likelihood of employment. Several studies using cross-sectional and longitudinal data suggest a relation directed from employment to SWB, with less support for causality going the other direction (Creed and Evans 2002; Shields and Price 2005). This explains the focus of this article, which is on presenting implications of individuals' employment status for SWB, although the possibility for reverse causality cannot be excluded.

A rich literature highlights that the strength and nature of the association between employment and SWB is contingent on numerous other factors. These include individuals' sociodemographics, such as age (Clark et al. 1996; Shields and Wailoo 2002), gender (Artazcoz et al. 2004; Lucas et al. 2004; Paul and Moser 2009) and educational attainments (Clark and Oswald 1994; Cuñado and De Gracia 2012). These also include contextual factors such as each country's unique national culture, which could put emphasis on different life priorities (Huppert et al. 2009; Sarracino 2013), and present differences in levels of employment (A. Clark 2006; Clark and Senik 2010; Davis and Von Wachter 2011).

### 2.2 | Reason for Migration, Employment and SWB in the UK

In this paper, we examine the extent to which migrants' reason for migration is a factor shaping the relationship between employment and SWB. The central idea is that reason for migration is closely linked to the legal, institutional, and broader social context under which individuals enter a country (Bauböck et al. 2006; Van Der Klaauw 2009; Wong and Celbis 2019). Each migration pathway places different employment requirements for access to visa and residence rights. These differences suggest that the SWB implications of employment could reflect, for instance, the extent to which migrants' legal permanence in the destination country is contingent upon continued employment. The objective of this section is to develop the argument for the UK context, while drawing on international experiences to identify both common trends and unique characteristics of the UK system.

In the UK, those who migrated for work reasons tend to have higher employment rates than those born in the country (the UK-born) and other migrants (Ruiz and Vargas-Silva 2018). Given that individuals generally compare their circumstances to those of similar others in their reference group, the high employment rates among work migrants may create additional social pressure to maintain employment status (Clark et al. 2008; Clark and Senik 2010). Moreover, most migrants who arrive in the UK via employment routes depend on having a valid work visa (e.g., Tier 2 or Skilled Visa) to remain in the country. This type of visa only allows short periods without employment, thus reinforcing the pressure work migrants may experience to remain employed. This pressure on work migrants has been demonstrated in other countries. For instance, in the Finnish context, Könönen (2019) shows how

immigration regulations to which labour migrants are subject explicitly tie their work and residence permits. This legal framework increases migrants' reliance on paid employment while simultaneously decreasing their bargaining power in the labour market. Examining these tensions across North America and Europe, Lewis et al. (2015) refer to the "precarity" of work migrants, often implicated in highly unstable work experiences on which their residence status and financial viability nevertheless depend.

In contrast, those coming via study, family and asylum routes have less pressure in keeping employment from a visa perspective and their migration relates to other aspects (e.g., joining family members, pursuing education or escaping persecution). Some of these groups also tend to have greater networks of support. In the UK, for instance, family migrants need to be sponsored and the sponsor needs to show the financial capacity to support the family member (Sumption and Vargas-Silva 2016, 2019). For those coming via the asylum route, there is access to different sources of government and civil society support during the asylum application process and afterwards. This support differs from that which is available for other migrants in the UK (Mahdi et al. 2018; Mayblin and James 2019; Phillimore 2020), and would suggest lower SWB implications of employment status, at least in early stages when this support is available. Importantly, while the UK Government has recently proposed major restrictions on asylum rights (Office 2022), these occurred after the end of the analysis period for this article.

This discussion in the UK context leads to the first hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 1.** *The positive implications of employment for SWB are greater for those who migrated for work reasons, relative to those who migrated for study, family or asylum reasons.*

In other words, the hypothesis suggests that all migrants benefit from employment in terms of SWB, given these specificities of the UK policy context. For instance, study migrants often need to work some hours to cover their educational expenses (Könönen 2019; Maury 2020). The hypothesis, however, states that work migrants are likely to benefit more. They are more likely to be dependent on maintaining employment for their visa status in the UK and are part of a group that has higher employment rates, potentially leading to higher societal expectations.

### 2.3 | Migrants' Employment and SWB Across Years of Residence in the UK

The next hypothesis suggests that implications of employment status for SWB change with migrants' length of residence in the UK. For the period under analysis, most migrants in the UK on work, family and asylum visas can apply for permanent settlement after residing for five continuous years in the country, which breaks the link between employment status and right of residence. In addition, evidence from the UK and other contexts highlights key changes in migrants' living outcomes with length of residence. These include better language skills, more information about government support and the creation of support networks, all of which could reduce the strength of the association between employment and SWB (Ryan and Mulholland 2014; Kearns and Whitley 2015; Föbker and Imani 2017).

This relation between migrants' years of residence in the destination country and the link between their employment status and SWB likely presents nuances in the case of study migrants. For this group, the link between employment and SWB may hold for longer than other migrants since years spent in the UK on a student visa do not contribute to the requirements for permanent settlement in the same way as for those in other routes.

A rich literature also emphasises the challenges and financial pressure study migrants face to obtain employment after completing their studies (Wilson et al. 2023). These pressures sometimes lead study migrants to accept precarious forms of work in order to maintain their residence rights (Maury 2020). For instance, drawing from the experience of Indian students in the United States, Thomas (2017) shows how study migrants experience persistent pressure to secure employment after graduation. This pressure stems from several factors, including a perceived duty to justify their education investment abroad through successful employment in the post-study period.

This discussion leads to the second hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 2.** *The positive association between employment and SWB is weaker for migrants with longer residence in the UK, except among study migrants.*

### 2.4 | The Focus on Employment for Migrants' Happiness and Life Satisfaction

While SWB relates to different components of how migrants think and feel about their lives in destination countries, much of the research on migrants' SWB has focused on life satisfaction and happiness (e.g., Bartram 2013; Hendriks and Bartram 2019; Kogan et al. 2018; Polgreen and Simpson 2011). These are standard indicators in assessing individuals' SWB and are used in numerous other contexts (Diener et al. 1985; Veenhoven et al. 1993; Oishi 2018). Life satisfaction captures individuals overall cognitive evaluations of their life (Pavot and Diener 2008), while happiness captures the importance of momentary experiences (Kahneman et al. 2004). Both indicators of SWB share the similarity of being about positive aspects of a person's life but differ in that happiness pertains more to emotions, while life satisfaction pertains more to cognitive evaluations.

That said, our final hypothesis posits that the relations between reason for migration, employment and years of residence presented in Hypotheses 1 and 2 will hold across both dimensions of SWB. The central argument behind this is that employment has been shown to influence both migrants' immediate and long-term well-being through multiple channels—from alleviating day-to-day financial stress and providing social connections (Bartram 2011), to contributing to a broader sense of achievement and stability in the destination country (Hendriks et al. 2016; Ambrosetti and Paparusso 2021). These benefits of employment are therefore likely to manifest in both emotional

responses (happiness) and overall life evaluations (life satisfaction), regardless of reason for migration.

This discussion leads to the final hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 3.** *The relationships specified in Hypotheses* 1 *and* 2 *hold across both happiness and life satisfaction measures.*

## 3 | Methodology

### 3.1 | Data

To shed empirical evidence on these three hypotheses, our study provides a quantitative analysis of data from the secured version of the APS. This data is provided by the Office for National Statistics (ONS). The APS is a nationally representative, cross-sectional and continuous household survey. It combines two waves of the main UK Labour Force Survey (LFS) and local sample boosts, including around 320,000 individuals each year. Since 2011, the APS includes a comprehensive set of SWB measures and around 45% of all APS respondents are surveyed for these SWB questions. APS datasets are weighted by the ONS to reflect the size and composition of the general population (ONS 2018). Our analysis covers the decade from April 2012 to April 2022.

Since 2010, the APS asks respondents born outside the UK about their main reason for coming to the country. The available categories are work, study, family, seeking asylum, and other reasons; the analysis in this paper focuses on the first four. While these categories provide a unique classification based on migration motives, it is important to clarify the conceptual similarities and differences underlying these motives. Migrants arriving for work or study primarily have a form of economic or skill-based motivation, while family migrants typically relocate to join or support relatives, reflecting social obligations and expectations rather than direct labour-market imperatives. Asylum migrants experience a combination of legal precarity and constrained agency, as their migration is contingent on international protection frameworks.

Although these categories do not perfectly disentangle legal precarity, labour-market conditionality, and social motivations, they offer a useful framework based on self-reported migration motivations, as opposed to categories assumed from migrants' year of migration and country of origin. Here, the objective of this study is to discuss differences in SWB across self-reported migration reason, in light of the varying structural and social constraints associated with each migration pathway. Table 1 shows that UK-born respondents constitute the majority of the sample (88%), while the remaining 12% are foreign-born migrants. Among migrants, family reasons are most common (35%), followed by work (32%), study (26%), and asylum (7%).

Since 2012, both happiness and life satisfaction questions are included in the APS to capture emotional and evaluative components of SWB, respectively, as described in Section 2. Both are measured on a 0 to 10 scale where 0 is 'not at all' and 10 is '*completely*' and are formulated as follows:

**TABLE 1** | Sample distribution.

| | Observations (*N*) | Share (%) |
|---|---|---|
| UK-born | 743,093 | 87.98 |
| Migrants | 101,979 | 12.02 |
| Total observations | 845,072 | 100.00 |
| Migrants by reason for migration | | |
| Work | 32,957 | 32.32 |
| Study | 17,262 | 16.93 |
| Family | 36,246 | 35.54 |
| Asylum | 6900 | 6.77 |
| Other | 8614 | 8.45 |
| Total observations | 101,979 | 100.00 |

*Note:* ONS weighted sample of personal well-being respondents, using APS datasets April 2012 to April 2022.

- *Overall, how happy did you feel yesterday?*
- *Overall, how satisfied are you with your life nowadays?*

Our analysis uses Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression, a statistical method that allows us to understand how changes in employment status relate to changes in SWB scores. While SWB is measured on a numerical scale with fixed intervals (a cardinal scale), OLS treats these scores as continuous variables that can take any value within their range. Research in SWB has shown that this approach produces results very similar to alternative methods like ordered logistic regressions (Ferrer-I-Carbonell and Frijters 2004), and it has become standard practice in SWB research, including research on migrants' SWB (e.g., Bartram 2011; Helliwell et al. 2020; Hendriks and Burger 2021).

Table 2 reports the UK-born and migrants' mean happiness and life satisfaction, disaggregating migrants by reason for migration. On average, the UK-born report a happiness of 7.34 on the 0 to 10 scale. This is lower than all migrant groups. Asylum migrants have the lowest mean happiness among migrants, followed by family, study, and work migrants, respectively. Asylum migrants report a life satisfaction level of 7.44 on the 0 to 10 scale, which is the lowest among migrant groups and lower still than the average 7.51 life satisfaction reported by the UK-born. This is followed by family, study, and work migrants, respectively. This is notable since most studies point to lower, if modestly so, SWB for migrants relative to those born in the country when considered as a single group (Obućina 2013; Hendriks 2015; Helliwell et al. 2020).

### 3.2 | Method

The first part of the analysis focuses on differences in SWB implications from employment between migrants, based on initial reason for migrating to the UK. These differences are estimated as follows:

$$y_i = \sum_{l=1}^{5} \mu_l R_{li} + \beta E_i + \sum_{l=1}^{5} \nu_l R_{li} \times E_i + \partial X_i + L_j + T_t + \varepsilon_i \quad (1)$$

**TABLE 2** | Descriptive statistics of main SWB indicators.

| | | Migrants by reason for migration | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | **UK-born** | **Work** | **Study** | **Family** | **Asylum** |
| Happiness (0 to 10) | 7.34 | 7.68 | 7.50 | 7.46 | 7.41 |
| | (2.15) | (1.97) | (1.98) | (2.15) | (2.22) |
| Life satisfaction (0 to 10) | 7.51 | 7.71 | 7.55 | 7.53 | 7.44 |
| | (1.80) | (1.59) | (1.64) | (1.85) | (1.93) |
| Observations | 743,093 | 32,957 | 17,262 | 36,246 | 6900 |

*Note:* ONS weighted sample of personal well-being respondents, using APS datasets April 2012 to April 2022. First line is sample mean, standard deviation in parentheses.

Here, $y_i$ is the indicator of happiness or life satisfaction. $R_i$ are dummies indicating each of the reasons for migration included in the APS (i.e., work, study, family, asylum, and other), using those born in the UK as the baseline category, in order to interpret coefficients for all migration reasons. As suggested in Section 2, the initial reason for migration reflects a person's initial entry route into the country, as opposed to their current immigration status. In research related to reason for migration, it is common to use those born in the country as the base categories with which to compare each migrant group (Dustmann et al. 2017; Ruiz and Vargas-Silva 2018; Pollenne and Vargas-Silva 2024). In our case, these are the UK-born. Next, $E_i$ is an employment dummy where 1 indicates that the respondent is in employment (0 otherwise, which includes both inactive and job seeking respondents). In Equation (1), the main discussion is therefore on the interaction coefficients, that is, $\nu_l$. These provide information on differences in SWB implications of being in employment for migrants who came to the UK for different reasons. $L_j$ represent dummies for each local authority. These dummies control for characteristics of the local area. This includes, for instance, whether the local area is one in which particular groups of the population, including possible reference groups, have historically high employment rates. $T_t$ are a series of time dummies capturing survey quarter and year effects. These dummies control for any period specific factors, including employment rates at the national level for that quarter.

All estimations are conditional on a series of controls included in $X_i$. These controls are used in other studies focusing on the SWB of migrants and include country of birth, gender, marital status, education, occupational sector, ethnicity, religion and self-reported health, among others (e.g., Bartram 2011; Kóczán 2016; Hendriks et al. 2016; Frank and Hou 2018; Helliwell et al. 2020). Appendix A provides descriptive statistics for these variables, with further information on the construction and definition of all the variables included in the estimations in Appendix B.

A second set of estimations considers how the association between employment and SWB varies with years of residence for different migrant groups. To do so, the employment status is interacted with a set of dummies $A_{ki}$, indicating years of residence in the UK, as shown in Equation (2):

$$y_i = \sum_{k=1}^{5} \theta_k A_{ki} + \beta E_i + \sum_{k=1}^{5} \gamma_k A_{ki} \times E_i + \partial X_i + L_j + T_t + \varepsilon_i \quad (2)$$

These estimations are conducted limiting the sample to each migration reason in turn and the UK-born, which serves as the baseline group in all cases. Here too, this approach allows us to interpret the patterns for all migrant groups, as opposed to omitting the group used as the reference category in the estimations. The focus is on coefficients $\gamma_k$, which provide information on SWB differences between in and out of employment migrants with different lengths of residence. Results of Equation (2) are presented in graphical form for ease of interpretation. All other variables are the same as in previous estimations. In all estimations, standard errors are clustered by survey year to account for potential biases resulting from the pooling of survey years.[1]

Before turning to the main analysis, we highlight three limitations of our empirical set-up. First, given the nature of the APS data, the analysis remains descriptive and cannot establish causality between SWB and employment. Our objective is to provide robust evidence on the strength of the statistical relationship between these variables. Second, the APS does not capture patterns of selection into migration and return migration, which could influence our comparisons across years of residence. For example, migrants with higher or lower levels of happiness may be more or less likely to return home. Third, the APS is less likely to capture individuals in extremely precarious situations (e.g., those experiencing homelessness), which may lead to an underrepresentation of the most vulnerable migrants. Despite these data limitations, our analysis makes an important contribution to the understudied relationship between migrants' employment and SWB over time.

### 3.3 | Main Independent Variables

The main independent variables in this analysis are migrants' reason for migration, employment status and years of residence. As highlighted in Table 3, there are marked disparities in migrants' employment rate according to initial reason for migration. While the UK-born employment rate is 71.82, this rate is higher still among those who migrated for work reasons (87.20). Study, family and asylum migrants have lower employment rates than the UK-born, but the gap is largest for asylum migrants. Table 3 also highlights that progress in employment rates across years of residence is the slowest for asylum migrants, for whom this rate is 65% even after 20 years or more in the UK. That asylum migrants have worse employment outcomes than other migrants is evidenced in many other studies, which also outline

**TABLE 3** | Employment rate for the UK-born and different groups of migrants, by years of residence.

| | | Migrants by reason for migration | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | **UK-born** | **Work** | **Study** | **Family** | **Asylum** |
| Employed | 71.82 | 87.20 | 70.03 | 65.31 | 61.24 |
| By years of residence | | | | | |
| Under 5 years | | 89.95 | 30.48 | 39.36 | 33.02 |
| 5 to 9 years | | 89.46 | 67.24 | 51.11 | 45.69 |
| 10 to 19 years | | 89.59 | 83.74 | 58.49 | 55.08 |
| 20 years and more | | 76.44 | 80.02 | 67.32 | 65.35 |
| Observations | 743,093 | 32,957 | 17,262 | 36,246 | 6900 |

*Note:* ONS weighted sample of personal well-being respondents, using APS datasets April 2012 to April 2022. The reference category for employed respondents includes inactive and job-seeking respondents.

the different reasons why this may be the case (Hainmueller et al. 2016; Ruiz and Vargas-Silva 2018; Brell et al. 2020; Fasani et al. 2021).

## 4 | Main Results

### 4.1 | There Are Marked Differences Between Work and Family Migrants, Less So With Others

Table 4 below presents the first set of results. These refer to Equation (1) and estimate whether there are differential SWB implications of employment for migrants in the UK, based on the reason for which they migrated to the country. The first five rows estimate the main differences in SWB between out of employment UK-born and migrants. While the estimates suggest higher happiness and lower life satisfaction for out of employment migrants, none of these differences relative to the UK-born are statistically significant. This corresponds to other evidence on the topic for the UK, which has looked at these differences, but without focusing on the role of employment (e.g., Pollenne and Vargas-Silva 2024).

This said, the main focus of this paper is on the role of employment in explaining migrants' SWB in destination countries. In order to do so, Table 4 also includes the main effect of employment status, which can be interpreted as the main effect of employment for the UK-born. Table 4 highlights that employment associates with a 0.094 decrease in the 0 to 10 scale of happiness and with higher life satisfaction by 0.085. While most literature also finds that employment contributes positively to SWB, especially when focusing on the evaluative component (Stiglitz 2002; Lucas et al. 2004), the negative point estimate for happiness could be reflecting other changes, such as the drop in leisure time, which come with labour market participation and which negatively affect daily emotions (Knabe et al. 2010; Krueger and Mueller 2012).

Turning to the main coefficients of interest in Table 4, the interactions of employment and reason for migration, the coefficient is positive and statistically significant for work and study migrants when estimated with the happiness indicator. The coefficient is also positive for asylum migrants, with a point estimate larger than that of work migrants but falling just below the 10% significance level, which reflects the smaller sample size that we have for this group. On the other hand, the coefficient for family migrants (−0.002) is substantially different from other groups. This provides mixed evidence for Hypothesis 1, which indicated that the positive implications of employment for SWB are greater for those who migrated for work reasons, relative to other migrants. This seems to be the case when compared to family migrants, but not the case for study migrants and (arguably) asylum migrants. In the latter case, the coefficient is larger than what is estimated for work migrants, but the large standard error likely relates to the smaller number of asylum migrants in the APS, meaning patterns for asylum migrants must be interpreted with caution. Furthermore, the size of the coefficients for our main variables of interest is small compared to the standard deviations of the dependent variable presented in Table 2. However, this is expected as we are focusing on the effect from the interaction terms.

Looking at the interactions in the estimation in which the life satisfaction indicator is the dependent variable, the estimates confirm different SWB implications from employment when considering those who migrated for family reasons. Here the point estimate is negative (−0.077) and statistically significant, indicating that being in employment for family migrants associates with a decrease in life satisfaction, relative to being out of employment. Finally, while life satisfaction gains from employment for work migrants are positive, and more positive than the coefficients for other groups, the coefficient is statistically insignificant. Hence, this first part of the analysis highlights a positive gap in the effect of employment on SWB for work migrants relative to family migrants only. This also suggests mixed evidence in favour of Hypothesis 3, as while results with happiness and life satisfaction go broadly in the same direction, there are key differences in statistical significance.

At this stage, two points can be highlighted. First, while the effect sizes of employment for migrants appear relatively marginal, these effect sizes are consistent with existing research on migrants' SWB. For instance, Bartram (2011) found that even doubling a migrant's income resulted in only a 0.53-point increase on a 10-point happiness scale. Similarly, Leopold

**TABLE 4** | Association of migration reason and employment status with SWB indicators.

| | (1) | (2) |
|---|---|---|
| | **Happiness** | **Life satisfaction** |
| Reason for migration | | |
| Work | 0.072 | −0.076 |
| | (0.087) | (0.092) |
| Study | −0.023 | −0.068 |
| | (0.090) | (0.100) |
| Family | 0.095 | −0.028 |
| | (0.089) | (0.098) |
| Asylum | 0.023 | −0.072 |
| | (0.082) | (0.057) |
| Employment status | | |
| Employed | −0.094*** | 0.085*** |
| | (0.012) | (0.013) |
| Work × employed | 0.055* | 0.057 |
| | (0.026) | (0.034) |
| Study × employed | 0.094*** | −0.018 |
| | (0.017) | (0.022) |
| Family × employed | −0.006 | −0.077*** |
| | (0.023) | (0.018) |
| Asylum × employed | 0.064 | 0.023 |
| | (0.100) | (0.061) |
| Individual controls[a] | Yes | Yes |
| Local authority dummies | Yes | Yes |
| Survey quarter × year fixed effects | Yes | Yes |
| Observations | 845,072 | 845,072 |

*Note:* ONS weighted sample of personal well-being respondents, using APS datasets April 2012 to April 2022. Standard errors are clustered by survey year. UK-born is the reference category for the reasons for migration. The reference category for employed respondents includes inactive and job-seeking respondents.
[a]Controls are country of birth, age, gender, marital status, number of dependent children, ethnicity, religion, self-reported health, age completed full-time education, occupational sector.
*$p < 0.10$.
**$p < 0.05$.
***$p < 0.01$.

et al. (2017), when studying unemployment effects on migrants' life satisfaction, found interaction effects ranging from 0.01 to 0.18 on an 11-point scale. These coefficients are meaningful when considering that SWB measures are generally stable and resistant to large fluctuations (Diener et al. 2009; Czaika and Vothknecht 2014).

Second, the negative association between employment and life satisfaction among family migrants may reflect gendered and care-related dynamics that are well established in the migration literature. This interpretation is consistent with the gender composition of our sample (65% women among family migrants; see Appendix A). Family migration has long been conceptualised as a gendered process in which women frequently move as "tied migrants," prioritising their partner's employment over their own career trajectories (Bielby and Bielby 1992; Mincer 1978). Unlike employment migrants who relocate primarily for their own job opportunities, family migrants often migrate to support or accompany a partner. They must therefore balance any labour market participation together with the family responsibilities that were central to their migration decision (Cooke 2008; Krieger and Salikutluk 2023). In contexts where local support networks are initially weak, these overlapping roles may increase the risk of work–family conflict and role strain (Greenhaus and Beutell 1985; Voydanoff 2005). Under such conditions, employment may function more as an additional source of pressure, thereby attenuating its positive association with SWB.

Moreover, research on gender and migration shows that women who migrate through family channels often face labour market constraints, including occupational downgrading, deskilling, and limited career advancement opportunities (Man 2004; Morrison and Lichter 1988). These patterns align with broader evidence of migrant labour market disadvantage (Aleksynska and Tritah 2013; Chort 2017; Chiswick and Miller 2009), but may be particularly pronounced among tied movers. When employment entails status loss or underemployment relative to pre-migration qualifications, especially in combination with shifting family responsibilities, its benefits for SWB are likely to be further reduced.

### 4.2 | The SWB Implications of Employment as Length of Residence Increases Differs Among Migrant Groups

In this second set of results, we provide insight on our second hypothesis. According to Hypothesis 2, the importance of employment for SWB should be lower for migrants with longer length of residence in the UK, except in the case of study migrants. To explore this, Figure 1 plots the estimates from Equation (2) which illustrate how the SWB implications of employment evolve for migrants with different lengths of residence in the UK. Across all groups, this would materialise as a pattern of convergence to the zero line in Figure 1, which is effectively where there is no SWB gap between in and out of employment migrants.

This pattern of convergence is observed for work and asylum migrants. There is an initial positive effect of employment on SWB before convergence to the zero line. In the case of work migrants, employment is even associated with slightly lower happiness for those who have spent 20 years or more in the country. This effect is broadly in line with Hypothesis 2, since the marginal effect of employment on SWB is decreasing for these two groups of migrants.

The pattern differs substantially for study migrants. For this group, the estimates suggest that the association between employment and subjective well-being increases with length of

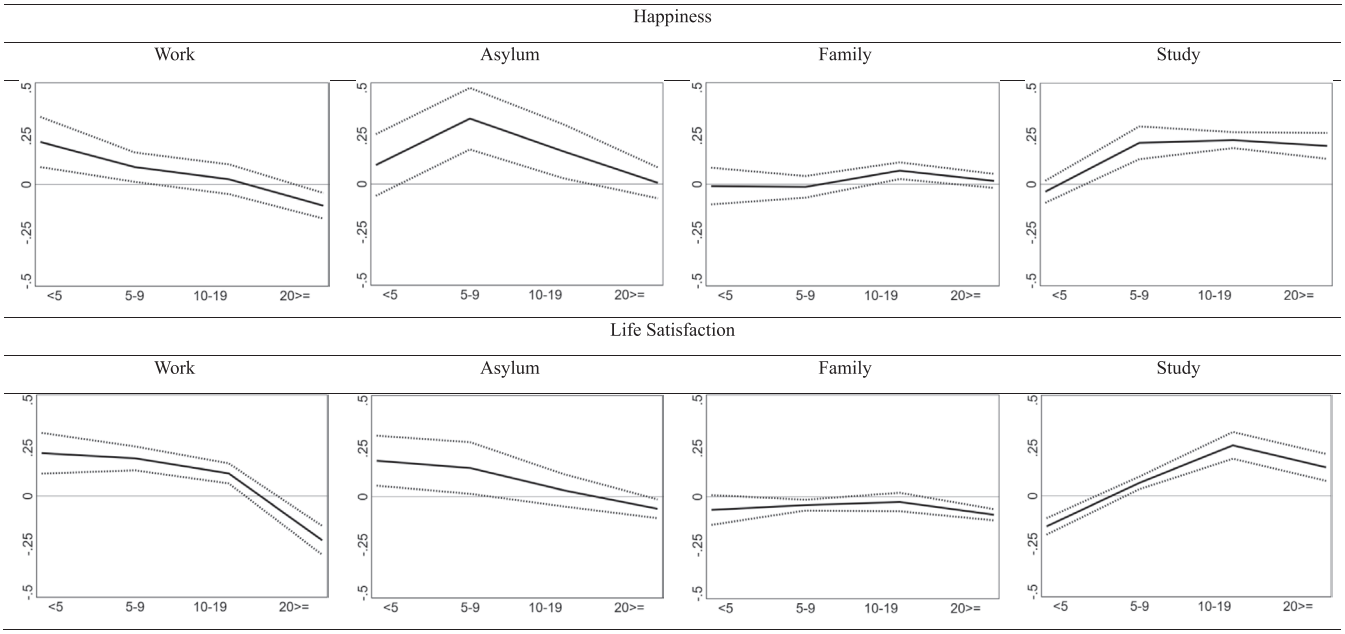


**FIGURE 1** | SWB gap between migrants in and out of employment and the UK-born (*y*-axis), for different lengths of residence in the UK (*x*-axis), by reason for migration. ONS weighted sample of personal well-being respondents, using APS datasets April 2012 to April 2022. Standard errors clustered by survey year. Controls are country of birth, age, gender, marital status, number of dependent children, ethnicity, religion, self-reported health, age completed full-time education and occupational sector. UK-born is the reference category for the reasons for migration. The reference category for employed respondents includes inactive and job-seeking respondents. Interaction coefficients, 95% confidence intervals in dotted line.

residence. In line with the discussion in Section 2 leading to Hypothesis 2, years on a study visa do not contribute to achieving permanent settlement in the UK in the same way as for other migrants. This positions study migrants in a structurally temporary and legally contingent status, reflecting broader evidence on precarity and the staggered stages that characterise study migration pathways (Robertson 2013; Anderson 2010). In such a context, longer-term residence is contingent on securing post-study employment, which may help explain why the well-being implications of employment only begin to attenuate later in the migration trajectory.

As such, this finding resonates with research documenting study migrants' reliance on employment in destination countries under restrictive visa regimes (Maury 2020; Thomas 2017; Wilson et al. 2023). While employment may initially serve primarily as a source of income, it becomes increasingly central to maintaining legal status and economic stability as migrants progress through successive, conditional stages of residence in the destination country. By situating our results in the literature on precarity and conditional pathways, we highlight how the well-being implications of employment evolve over time, likely in response to both structural constraints and the staggered nature of study migration.

Finally, SWB differences between in and out of employment family migrants are consistently close to the zero line. This could be reflecting both that family migrants' right to remain is more independent from their employment status, regardless of years of residence in the UK, and that family migrants have access to more support to buffer some of the negative SWB implications of being out of employment.

## 5 | Robustness Checks

### 5.1 | Excluding Covid-19 Years

Before concluding and discussing these findings, Section 5 presents two robustness checks. The first excludes survey years from 2020 onwards, which cover the Covid-19 period. There is evidence that migrants in destination countries were disproportionately affected by Covid-19 relative to the local-born. This includes being more likely to lose employment but also having jobs that were more exposed to Covid-19, which could alter the implications of employment for SWB (Guadagno 2020; Fasani and Mazza 2023). Results for this check in Table 5 are broadly consistent with the main findings. While the point estimate for work migrants' happiness gains is no longer statistically significant, it is larger in magnitude than the estimate for the full sample, and this is true for asylum migrants too. It is still the case that life satisfaction implications from employment are significantly different, and negative, for family migrants.

### 5.2 | Excluding EU-Nationals

The second check excludes migrants who are EU-nationals. Before the implementation of the new Brexit rules in 2021, EU and non-EU migrants faced significantly different requirements for employment and residence in the country, with EU-nationals enjoying freedom of movement in the UK (Sumption 2017a). In other words, the right to stay in the UK was not as strongly linked to continuous employment status for EU-nationals compared to many non-EU nationals. If, as suggested above, immigration policies explain some of the dynamics across reasons

**TABLE 5** | Association of migration reason and employment status with SWB indicators, excluding Covid-19 period.

| | (1) | (2) |
|---|---|---|
| | **Happiness** | **Life satisfaction** |
| Reason for migration | | |
| Work | 0.064 | −0.041 |
| | (0.106) | (0.109) |
| Study | −0.037 | −0.042 |
| | (0.107) | (0.129) |
| Family | 0.095 | 0.050 |
| | (0.103) | (0.121) |
| Asylum | −0.038 | −0.094 |
| | (0.075) | (0.060) |
| Employment status | | |
| Employed | −0.107*** | 0.079*** |
| | (0.010) | (0.017) |
| Work × employed | 0.060 | 0.048 |
| | (0.036) | (0.046) |
| Study × employed | 0.096** | −0.038** |
| | (0.024) | (0.010) |
| Family × employed | −0.021 | −0.092** |
| | (0.031) | (0.026) |
| Asylum × employed | 0.141 | 0.053 |
| | (0.135) | (0.078) |
| Individual controls[a] | Yes | Yes |
| Local authority dummies | Yes | Yes |
| Survey quarter × year fixed effects | Yes | Yes |
| Observations | 624,308 | 624,308 |

*Note:* ONS weighted sample of personal well-being respondents, using APS datasets April 2012 to April 2019. Standard errors are clustered by survey year. UK-born is the reference category for the reasons for migration. The reference category for employed respondents includes inactive and job-seeking respondents.
[a]Controls are country of birth, age, gender, marital status, number of dependent children, ethnicity, religion, self-reported health, age completed full-time education, occupational sector.
*$p < 0.10$.
**$p < 0.05$.
***$p < 0.01$.

**TABLE 6** | Association of migration reason and employment status with SWB indicators, excluding EU-nationals.

| | (1) | (2) |
|---|---|---|
| | **Happiness** | **Life satisfaction** |
| Reason for migration | | |
| Work | 0.046 | −0.084 |
| | (0.103) | (0.105) |
| Study | −0.039 | −0.086 |
| | (0.081) | (0.093) |
| Family | 0.072 | 0.015 |
| | (0.091) | (0.100) |
| Asylum | −0.001 | −0.104* |
| | (0.075) | (0.047) |
| Employment status | | |
| Employed | −0.094*** | 0.084*** |
| | (0.013) | (0.014) |
| Work × employed | 0.100** | 0.081** |
| | (0.043) | (0.031) |
| Study × employed | 0.125*** | 0.005 |
| | (0.034) | (0.024) |
| Family × employed | 0.016 | −0.065** |
| | (0.026) | (0.026) |
| Asylum × employed | 0.085 | 0.037 |
| | (0.117) | (0.082) |
| Individual controls[a] | Yes | Yes |
| Local authority dummies | Yes | Yes |
| Survey quarter × year fixed effects | Yes | Yes |
| Observations | 800,530 | 800,530 |

*Note:* ONS weighted sample of personal well-being respondents, using APS datasets April 2012 to April 2022. Standard errors are clustered by survey year. UK-born is the reference category for the reasons for migration. The reference category for employed respondents includes inactive and job-seeking respondents.
[a]Controls are country of birth, age, gender, marital status, number of dependent children, ethnicity, religion, self-reported health, age completed full-time education, occupational sector.
*$p < 0.10$.
**$p < 0.05$.
***$p < 0.01$.

for migration, in particular, a stronger effect for work migrants, then the estimated effect should be even stronger when EU-nationals are removed from the estimation.

Table 6 provides the results excluding EU-nationals in the estimation. For the happiness indicator, as expected, the coefficient of the interaction is larger for all migrants and largest in the case of work migrants (0.100 vs. 0.055). Estimates for life satisfaction indicate a similar dynamic, with the coefficient for work migrants now also statistically significant. Hence, while excluding EU-nationals leads to small differences in the results, the changes are in the expected direction.

## 6 | Conclusion and Discussion

While there has been much interest in the links between employment and SWB, including for migrants, the role of the

initial reason for which individuals move across countries has remained largely unexplored. The main contribution of this article is to demonstrate that disaggregating migrants by their self-reported reason for migration provides empirical evidence not only into differences in SWB along this dimension, but also potential insights into the structural and social mechanisms that sustain these differences. Our results suggest that migration reasons likely overlap with multiple dimensions of migration pathways: economic and skill-based motivations (work and study), social obligations and expectations (family), and legal precarity (asylum). Our conceptual framing goes beyond documenting heterogeneity, offering a lens through which to interpret why employment matters differently for these different migrant groups.

One of the hypotheses developed in this article suggested that SWB differences between in and out of employment migrants should be positive for all migrants, but largest for those migrating for work reasons, as this is the group for which migration is more strongly linked to labour market participation in the destination country. The nature of immigration policies in the UK, which require nearly constant employment for many work migrants, reinforces this effect. However, the results are not entirely in line with this hypothesis, as the only clear statistical difference is with family migrants. This suggests that employment also plays a key role in the SWB of other migrant groups, such as study and asylum migrants, particularly when looking at short-term measures of SWB such as happiness. Furthermore, these first findings raise questions as to how gender dynamics and domestic responsibilities play into shaping the differences we observe for family migrants. For this group, the negative relation we uncover with life satisfaction calls for closer examination of how family migrants' often challenging conditions of work affect their well-being in the UK, indicating how structural and social conditions may interact with migration motives to influence key well-being outcomes.

The second hypothesis suggested that as length of residence in the UK increases, there should be a decrease in the importance of employment for SWB. Residence in the country means that migrants expand their support networks and change their legal status, making work less essential to their life in the country. This has been demonstrated in other research, showing how length of stay associates with improved language skills, social connections, all of which may lessen the centrality of employment in shaping migrants' well-being. The expectation was that this effect should be present for all migrant groups, with the exception of study migrants. The results broadly back this hypothesis. Notably, for study migrants, the strength of the association between employment and SWB increases with length of residence. This could be explained by the fact that study migrants remaining in the country after finishing their studies must rapidly switch into a work visa to stay in the country. This is an important contribution to research which has examined the precarious conditions study migrants face in many destination countries as their study visas expire, showing how these dynamics evolve over time.

Third, our study suggested these patterns would hold across different indicators of SWB. We focused on life satisfaction and happiness, as these are widely used in research on migrants in destination countries. While Hypothesis 3 suggested similar associations across both measures, the findings indicate more nuance. The associations are in the same direction, but with substantial differences in terms of statistical significance, opening avenues for further research exploring what likely sustains these differences.

Overall, the main finding from this article is that disaggregating migrants by their initial reasons for moving brings new insights on the link between employment and SWB. These findings demonstrate the importance of recognising heterogeneity across migrant groups, as treating migrants as a homogenous population risks concealing systematic differences that persist even decades after arrival.

Our findings also carry implications for policy debates on migration and labour market access in the UK. First, the positive role of employment in sustaining SWB for study and asylum migrants is particularly relevant, given that both groups face restrictions in accessing the labour market. More flexible employment opportunities for these groups, for instance, allowing asylum seekers to work while their claims are processed, or easing restrictions on student working hours, could potentially be beneficial for SWB. Second, the result that the strength of the association between employment and SWB increases for study migrants as their residence lengthens is potentially linked to the need to secure a work visa after graduation. This provides empirical support for policies such as the Graduate Visa route, which facilitate the transition from study to work. Finally, a broader implication of our study is that policies which tie residence rights closely to employment status, as is the case for many work migrants, may create vulnerabilities that manifest in migrants' SWB. As such, our analysis highlights the value of using SWB data to inform migration policy, in the same way such data are increasingly being used to understand and improve the well-being of the wider population.

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**Conflicts of Interest**

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

**Data Availability Statement**

The data that support the findings of this study are available from Office for National Statistics. Restrictions apply to the availability of these data, which were used under license for this study.

**Peer Review**

For transparency, the peer review documents associated with this article are available at https://doi.org/10.1111/imig.70189.

## Endnotes

[1] Standard errors are clustered to account for arbitrary correlation among individuals interviewed in the same year. Since the APS consists of repeated cross-sections, respondents within a year may share common shocks or survey-specific design effects. Local authority dummies are included in all models to absorb time-invariant local characteristics. However, we acknowledge that there could be possible cross-sectional correlation in errors, which is a limitation of the analysis.

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**Appendix A**

**Percentage of Respondents Across Categories of Independent Variables Included in the Estimations**

| | | Migrants by reason for migration | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | **UK-born** | **Work** | **Study** | **Family** | **Asylum** |
| | | | Socio-demographics | | |
| Female (baseline = male) | 57.32 | 46.17 | 51.70 | 64.77 | 60.33 |
| Age (in years) | 45.75 | 39.89 | 36.93 | 42.79 | 41.35 |
| | (14.40) | (10.33) | (11.87) | (13.38) | (13.36) |
| *N* dependent children | 0.65 | 0.86 | 0.74 | 1.02 | 1.15 |
| | (1.04) | (1.06) | (1.06) | (1.28) | (1.33) |
| Marital status (baseline = single) | | | | | |
| Married | 47.47 | 53.02 | 44.99 | 55.29 | 56.36 |
| Divorced | 10.06 | 5.28 | 4.76 | 7.81 | 6.93 |
| Widowed | 2.04 | 0.08 | 0.07 | 2.12 | 1.96 |
| Religion (baseline = none) | | | | | |
| Christian | 54.53 | 63.00 | 42.58 | 43.15 | 39.46 |
| Buddhist | 0.25 | 0.11 | 0.31 | 0.15 | 0.17 |
| Hindu | 0.29 | 0.71 | 0.76 | 0.71 | 0.94 |
| Jewish | 0.32 | 0.50 | 0.54 | 0.60 | 0.45 |
| Muslim | 0.11 | 0.62 | 15.36 | 20.12 | 28.26 |
| Sikh | 0.30 | 0.73 | 1.01 | 2.89 | 2.49 |
| Other | 1.88 | 2.10 | 2.42 | 2.45 | 2.49 |
| Ethnicity (baseline = White) | | | | | |
| Mixed | 0.74 | 1.32 | 1.86 | 1.80 | 1.88 |
| Asian/Asian British | 1.77 | 17.17 | 23.36 | 31.10 | 30.90 |
| Black/Black British | 0.90 | 0.52 | 14.33 | 9.96 | 18.10 |
| Chinese | 0.11 | 1.30 | 9.21 | 1.63 | 0.22 |
| Arab | 0.003 | 0.79 | 3.52 | 1.16 | 3.29 |
| Other | 0.02 | 5.34 | 7.85 | 4.76 | 8.68 |
| Self-reported health (baseline = very bad) | | | | | |
| Bad | 1.66 | 0.51 | 0.42 | 1.39 | 1.94 |
| Fair | 16.32 | 8.51 | 8.78 | 15.46 | 16.09 |
| Good | 39.91 | 43.68 | 42.13 | 42.31 | 42.03 |
| Very good | 36.64 | 45.26 | 47.10 | 36.08 | 35.16 |
| Education | | | | | |
| Age left full-time education (years) | 18.05 | 20.86 | 22.39 | 19.33 | 19.17 |
| | (2.88) | (3.87) | (3.82) | (4.15) | (4.65) |
| Years of residence in the UK (baseline = Under 5 years) | | | | | |
| 5–9 | | 23.36 | 19.04 | 11.82 | 12.95 |
| 10–19 | | 37.90 | 35.35 | 23.10 | 33.90 |
| 20 and over | | 16.07 | 26.92 | 59.04 | 44.99 |
| Observations | 743,093 | 32,957 | 17,262 | 36,246 | 6900 |

*Note:* ONS weighted sample of personal well-being respondents, using APS datasets April 2012 to April 2022. The marital status category "other" is not displayed for identification reasons. Standard deviation in parentheses for continuous variables.

**Appendix B**

**Description of Variables Included in the Estimations**

| Variables | Definition |
|---|---|
| Marital status (single is the baseline category) | |
| Married | Married = 1, otherwise = 0 |
| Divorced | Divorced = 1, otherwise = 0 |
| Widowed | Widowed = 1, otherwise = 0 |
| Other marital status | Other marital status = 1, otherwise = 0 |
| Religion (no religion is the baseline category) | |
| Christian | Christian = 1, otherwise = 0 |
| Protestant | Protestant = 1, otherwise = 0 |
| Buddhist | Buddhist = 1, otherwise = 0 |
| Hindu | Hindu = 1, otherwise = 0 |
| Jewish | Jewish = 1, otherwise = 0 |
| Muslim | Muslim = 1, otherwise = 0 |
| Sik | Sik = 1, otherwise = 0 |
| Other religion | Other religion = 1, otherwise = 0 |
| Ethnicity (White is the baseline category) | |
| Mixed/multiple | Mixed/multiple = 1, otherwise = 0. White is the baseline category |
| Asian/Asian British | Asian/Asian British = 1, otherwise = 0. White is the baseline category |
| Black/Black British | Black/Black British = 1, otherwise = 0. White is the baseline category |
| Chinese | Chinese = 1, otherwise = 0. White is the baseline category |
| Arab | Arab = 1, otherwise = 0. White is the baseline category |
| Other ethnicity | Other ethnicity = 1, otherwise = 0. White is the baseline category |
| Other demographic/social/household | |
| Female | Female = 1, Male = 0 |
| Age | In years |
| Dependent children | Number of dependent children in household aged under 19 |
| Education | Age when completed full-time education |
| Employment outcomes | |
| Employed | 1 = In Employed, Out of Employment = 0. Out of respondents includes inactive and job-seeking respondents |
| Occupational sector (Managers, directors and senior officials are the baseline category) | |
| Professional occupations | Professional occupations = 1, otherwise = 0. (Managers are the baseline category) |
| Associate professional occupations | Associate occupations = 1, otherwise = 0. (Managers are the baseline category) |
| Administrative and secretarial occupations | Administrative occupations = 1, otherwise = 0. (Managers are the baseline category) |
| Skilled trades occupations | Skilled occupations = 1, otherwise = 0. (Managers are the baseline category) |
| Caring, leisure and other service occupations | Caring occupations = 1, otherwise = 0. (Managers are the baseline category) |
| Sales and customer service occupations | Sales occupations = 1, otherwise = 0. (Managers are the baseline category) |
| Process, plant and machine operatives | Process occupations = 1, otherwise = 0. (Managers are the baseline category) |
| Elementary occupations | Elementary occupations = 1, otherwise = 0. (Managers are the baseline category) |

| Variables | Definition |
|---|---|
| Migration related (UK-born is the baseline category) | |
| Work | Migrated for work reasons = 1, otherwise = 0 |
| Study | Migrated for study reasons = 1, otherwise = 0. |
| Family | Migrated for family reasons = 1, otherwise = 0. |
| Asylum | Migrated for asylum reasons = 1, otherwise = 0. |
| Other reason for migration | Migrated for other reasons = 1, otherwise = 0. |
| Years since migration | Dummy variables indicating 0–4 years, 5–9 years, 10–19 years, 20 years and above since migration to the UK |
| Health (Very bad is the baseline category) | |
| Bad health | Bad health = 1, otherwise = 0 |
| Fair health | Fair health = 1, otherwise = 0 |
| Good health | Good health = 1, otherwise = 0 |
| Very good health | Very good health = 1, otherwise = 0 |
| Subjective well-being | |
| Happiness | Original question in the APS is "How happy did you feel yesterday? (where nought is 'not at all happy' and 10 is 'completely happy')" |
| Life satisfaction | Original question in the APS is "Overall, how satisfied are you with your life nowadays? where nought is 'not at all satisfied' and 10 is 'completely satisfied'" |
| Other | |
| Local authority | Dummy variables for each of the 201 local authority identifiers |
| Survey quarter × year | Dummy variables for each of the 4 survey quarters (January–March, April–June, July–September, October–December) for every year of survey data (2012–2022) |
| Country of birth | Dummy variables for each of the 250 countries of birth in the APS |