

# ‘For a Secure and Stable Life’: Constructing Life Satisfaction in the ‘Migratory Careers’ of Russian Immigrant Physicians in Finland

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*This article investigates the subjective life satisfaction of Russian immigrant physicians in Finland. It focuses on how life satisfaction is subjectively experienced and interpreted post migration in a bid to identify the resources which influence it in both work and family domains. The advantage of life satisfaction is taking it as a unifying cross-disciplinary conceptual framework and as a multidimensional analytical approach, including macro-societal, meso-relational, and micro-personal levels. We use the concept of the migratory career to analyse work and family life on migration journeys. These life evaluations are analysed using a sociological conception of subjective life satisfaction and a psychological conception of wellbeing as guiding principles in theory and analysis. Based on 26 semi-structured qualitative interviews, the study finds that an interplay between societal-structural and personal-relational resources makes the interviewees satisfied with their work and family lives. Societal-structural resources included the work environment, income, life security and stability, while personal-relational resources included social support, social trust, and family relationships. Beyond the classical income and job security, we find our participants’ experienced and interpreted life satisfaction is essentially associated with outcomes of family-friendly and supportive work conditions. Moreover, social and personal security and family stability are important for their quality of life in a characteristic Nordic social environment.*

*Keywords: subjective life satisfaction, migratory career, Russian immigrant physicians, resources, work and family domains, qualitative approach*

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## Introduction

With the increasing international migration of physicians since the 1990s (Klein 2016; Walton-Roberts, Runnels, Rajan, Sood, Nair, Thomas, Packer, MacKenzie, Tomblin-Murphy, Labonté and Bourgeault 2017), research focus across disciplines has often surrounded the underlying aspirations and capabilities for human development in the migration context (de Haas 2021) as well as outcomes of their experiences in receiving countries over time, including employability, occupational mobility and life adjustments (Mozetič 2018). However, bodies of literature on work trajectories and their connections with family life dynamics through the life-course have grown (Han and Mortimer 2023), detaching from the academic tradition of labour-market integration in disciplinary areas such as human-resource management and development (Habti 2021). Furthermore, beyond career opportunities, the ‘human face’ of the subjective approach to migration experience of social life (Favell, Feldblum and Smith 2007) has increasingly focused research attention on work and family domains (Bolzani, Crivellaro and Grimaldi 2021; Habti 2021; Ivana 2020), as scholars traditionally presumed that highly skilled immigrants do not experience challenges. Being highly skilled may indicate a successful career progression and upward social mobility, socio-cultural adjustment, and supposedly positive life-satisfaction outcomes. However, these studies often compare immigrants’ pre-migration conditions in their sending countries to their early-phase post-migration conditions in receiving countries, using quantitative analysis of the immigrants’ work experiences.

Though important, such line of research suffers from two drawbacks. First, it quantitatively analyses changes in working life and income, but overlooks other significant life dimensions, as in the context of Finland. Quantitative studies on wellbeing among immigrant physicians in the workplace have burgeoned in the last 10 years or so, being predominantly led by healthcare researchers. Some found negative psycho-social wellbeing among ‘foreign-born’ physicians in the work environment – mainly mental stress and physical strain (Aalto, Heponiemi, Keskimäki, Kuusio, Hietapakka, Lämsä, Sinervo and Elovainio 2014) – symptoms which may be associated with an intention to leave one’s job or even the country (Heponiemi, Hietapakka, Kaihlanen and Aalto 2019). Other research suggests that highly skilled immigrants in Finland experienced difficulties in socio-cultural adjustment in the workplace (e.g., Lahti 2013) and beyond (e.g., Habti 2014a; Koskela 2019) due to socio-cultural identity(ies) negotiations, which affect the individual’s wellbeing (Neira, Bruna, Portela and Garcia-Aracil 2018). Most studies addressed objective indicators using quantitative approaches in the variations in individual characteristics among these immigrants’ socio-psychological stressors at work. However, while the migration of physicians from Eastern to Western Europe is generally found to be associated with better career and life opportunities (Habti 2019; Klein 2016), the issue of what multidimensional migration outcomes in life satisfaction they essentially experience over time in the receiving countries, apart from work and in relation to their connectedness with their origin countries, still stands.

Concerning the second major downside that extant research has in line with subjective approach to migration experiences, quantitative cross-sectoral or longitudinal research abundantly examined the drivers and outcomes of social integration and life satisfaction among various immigrant groups in receiving countries (Hendriks, Burger, Ray and Esipova 2018). Largely focusing on differences in income levels and welfare benefits between countries (Amit 2010; Bartram 2015; Hendriks and Bartram 2016; Hendriks *et al.* 2018), such research often links life satisfaction in receiving countries to a better life situation and future, often highlighting the role of macro-societal conditions in both receiving and sending countries on life satisfaction (Kogan, Shen and Siegert 2018; Safi 2010). Interestingly, such research showed conflicting results when comparing subjective life satisfaction among immigrant communities, often underlining macro-societal conditions only (Amit 2010; Arpino and de Valk 2018; Safi 2010). In the Russian highly skilled migration context, researchers have observed that socio-economic and macro-societal conditions influenced the intention

to migrate (Amit 2010; Otrachshenko and Popova 2014), whereas others found that emigration is driven by other incentives than the socio-economic (Bartram 2015; Mihăilă 2019). Approaching subjective life satisfaction from a quantitative macro-societal perspective leaves an important void because it does not comprehensively account for other meaningful life dimensions of experienced and interpreted life satisfaction across social settings, which might be more important for the immigrants and those close to them in their present and future life prospects. Additionally, a quantitative approach does not consider immigrants' subjective life evaluations, grounded upon major life-events and transformations, and presenting the immigrants as social agents actively trying to meet their life goals and needs and to overcome challenges in their migratory journeys, often with reference to their origin country.

Because it is often studied as the best indicator of an individual's perceived quality of life (Bartram 2015; Pavot and Diener 2008), positive life satisfaction is the most significant goal in human life according to the psychological theory of social production function (Ormel, Lindenberg, Steverink and Verbrugge 1999). The theory stipulates that people produce their wellbeing by trying to increase the achievement of universal goals with an ensemble of resources they have, despite constraints which they encounter. For example, subjective life satisfaction is considered a key factor of and outcome for upward social mobility (Hadjar and Samuel 2015) and self-realisation (Sirgy 2021) in one's life. Taking a sociological perspective, Veenhoven (2012) defines subjective life satisfaction as a person's subjective evaluations of life on their chances for a good life. He advances that the key to happiness is combining a 'liveable environment' (external conditions) and 'life-abilities' (internal conditions). Inspired by these sociological and psychological theories of life satisfaction and wellbeing, our study uses a cross-disciplinary conceptual framework that ranges from sociological and psychological underpinnings, alongside a multidimensional analytical approach that interplays between the perceptual, material and relational dimensions in immigrants' life journeys which Martiniello and Rea (2014) define as *migratory careers*.

This article aims to contribute to the above-mentioned lines of inquiry by examining the subjective life satisfaction of Russian immigrant physicians – understood as the subjective appreciation of life as a whole, in its reflective, evaluative and interpretative forms (Veenhoven 2012) – in the important life domains of work and family. Cross-disciplinary theorisation and a multidimensional analysis of migration experiences of migratory career, particularly on this research question, have received limited empirical attention. The study does not concern the variations in these immigrants' subjective life satisfaction across time. Our research investigates what and how a combination of characteristic resources is perceived to influence a person's overall life satisfaction through migratory careers. Focusing specifically on Russian physicians is intriguing, as the largest foreign-born healthcare physicians, would enlighten the profession-specific aspects which shape their evaluations and allow identification of pre-migration effects. Hence, this study asks the following questions: Are these immigrants satisfied with their work and family lives post migration? If so, what resources (or factors) account for their subjective life satisfaction within these domains? This study builds on the stance that migration is neither advantageous nor disadvantageous for immigrants, while societal-structural, personal and relational resources are elemental in experienced and interpreted life satisfaction at different stages of life.

The study analyses the subjective experiences and evaluations of life satisfaction among Russian immigrant physicians, characterised by diverse biographies and migration trajectories, in order to understand under what conditions their life satisfaction outcomes of migration are achieved in such characteristic life domains as work and family. Considering the limited research using qualitative biographical approaches to investigate highly skilled immigrants' subjective life satisfaction, this study relies on their perceptions and experiences through semi-structured interviews with 26 participants. A biographical approach allows the analysis of their overall life evaluations under the changing conditions of lived migration experiences. Moreover, an interpretative analysis (Denzin 1989) of the long-term outcomes of migration in their work and family lives may illuminate

how their life satisfaction is subjectively experienced and interpreted, with a focus on the subtleties of narrative accounts rather than the metrics of quantitative data. Against this backdrop, a qualitative approach to subjective life satisfaction is important for identifying and analysing the interplay of individual characteristics and structural forces that may promote or challenge the life satisfaction in work and family domains in the immigrants' lived experiences in Finland.

In what follows, we present a theoretical literature review drawing on the relevant sociological and psychological dimensions of subjective life satisfaction in a migration context; we also elaborate on the concept of the migratory career and its theoretical and analytical approach for better understanding our research objectives. We then sketch out a brief discussion on the situation of Russian immigration in Finland, after which we describe the original qualitative data, sample and qualitative method used for our empirical analysis. Next come the main results and analysis of our participants' life evaluations, particularly the perceived resources of life satisfaction, placed within the broader framework of their biographical accounts; this is followed by our concluding remarks. The findings show that, overall, Russian immigrants experienced and interpreted their life satisfaction positively. Interestingly, though a good income and work environment are significant resources and drivers behind migration, they conceive that their life satisfaction is mostly promoted by family-related resources thanks to a cherished sense of personal and relational security and stability in life.

### **Navigating life satisfaction in migratory career in the life domains of work and family**

As previous research on wellbeing/life satisfaction has largely focused on objective evaluations from quantitative metrics, an interacting multidimensional analysis and cross-disciplinary theorisation to analyse immigrants' subjective life satisfaction from biographic narratives remains under-explored. We propose a framework that combines sets of explanatory factors and/or resources to allow comprehensive analysis of their experienced and interpreted life satisfaction in their *migratory careers*.

#### *Subjective life satisfaction in the migratory career: a holistic multidimensional lens*

Martiniello and Rea introduced the concept of the *migratory career* based upon the sociological concept of the *career* by proposing a multidimensional conceptual apparatus in theoretical linkage between the migration process and lived experiences, as an addition to concepts of trajectory and integration. They define the *migratory career* as 'a sequence of steps, each marked by events that are defined as significant within the structure of the actors' narratives and publicly recognised as such by various audiences' (2014: 1083). They explain how the migratory career provides added value to the multidimensional analysis of the social reality of immigrants' experiences from macro-structural (opportunity structures and barriers), meso-relational (social relationships, networks) and micro-individual (agency, personal characteristics) levels. These resources develop the migratory career in an interactive way. In our study, we explore the specific needs and goals that immigrants consider important for life satisfaction and how they shape and are shaped by the migration process. The concepts of incorporation or integration have focused on receiving countries as the departure point, while overlooking immigrants' life experiences in the sending country before migration. Instead of approaching migration as linear and unidirectional (de Haas 2021; Habti 2018), the migratory career is a theoretical and analytical tool that allows an understanding of the complex multidirectional, idiosyncratic and dynamic migration process.

As a conceptual tool, the migratory career provides an extended analysis with which to reconstruct the experienced 'career' of immigrants as part of the work–family life course (Habti 2018; Han and Mortimer 2023). The first dimension of the migratory career is that it is constructed objectively by legal-institutional and

socio-economic pathways and is subjectively grounded on early migration expectations and post-migration experiences. This subjective dimension allows a deep understanding of the migratory career as a diachronic construct in constant transformation. In this way, we differentiate between the concept of the career and that of the trajectory which focuses solely on the objective dimension and thus limits the analysis to steps in the migration and settlement processes to the detriment of transformations related to forms of social identity(ies). To illustrate, the first-born child for highly skilled immigrant mother has greater importance in the definition of her relational identity than her professional identity, as it has greater influence than other aspects in orienting her migratory career (Habti 2014a). Her new subjective identity could be freedom, prioritising stability of family more than occupational and socio-economic gains. Thus, the migratory career is useful in identifying and analysing not only pecuniary resources influencing life satisfaction but also the non-pecuniary dynamic processes in immigrants' experiences related to identity development, socio-cultural adjustment, way of life and particular agentic strategies in their narratives.

The second dimension of the migratory career which Martiniello and Rea (2014) propose is the concept of success and failure. Highly skilled immigrants often mobilise forces and strategies that motivate their career. Thus, the career as a process aims for achievement grounded on objective and subjective conditions. As shown later, the migratory career is built upon manifold goals, not only the pursuit of career progression but possibly self-realisation, recognition and social identities which nurture life satisfaction. It bears varying degrees of subjective and objective success from immigrants' subjective evaluations across life domains. Analysing the migratory career requires consideration of the values and norms in receiving and sending countries. Some immigrants may link their career success to socio-economic success, whereas others conceive it as self-achievement and a social status (Hadjar and Samuel 2015). Educational credentials and work are major factors explaining an immigrant's social mobility although perceived subjective success could be based on the social norms and values rooted in society in both the receiving and sending country – i.e. a hybrid culture or that of only the origin country (de Haas 2021; Habti 2014b). Such a process situated in immigrants' practices are major founding elements of identity(ies) development and socio-cultural adaptation, hence shaping their personal–relational resources and frame of reference for analysing subjective life satisfaction (e.g., Hajro, Stahl, Clegg and Lazarova 2019). Research needs to analyse both the life situations regarding immigrants' needs and goals and the criteria used to define success over time, such as the characterisation of life satisfaction outcomes from cross-disciplinary underpinnings.

### *Subjective life satisfaction as sociological and psychological theoretical underpinnings*

Conceptually, life satisfaction has been closely linked to and often used interchangeably with subjective wellbeing, quality of life and happiness, despite the differences in philosophical and theoretical foundations between these concepts (e.g., Hendriks and Bartram 2016; Pavot and Diener 2008; Veenhoven 2012). Veenhoven (2012: 66) approaches subjective life satisfaction as 'the degree to which an individual judges the overall quality of his/her life-as-a-whole favourably', based on their personal criteria, judgments and perceptions. For psychologists (Pavot and Diener 2008) and sociologists (Veenhoven 2012) alike, satisfaction with life as a-whole is not only about how well one feels, but also about the resources and conditions available and mobilised in the life domains in which people are embedded, which may contribute to their flourishing and self-realisation. In this sense, amidst opportunities and challenges experienced as life events – for example, the migratory career – Veenhoven (2012) posits that the key to higher life satisfaction is a combination of a 'liveable environment' nurtured by opportunity structures such as societal-structural resources (e.g., social welfare, work conditions, environmental conditions) alongside 'individual life-abilities' resulting from 'life chances' and 'inner qualities' such as personal–relational resources (e.g., income, social status, social relationships,

social identities, qualifications/skills). He adds that the appreciation of life and its purpose ('utility') further contributes to life satisfaction. Hence, we assume societal–structural and personal–relational resources form the opportunity structures and outcomes of life satisfaction, which itself constitutes a major outcome in immigrants' experiences and (non-)achievement of their life aspirations and capabilities in receiving countries (de Haas 2021).

Veenhoven (2012) conceives that the role of societal–structural resources in life satisfaction derives from research findings which show that individuals in modern, liberal and wealthier countries feel happier than those living in less-rich countries – for example, based on world happiness reports. He adds that advantageous societal-structural conditions, e.g. quality healthcare and education systems, generous welfare support and social equality, built on state policies and the good functioning of services, are deemed to create a stable and safe social environment and potentially to promote human flourishing in major life domains. Although most existing research, as described earlier, underlined such advantages, empirical findings in Europe concluded that immigrants do not always benefit from a propitious and enduring work and family environment in receiving societies because the opportunity structures for wellbeing-induced gains for them are often absent (de Haas 2021). However, living in a country endowed with a propitious 'liveable environment' may help immigrants to develop personal–relational resources which could promote their life satisfaction. It can be argued that they may experience different levels of life satisfaction and outcomes on their migratory journeys, depending on their life situations and events involving macro-societal, meso-relational and micro-individual resources, as proposed by Veenhoven (2012) above. Propitious societal resources may shape personal resources in flourishing and satisfaction in major life domains. As Veenhoven (2012) argues, the interaction between life events – such as migration and employment – and personal–relational resources and capabilities may fundamentally influence life satisfaction. Hence, to understand immigrants' life satisfaction, one needs to identify the different interacting resources that support migration outcomes to which immigrants aspire and to learn how these resources influence their experienced and interpreted life satisfaction in work and family domains. These insights serve as important contextual factors related to this article's focus.

A shared thread with Veenhoven's theory is Ormel *et al.*'s (1999) psychological approach to wellbeing through their *social production function theory*. They propose that people are rational agents actively selecting cost-effective ways to promote two major needs and goals: physical and social wellbeing. They argue that status and affection are major instrumental goals, the attainment of which increases social mobility and social wellbeing – such as a sense of approval, worth, respect and prestige from others and in personal self-perceptions (1999: 67–68). Hence, the efficiency of these two instrumental goals and activities in a person's social production functions eventually influences subjective wellbeing. According to Ormel *et al.* (1999: 67), the major activities and abilities to produce status are occupation, lifestyle and excellence in life domains, while the main resources are unique qualifications and skills, which have a long-term effect on wellbeing. This approach adds to our framework for understanding how individual immigrants engage in the social production of their life satisfaction and emphasises the dynamic and strategic nature of pursuing goals and resources in various circumstances; it thus features the relevance of examining any activities shaping their subjective life satisfaction, particularly in the work domain, through their migratory careers. Veenhoven's focus on the importance of and connection between societal–structural and personal–relational resources and capabilities resonates with Ormel *et al.*'s theory that individuals strategically seek instrumental goals through available resources and activities undertaken to enhance psychological and social wellbeing. Both theories recognise the intricate connections between those resources and the pursuit of wellbeing, hence contributing to a comprehensive understanding of influential resources. The content and combination of resources in immigrants' experiences change over time, which directly influences their life satisfaction in what Veenhoven (2012) considers the major life domains: work and family.

### *Navigating life satisfaction in work and family domains*

While life evaluations refer to people's experienced and interpreted life as a whole, they often encompass people's significant others – namely family relatives, colleagues and friends. Veenhoven (2012) observes that satisfaction in specific life domains typically contributes to overall life satisfaction and, conversely, contentment with life-as-a-whole fosters satisfaction with specific life domains. Since work and family are important domains that are intimately interrelated in people's lives, we argue that a closer investigation of domain-specific life satisfaction becomes essential in the context of highly skilled immigrants. The assumption is that such migration is driven by their aspirations and capabilities for opportunities and wellbeing elsewhere (de Haas 2021; Habti 2018; Man, Gan and Fong 2023). Thus, an analysis of domain-specific life satisfaction is imperative for a broader understanding of migration outcomes among immigrant physicians in various aspects of their work and family lives.

The work domain encompasses activities geared towards high-quality output. Warr's (1999) theoretical framework identifies significant structural resources in this domain, including income, work infrastructures and job security, together with inherent personal–relational resources like autonomy, respect, status, trust and recognition. Hence, such resources, conceptualised in Veenhoven's (2012) and Ormel *et al.*'s (1999) theories, contribute to achieving instrumental goals on the path to the universal goal of social and psychological wellbeing. Migration research underscores the importance of these resources to job satisfaction, income and career progression (Wang and Jing 2018). Though subjective career success has often served as a criterion for understanding an individual's satisfaction with his or her job security, income or career progression, research has shown that immigrants' subjective life satisfaction often turns lower through time, despite their satisfaction with income (e.g., Bartram 2015; Hendriks and Bartram 2016), thus having a minimal influence on their life satisfaction. Such a change can be explained by the fact that life satisfaction may be influenced by non-pecuniary relational resources such as collegiality, trust, support, professional recognition and respect in the work environment, which all nurture a sense of esteem and self-realisation, especially considering Ormel *et al.*'s tenet that individuals' choices in pursuing wellbeing, including instrumental goals, activities and resources, are highly individualised.

Research has observed that immigrants experience and interpret work not only as a source of income but also as a measure of a successful migration outcome (Kogan *et al.* 2018; Kushnirovich and Sherman 2018). The pursuit and achievement of higher life satisfaction require fundamental resources such as rights, income and opportunities (Pavot and Diener 2008; Veenhoven 2012). For example, the literature on voluntary highly skilled migration depicts such immigrants as 'mobile' and considers their 'legal capital' such as a passport, social status and 'career capital' as a privileged class of 'global talent'. However, these immigrants also need meaningful recognition because their occupational performance and increased organisational commitment may increase their life satisfaction (Man *et al.* 2023). They need recognition when they show increased interpersonal and cooperative relationships and, particularly, social recognition as a precondition for individual autonomy and self-realisation (see Honneth 2010). As Honneth (2010) proposes, the presence of collegial norms and values shapes the trust, respect and recognition by others and their own self-esteem and, consequently, feed self-realisation in the working life. Related to the work domain, work–life balance, meaning the ability to meet personal–relational goals in balancing work and family life (Dyer, Xu and Sinha 2018) has burgeoned, as it influences people's life satisfaction (Szücs, Drobic, den Dulk and Verwiebe 2011). For highly skilled immigrants, achieving a work–life balance is of paramount importance (Habti 2014a; Ivana 2020; Man *et al.* 2023), especially for women experiencing tensions between work and family demands (Kofman and Raghuram 2005) and trying to maintain their mental and emotional wellbeing and job satisfaction. Hence, we may ask

whether societal–structural resources are enough to make immigrant physicians overall satisfied in the workplace.

The family domain covers individuals' family relationships, household activities and responsibilities based on affection between family members. Previous studies found the causal association between family relationships and wellbeing to be family-related resources such as marriage, family structure and children's influence on the family's wellbeing (Diener and Diener-McGavran 2008). Family relationships are enduring and substantial for wellbeing on people's life courses (Thomas, Liu and Umberson 2017), because spouses with children are found to be more satisfied than those without (e.g., Pavot and Diener 2008). Migration research on the ways in which family relations and living arrangements influence immigrants' life satisfaction has burgeoned over the last two decades, although often showing mixed results. For example, marriage promotes immigrants' life satisfaction (e.g., Bartram 2015; Kushnirovich and Sherman 2018; Safi 2010) and satisfying social relations among close family and extended relatives – as well as collegial relations – are fundamental for immigrants' life satisfaction (Arpino and de Valk 2018; Neira *et al.* 2018). It is important to understand the ways in which strong family ties provide such resources through giving a sense of meaning and purpose, strengthening caregiving and yielding social support when immigrants need it (Ryan 2011). For highly skilled immigrants, strong family ties are found to increase their life satisfaction in various circumstances (e.g., Bolzani *et al.* 2021; Gerber and Ravazzini 2022; Man *et al.* 2023). Moreover, being highly skilled immigrants, social ties with extended relatives and friends are important in offering social and emotional support for them as local and transnational families (e.g., Habti 2021).

Migration studies show the importance of the psychological and social corollary of social support and trust as important resources of life satisfaction among immigrant communities (e.g., Arpino and de Valk 2018; Hombrados-Mendieta, Millan-Franco, Gomez-Jacinto, Gonzalez-Castro, Martos-Mendez and Garcia-Cid 2019; Man *et al.* 2023). Social support influences social and psychological wellbeing, especially at the family level (Thomas *et al.* 2017), while trust is grounded on the trustworthiness of one's social environments (e.g., Rodríguez-Pose and von Berlepsch 2014). Social trust fosters reciprocity, feelings of security and social cohesion between colleagues, family members and the extended community, while institutional trust involves confidence in the services of government, authorities and other social institutions in life domains. Related to trust, individuals may face safety and security concerns, such as a fear of crime or social injustice (e.g., Purkayastha 2018) or job and welfare security (Bartram 2015). As such, security, stability and safety are important social and psychological domains to consider and to investigate from the perspective of personal flourishing, social wellbeing and life satisfaction (Webb and Willis-Herrera 2012), considering that they have both accelerated global migration for safer and better life prospects. Studies on Arab highly skilled immigrants in Finland (Habti 2012) and Qatar (Babar, Ewers and Khatab 2019) showed that personal and social safety and security as psychological and social resources greatly influenced their subjective life satisfaction and decision to stay longer in their receiving countries.

Based on the above considerations, we observe that the meaning of cherishing a satisfying life appears to lie not so much on high incomes and professional positions but in the long-term social transformations in life domains (Pavot and Diener 2008) such as positive family wellbeing (Diener and Diener-McGavran 2008). Family relationships are often identified as a primary source of wellbeing/life satisfaction within these domains (Thomas *et al.* 2017), in addition to work, income, community, friends and good health. As such, the relationship between work and family satisfaction is reciprocal (Judge and Klinger 2008). Moreover, higher life satisfaction may result more from social relationships than from achievement-related domains, while life achievement can be facilitated through other means than income and occupational motivations (Sirgy 2021). As a multidimensional concept, life satisfaction is intricately related to individuals' multi-level life experiences (Szücs *et al.* 2011). Therefore, subjective evaluations of work and family lives vary across immigrants' life



journeys. This invites us to ask how Russian physicians experience and weigh up their migratory careers, within work and family domains, as being overall more satisfying than before migration, as long as they did not encounter long-term challenges and instead cherished opportunities, as they expected, in pre-migration stage. Importantly, we ask what significant societal–structural and personal–relational resources and other subjective forces influenced their experienced and interpreted life satisfaction.

### **Contextualising Russian migration in Finland**

Finland is a Nordic country with a small homogeneous population of around 5.5 million and a foreign-born community of 3 per cent; it remained a net emigration and non-immigration country until the 1970s. However, Finland has become an attractive migration destination for Russians since the 1990s for several reasons: the longest shared EU geographical borders, ethnic repatriation, marriage, existing bilateral agreements, regulated mobility policies and the Finnish welfare system (Habti 2019). While the number of immigrants increases yearly, Russia has been the largest source country over last 30 years, from 5,500 arrivals in 1991 to almost 6,000 in 2022 (Statistics Finland 2023). Thus, they remain the largest immigrant group in Finland, representing approximately 21 per cent of the total number of immigrants. Family ties, study and work are common reasons for Russians being granted residence permits (Statistics Finland 2023). Moreover, migration increased with the repatriation of about 61,000 Finnish ethnic descendants in Russia in the 1980s. The government granted them the right to Finnish citizenship, which allowed the repatriation of 30,000 Ingrian Finns between 1990 and 2011 (Potinkara 2023). Another significant turn in the migration dynamics from Russia was Finland's membership of the EU from 1995, a change in policy environment amidst an economic boom, the strengthening of the social democratic regime and welfare and change in policy. Finland has become a migration magnet for neighbouring Russia. An EU–Russia partnership agreement in 1997 allowed Russia to develop cross-border connections with Finland in different domains. Subsequently, the inflow of Russian nationals to Finland has increased, mostly on the grounds of work and study and for family reasons (Habti 2021). These transformations coincided with the unprecedented economic, political and societal transitions in Russia during the 1990s, following the fall of the Soviet Union. Among the macro-economic and social consequences of this latter were the precarity in the work conditions due to a decline in the healthcare workforce and welfare support, an economic recession and austerity and restricted professional development opportunities (Davidova, Manning, Palosuo and Koivusalo 2009), which drove many physicians to move abroad or into other sectors (Popovich, Potapchik, Shishkin, Richardson, Vacroux and Mathivet 2011; Mihailă 2019).

Russian physicians were the largest group of registered foreign-born accredited physicians in Finland in the 1990s and 2000s; the demand is still increasing in the labour market, mainly for generalists in primary care, due to their impending shortages (Habti 2021). However, Finland still finds difficulty in attracting and retaining foreign-born physicians because of the country's difficult accreditation procedures. The number of recruited Russian immigrant physicians increased from 4 per cent in 2000 to 8.4 per cent in 2008, with a net increase from 357 in 2013 to 644 in 2016 – a figure which represents around half of all foreign-born physicians (Finnish Medical Association 2016). They are over-represented in public health centres and emergency duty compared to their native-born peers (Aalto *et al.* 2014). Generally, they live in metropolitan Southern Finland and in eastern cities bordering Russia. Habti (2021) found that they create extensive co-national local and transnational social ties in both countries but that they experience difficulties in building close social relationships with local natives. Finland has been rated the happiest country in the world for the seventh consecutive time by the UN Happiness Report, leading in indexes of quality of life, effective government, trust in institutions, social support, generosity, low-income inequality, safety and personal freedom (Helliwell, Layard, Sachs, De Neve, Aknin and Wang 2024). While these characteristics could drive migration intention

from Russia, the question persists as to whether Russian physicians could enjoy these characteristic resources to improve their quality of life.

### **Data and method**

This study is part of a research project that explores questions on the career mobility of Russian immigrant physicians in Finland to capture their lived experiences, including their subjective life satisfaction in the domains of work and family. This article presents the results from semi-structured interviews with 26 Russian immigrant physicians carried out in Finland between 2014 and 2015. Most of the participants were sampled based on an official list of 365 registered practicing physicians retrieved from the Finnish Medical Association (2014). After informing the interviewees of our research objectives, a request for participation and a letter of consent concerning ethical conduct were sent to them to be signed and returned. Initially, 32 responses were received but only 22 agreed to participate. The sample also included participants recruited through snowballing, whereby the first group members managed to introduce new participants. The recruitment of participants was done post migration, irrespective of the drivers of migration or the interviewees' socio-demographic characteristics. The sample emigrated to Finland in their early or mid-career stages between the late 1980s and the 2000s, comprising 22 women – only 2 without children – and 4 male participants. This sample reflects the profile of graduated physicians in Russia with an over-representation of women ( $n=272$ ) to men ( $n=93$ ). During the interviewing, they were aged between 28 and 60 years old, with more than half over 40 years old ( $n=17$ ). On average, they lived in Finland for more than 15 years and worked for around 14 years. Their length of residence ranged between 8 and 35 years, providing diverse migration trajectories and individual experiences. The majority held dual citizenship or had migrated as Finnish ethnic repatriates with a Russian background. Several were married to Finnish citizens and had children. The geographical locations of the participants were diverse, ranging from big cities to peripheral towns (see Table 1 in the Annex).

The interview guide was constructed to prompt the participants to narrate what characterised their overall satisfaction with life or their 'quality of life' in Finland as a continued appreciation of the various life domains. The purpose was to portray their subjective evaluations rather than to examine their individual differences in their migration pathways and experiences – or the ways in which socio-demographic markers influenced their subjective life satisfaction. The questions within semi-structured interviews had an open nature and concerned subjective states in key life domains; they were designed to avoid performativity and social desirability bias in answers by participants. Important concepts and umbrella terms stirred the participants to share the meaning of questions, concepts and dimensions of life satisfaction. The study used thematic content analysis, involving manual coding of the data and identifying emergent themes. The coding was carried out both within and across the transcripts to best reflect the characteristics of the participants' narratives and common themes. The interviews lasted between 1.5 and 2 hours; they were carried out mostly on Skype, while others were conducted by phone, with a few face to face, according to the participants' availability. The language used was selected according to the participants' preference – either Finnish or Russian. The interviews were audio-recorded with their consent and transcribed *verbatim* from Russian or Finnish to English. The quotes cited here were selected based on strong features of and patterns identified in the data. The quotes were edited to protect participants' confidentiality and anonymity (names, specialisations and locations).

Moving beyond the overly used quantitative paradigm that systematically neglected and downplayed a qualitative approach (Thin 2018: 1–2), such a qualitative approach and interpretative analysis portray immigrants' life satisfaction not as a 'quantifiable essence, but as a diverse, fluid and elusive set of feelings and evaluations'. A qualitative approach allows an understanding of participants' evaluations of their lived experiences and provides an added-value contribution to research on subjective life satisfaction in synthesising

important empirical lessons. Interview narratives disclosing the participants' thoughts, feelings and meanings are at the core of that construction process. This necessitates the codification of which standards count as a socially constructed 'quality of life'. Thus, a qualitative approach allows the reconstruction of narrated reality, construction and explanations of consistent satisfaction with their life circumstances. The participants' subjective evaluations are linked to and contextualised into their life stories and are subject to interactive and situational variation, often showing heterogeneity on how they weigh up their satisfaction in work and family domains. Analysis of their evaluations is grounded on key resources identified in migratory experiences. Two levels of analysis were mobilised in tandem: an analysis of perceptions that provided diverse narrative accounts and tapped into the different questions to which the participants reacted and the evaluation of the societal conditions which they considered in their narratives. The individual characteristics of each participant were expected to influence life evaluations and yield individual differences but would not affect the empirical direction of the analysis. The mutual constitution between these analytic levels unveils their self-interpretations in biographies, including the strategies, practices and structures governing their migratory careers. In an empirical analysis, the themes are not interpreted as separate but rather as interrelated aspects of general patterns.

### **Constructing life satisfaction in *migratory careers***

Analysis of participants' biographic narratives on their subjective evaluations of life satisfaction revealed their views on an ensemble of identified self-defined resources nurturing life satisfaction within their diverse and distinct *migratory careers*. Overall, the perceived gains in the chances for a highly satisfying life mostly derive from the Finnish 'liveable environment' and life chances and individual 'life abilities', sustained by significant structural–societal and personal–relational resources.

#### *The role of structural–societal resources*

It is acknowledged that job satisfaction comprises different characteristics of work activities. Many late-career participants' life evaluations in their narratives show that they often compare their work–life experiences and conditions in Finland to previous ones in Russia as a reference point. They recall important resources of an ideal work environment that were missing in Russia, during the difficult macro-conditions and uncertainties of the 1990s onwards – namely work conditions, remunerations and the organisational environment (see Davidova *et al.* 2009). Many years since the 1990s, late-career specialist Marina, aged 59, who migrated to Finland in 1993 and witnessed such conditions in Russia, describes the Finnish supportive work environment and opportunities for career progression and concluded: 'Salaries here are much higher than Russia (...). I'm happy to go to work and come back home from work daily'. For early-career participants like Larisa, a specialist aged 36 who migrated after graduation in 2010, when reflecting on her reasons for migration, referred to the quality of and free medical residency for specialist trainees compared to Russia. She is satisfied with her first years' work experience, attributing it to a favourable income and supportive work environment. The presence of necessary infrastructures and resources and efficient organisational culture of institutions eventually make the working life of physicians productive and satisfying:

*I moved to Finland to have a new experience and probably also for economic reasons; I had my own expectations and dreams that I could realise. After I started work in Finland, I liked the Finnish work environment and the attitude which physicians in Finland have towards their colleagues.*

For many participants, regardless of their career stages, the conditions of ongoing professional training and available resources, the organisational culture and the approaches to treatment in Russia differed from the Finnish ones. The Finnish work environment, with its medical resources, has a positive impact on the provision of healthcare as well as on physicians' mental wellbeing – and hence job satisfaction. Several participants reported that job satisfaction meant a good infrastructure, working environment and income, despite mentioning the pressure of long queues of patients and long working hours in primary care. Moreover, they reported satisfaction with their work conditions in connection with those of their private lives. As found earlier, low remuneration, poor living and working conditions and the profession's low prestige in Russia were push factors motivating many Russian physicians to migrate with aspirations for better work–life prospects.

Immigrants are satisfied with life in countries that provide high-quality public goods and welcoming social settings (Hendriks and Bartram 2016; Kogan *et al.* 2018). Effective social welfare policies promote resources that allow families to have a good quality of life and to strengthen their ties. The efficient functioning of institutions contributes to a rewarding social environment in the work–life balance when the state provides social services and learning infrastructures – such as a free and quality career-oriented education system – for professionals to perform their activities (Szücs *et al.* 2011). Natalia, a mid-career specialist, aged 46, who migrated in 1994, is satisfied with her salary and working life. She felt proud about experiencing 'good' training programmes which she believed enabled her professional advancement: 'I'm very proud that I can do so much. I think I could manage in quite a few places with a Finnish education. It's good that I had opportunities to practice'. Likewise, Tatjana, a late-career GP aged 55, explained how rich the Finnish health-education system was in learning and practice, developing her competences and ultimately making her satisfied with her work:

*Young physicians certainly have received a quality education. When they start, they have the possibility to work in different clinics and benefit from vast learning opportunities. It raises the quality of a doctor's work experience.*

However, as a specialist, she referred to the daily challenge of 'full-time work with long queues of patients', as several other participants indicated. Overall, job satisfaction would naturally be reflected in intrinsic competency and performance, as one of its important psychological components.

Finland has embedded the flat working model and flexible working hours as it suits its culture of flat organisations – autonomy and trust and a low hierarchy between management and staff (Laarni, Miiluniemi, Nykänen, Schembri and Richer 2014). Such flexible organisational structures and working patterns aim to promote interprofessional communication and engagement, which are associated with increased productivity and performance. Most participants felt satisfied with these conditions, providing examples of those specific work-related resources which were feeding their job satisfaction. For example, ongoing opportunities for specialised training were believed to develop the physicians' individual abilities in their career mobility. The participants' narratives revealed their smoothly promoted social and professional status in their current work–family life situations. Thus, the flexible model clearly facilitated their accomplished navigation of their work and family lives, which was evidence of their satisfaction. To illustrate, Elena, a mid-career specialist aged 39, who migrated in 2008 and had been working for 7 years, mentioned that her career progression in Finland promoted her social and professional status after her accreditation: 'My social status certainly improved, because my salary is higher. My professional position changed because I am now a specialised doctor'. Often, the narratives disclose that the advantages of social status are coupled with the gain of high salaries. Take Vladimir, a late-career specialist aged 53, who migrated from Russia in 1990 after graduation; he reminded us of the difficulties that physicians would have encountered in advancing their professional skills and competences and achieving career progression in Russia, leading to a dissatisfying work–family life balance:

*It is unlikely that, in the Russia of the 1990s and 2000s, I would have reached similar professional development milestones as I have now (...). Regarding family life, the living standard we have would be difficult to achieve in Russia.*

After 25 years of experience in Finland, Vladimir showed his satisfaction with working life, his Finnish work–life balance and the receiving country’s healthcare system. Furthermore, Inga, a late-career specialist aged 55 and a repatriate Finn who migrated in 1998, explained how important it was to her to work and to be self-reliant in Finland as an immigrant physician. Indeed, she perceived her satisfaction in her gradually rising social and professional status over the years:

*It is important for me that I am self-sufficient, that I came from another country, and I am working here... That is why the professional status I acquired after my accreditation and my extensive work experience are very important to me. I’m very satisfied with my situation.*

Considering these three participants’ social and professional positioning, their narratives imply that they enjoy an elevated social and symbolic status going beyond mere pecuniary rewards in the Finnish context, hence their perceived upward social mobility and positive life evaluations (Hadjar and Samuel 2015). Their relative social and professional statuses matter in terms of life satisfaction with incomes and jobs. They felt better off when they compared their conditions to those of physicians in Russia. However, an early perceived life satisfaction may not continue to be evident over the years for all participants once they assimilate into Finnish lifestyle with its professional and socio-economic status and compare it with those of their Finnish colleagues (Hendriks *et al.* 2018).

The Finnish flexible work model appears to improve the participants’ satisfaction with their family-friendly work environment. Family-welfare support provides resources which help dual-income spouses, who are both parents and workers, to cope with life pressures such as stress, overwork and intense child caregiving. While trying to balance family and work duties, parents often experience time pressures in childcare and an emotional engagement with their young children (Diener and Diener-McGavran 2008). The Finnish system provides convenient arrangements for working spouses. Child welfare package is highly valued which includes day-care, education, financial support and dual parental leave. In this regard, Julia, a specialist trainee aged 31, who migrated in 2009, expressed her satisfaction with family welfare support by linking the conception of welfare resources, pressures of work and career aspirations, especially for a young mother with a child during her first years of immigration and a busy accreditation process:

*Social welfare seems secure and promising. I’m not a citizen yet but I get social support and healthcare and other things if needed. It’s good for kids and I have that impression from my work. (...). As a family, we feel very happy; there are more possibilities for children because kindergartens are high-quality; my child feels good there.*

Additionally, after living in Finland for 12 years, Anatoli, an early-career specialist aged 35, considers safety and social security to be major attractive qualities of life in Finland. He believes his work environment, opportunities for professional development and work–family life balance schemes create ideal conditions for building and shouldering family responsibilities:

*I have nice working environment and an interesting job I get paid for. I have some perspective at this stage to take on family responsibilities, because I have gained professional experience. Now, I can achieve my goals and dreams.*

Migration can be seen as a turning-point that requires highly skilled immigrants to restart building stability in their lives. In a new social and work environment, a job that provides fair remuneration, skill utilisation and opportunities for professional growth is not only a source of job satisfaction but a prerequisite for a perceived right to build and lead a stable family life. Having achieved a certain level of comfort in their working life, the participants are likely to invest more time and effort in family responsibilities. These positive perceptions from their life-stories about experiences of the work–life interface are compared to their apparently less-favourable past experiences in Russia. For example, Irina, an early-career GP aged 36, who migrated in 2004, married and had a child, recounted her experience with pregnancy and delivery in Finland to exemplify the quality of the healthcare service and how one can combine work and family duties in Finland compared to Russia: ‘Compared to Finland, combining professional and family duties would be 10 times more difficult in Russia’. Previous studies observed tensions between family demands and professional tasks among highly skilled immigrant women in Finland (Habti 2014a). This latter study found that the participants managed to varying degrees to successfully build a work–family balance manifested in their upward occupational and social mobility and new family configurations, in line with findings from other studies on highly skilled immigrants in Finland and Sweden (Habti 2021; Ivana 2020).

Being able to trust others in one’s living circle – people, the workplace and public authorities – has been much associated with life satisfaction among immigrants. The participants generally held positive perceptions about Finnish public institutions as resources and public goods that could bring high life satisfaction to individuals and families. As they explained, their life satisfaction originated partially from the trust they had in institutions. This perceived trust in government and public institutions – among the top performers worldwide – is consistent with most surveys of the Finnish general population. Moreover, citizens’ trust in institutions when the latter fulfil their promises contributes to a feeling of certainty and security and, consequently, increases life satisfaction. Finns’ trust in and satisfaction with many valourised life domains, including welfare institutions and services, education, healthcare, social equality and social security, is among the flagships continuously ranking Finland as the ‘happiest country in the world’ (Helliwell *et al.* 2024). Therefore, we may ask whether institutional trust contributes to immigrants’ overall life satisfaction compared to that of local natives (Arpino and de Valk 2018; Kogan *et al.* 2018). The participants’ accounts often linked the advantages of public institutions’ services and the organisational structure of the workplace with trust and satisfaction. For example, early-career specialist Anatoli described the Finnish health system as ‘high quality’ and trusts it with confidence: ‘I trust it as a physician and a patient (...). I can compare it to Russia where healthcare doesn’t work well, though the legislation is quite like the Finnish’. Based on her professional experience, Ljudmila follows the same line: ‘I’m happy about the ways in which the Finnish health system treats pain and organises follow-up treatment (...). I never heard of such a social security system in Russia’. As argued above, the Finnish social welfare model successfully liaises with labour-market institutions and employment regulations to promote social and job security. Following the above-narrated views of participants, it positively influences the work–family balance and, accordingly, personal life satisfaction. Hence, welfare packages and family-friendly regulations arguably enhance professional productivity and satisfaction in family life.

### *The role of relational–personal resources*

Hired for their specialised qualifications, Russian immigrant physicians may experience initial challenges other than the recognition of their credentials during the accreditation process after migration (Klein 2016). They may also experience a lack of recognition of their knowledge, competencies and accumulated experience at an interprofessional level. Honneth (2010) observed that work is a field of a worker's quest for self-realisation while its recognition is linked with the structure of work. In this respect, the participants do not necessarily expect to gain immediate recognition from colleagues and supervisors in their activities, which are already proven in professional *savoir-faire* and practices. However, meaningful recognition is an important precondition for respect and self-realisation and, consequently, a source of psychological wellbeing (Ormel *et al.* 1999). Workers need self-esteem and respect in work environment, without which they may develop feeling of insecurity, unworthiness and unwantedness. The participants' occupational entitlements and resources in work environment potentially generate 'intrinsic' job satisfaction grounded in the characteristics of professional activities – that is, positive interprofessional relationships that produce support, cooperation, respect and recognition, as studies have shown (Judge and Klinger 2008; Wang and Jing 2018).

Some participants, such as Tania, a young GP aged 33 who had been working in Finland for 8 years, benefited from supportive relationships with their supervisors and colleagues; as social conditions for a fulfilling working life, which increased her sense of respect and recognition and consequently job satisfaction: 'Career progress is reflected in my social status, satisfaction with my work and life in the fact that I learn and develop. I feel my work as a professional is recognised by colleagues and patients'. When she feels valued and recognised for her professionalism and contribution to health-service provision, she gains respect from her colleagues and patients. As such, the ability to contribute to the common good also means a contribution to one's wellbeing and *vice versa*. Likewise, young Larisa recalled and acknowledged the cherishing respect and recognition which had enriched her interpersonal engagement and performance. Such motivational conditions were significant affective resources which embodied her satisfaction with the work environment: 'I like the Finnish work environment and attitudes which physicians have towards their colleagues; it is very important that a young newly arrived physician is respected and supported by colleagues'. Indeed, respect and recognition are conceived as fundamental social and institutional conditions for a fulfilling working life and, thus, a sense of job satisfaction when positive interprofessional relationships flourish. Following Ormel *et al.* (1999), status is a major instrumental means to one's ultimate human goal of social and psychological wellbeing, often through intrinsic interpersonal relations characterised by resources such as trust, recognition, respect, support, self-esteem and efficacy (also Sirgy 2021).

Social support as an interpersonal resource plays a significant role in the physicians' interprofessional relationships in work environment, as it influences their job satisfaction. Like several participants, Ljudmila, a mid-career GP aged 47, migrated in 2011 and had worked for only 4 years in Finland. She expressed her satisfaction with the positive interprofessional cooperation and interpersonal relationships: 'I feel very satisfied at work and work goes well (...). Teamwork cooperation goes well and we have good relations'. In a recent study, Russian immigrant physicians in Finland acknowledged their work organisation, non-hierarchical relations and teamwork as positive outcomes of their migratory careers (Habti 2021). The quality of the relationship with their supervisors and colleagues are considered pivotal in their job satisfaction and socio-psychological wellbeing at work.

Other participants' narratives revealed that they experienced intrinsic job satisfaction instilled by the sense of belonging to and shared professional identity and engagement with the workplace community. Such qualities generate social trust developing from trustworthy interprofessional relations and mutual professional support. For example, Ksenia, a mid-career specialist aged 42, who migrated as ethnic repatriate in 2000 and

who, after 15 years of work experience, described her positive experience in this way: ‘I work independently as a physician and make my own decisions. I always had the support from my senior physician (manager) and now it’s me who is a senior physician’. Owing to the effects of support and trust, she succeeded in functioning fully as an individuated autonomous physician, thus gaining the opportunity to reach her professional self-realisation. Moreover, shared professional values and a commitment to medical practice result in a rewarding job satisfaction and job performance, as Inga recalled: ‘To see patients recovered is more important to me than salary. The personnel and the environment are important because we spend most of our life at work. You feel accepted by and comfortable with the personnel’. Accordingly, participants generally perceive themselves as mutually related. Similarly, the work domain characterised by such intrinsic resources from interprofessional relationships increases their job satisfaction. However, as found elsewhere (Habti 2021), they may encounter challenges in their adaptation to a socio-cultural life due to the ‘cumulative disadvantage’ of establishing enduring social bonds with local Finns outside work, partly because they lost friends in Russia, as featured in Inga’s narrative.

Social relationships are important for immigrants’ life satisfaction (Arpino and de Valk 2018), especially family contact and closeness and friendships. Family relations influence members’ life satisfaction across the life span as they generate support and parental backing. Social support provided by family members and extended relatives contributes to a greater satisfaction in their work and family lives, especially in assuming family responsibilities when both spouses are professionally active. Besides, the Finnish social welfare system provides people with social benefits, assistance and information. The narratives generally indicate these valuable resources when participants navigate the opportunities and challenges in the work–family life balance. They referred to the family support package they could have. Slava, a mid-career specialist aged 40, migrated in 2007 and carried out specialisation training of 3 years, which took up much of her time. She attributed her satisfaction with rewarding relationships to the assistance with childcare from her spouse and other relatives on whom she could count. Recounting the importance of her husband’s support in the period of early childcare, she underlined the positive aspects of supportive marital ties: ‘Family responsibilities affected my life when I had a young child to take care of. My husband was at the stage of his degree accreditation, but we shared childcare, and our parents helped us so much’. Most participants showed satisfaction with their fulfilling family and marital relationships, while building resilience to working life pressure. As argued earlier, married couples who provide emotional and material support to each other are healthier and live longer but such outcomes strongly depend on their physical and emotional proximity (Man *et al.* 2023; Thomas *et al.* 2017).

Slava’s positive account was contrasted with those of 4 divorced women in their mid- and late-career stages. These participants had experienced complicated family histories with children involved, competing time pressures, increasing caregiving obligations and low emotional wellbeing, and had struggled to balance work and family life. Such family situations had strong implications for these women’s emotional state, lifestyle choices and life satisfaction. Indeed, highly skilled immigrant women may experience a disproportional burden when it comes to the division of household labour and care responsibilities (Habti 2014a; Kofman and Raghuram 2005; Man *et al.* 2023). When asked about quality of life, Elena, a divorced mother raising a 3-year-old child alone, admitted experiencing difficulties with long working hours and loneliness due to absence of support from relatives who live in Russia. Such a situation apparently exacerbated her emotional wellbeing. For her,

*Quality of life is social wellbeing – that is, having social interaction and contacts. Quality of life is lacking when one is lonely and a single parent. (...) I haven’t had time for hobbies for 3 years because of taking care of my child.*



Elena conceives social wellbeing as social wellness based on supportive and nurturing relationships and interaction with people in difficult times. Her case resembles that of a few other female participants who associated quality of life with fulfilling family bonds, friendships and social life. For example, Irina's social life was devoid of meaningful social relations, closeness and support from family in Russia, which seemed to propel her into loneliness: 'The greatest disadvantage is probably loneliness in the social domain (...); social wellbeing is a positive experience of inward peace and wellbeing, which is important to me'. For Elena and Irina, the difficulties in their social life appear to negatively affect their work–life balance and quality of life. With their demanding work schedules and the absence of relatives and friends, local and transnational social ties could have provided them with much-needed social and emotional support. Such relational social features directly influence social and psychological wellbeing. These women's 'migratory careers' exemplify the possible disadvantageous life events and opportunities experienced in migration across work–family lives, questioning the assumptions of 'privileged' and well-off highly skilled immigrants (Habti 2014a; Man *et al.* 2023).

Human security and safety are social and economic resources of a good quality of life for immigrants. In their narratives, they would refer to personal, financial, social, political and/or physical security and, importantly, a subjective conception of a safer life (Purkayastha 2018; Sirgy 2021). The participants, mainly women with children and spouses/partners, were highly satisfied with their personal and family stability, safety and economic security. For example, Ksenia, who stressed the importance of family stability and admitted that such concerns, together with economic factors, were sufficient reasons to migrate from Russia: 'The most important reasons to leave Russia are economic situation and instability'. The participants generally regarded Finland as an extremely safe and secure place for a family to live in, as Ksenia added: 'Finland is a good country to live in, peaceful and safe for children; it has probably always been like that (...). Safety is one of the reasons to migrate, especially if you have children'. While the participants understood security and safety in different ways, they generally linked them to quality of life which is influenced by sense of social cohesiveness and stability, and generosity in community life (see World Happiness Report 2024, Helliwell *et al.* 2024).

Empirical studies generally support a positive relationship between security and safety and life satisfaction across work and family domains. For instance, Williams *et al.* (2015) observed that neighbourhood safety in Canada can be an important factor in improving an immigrant's quality of life and related the perception of safety to environmental and interpersonal factors such as social justice, family harmony, mutual respect and the feeling that one could get help from one's neighbours when needed. Our finding aligns with such a tenet, which suggests such an outcome may be universal to different immigrant categories. Moreover, the migration of Russian physicians is partly driven by a quest for socio-economic and personal security and family-life stability (Habti 2019; Klein 2016). Galina, an early-career GP aged 33, who migrated in 2008 and is still a trainee-physician and mother of 3 children, compares her life experience in Russia with her current one, recollecting the difficulties of achieving a rewarding work–life balance with full-time child-caring: 'There is no guarantee of a safe and secure life with 3 children in Russia. There is no opportunity to build a career, fulfil professional duties and work honestly while caring for kids'. In relation to human development, conceiving security and safety in Finland at personal, relational, societal and socio-economic levels appears to differ considerably from the ability to attain similar life chances in Russia. The participants subjectively evaluated their life as more secure and safer and with positive outcomes in the meaning of life, freedom and a cherished future life for themselves and their families.

## Conclusions

This study examined life satisfaction among Russian immigrant physicians in both work and family domains. We sought to analyse and understand whether they are satisfied with their lives in Finland and to identify major resources which they perceived to influence life satisfaction in their work and family life. The qualitative analysis of their experiences and interpretation of their life satisfaction from biographic narratives provided a holistic portrait of the opportunities and challenges they perceived to have contributed or undermined it. Although their migration journeys, preferences and conceptions of quality of life are typically individualised, they report converging positive evaluations of life satisfaction. During the meaning-making process, their personalised characteristics evolved, redefining their priorities and life conditions. They have the resources and opportunities to fulfil their aspirations for career and social mobility and, thus, job satisfaction, while maintaining a thriving or less challenging family life. We found a connection between their migration aspirations-capabilities and wellbeing-induced opportunities (de Haas 2021). Exploring their ‘migratory careers’ (Martiniello and Rea 2014) allowed us to move beyond their individual aspirations-capabilities driving the migration process and to construct their life satisfaction in the intertwining work–family life balance. The narratives confirm their heterogeneous migratory careers during which they often anchored life evaluations retrospectively with reference to Russia and prospectively to life ahead in Finland.

The main themes identified in the analysis emphasise that: (i) the positive returns from Finnish social welfare resources promote satisfaction in both work and family lives; (ii) consequently, they are satisfied with their working-life environment; and (iii) in turn, this increases their satisfaction with family life in terms of family relations and work–family arrangements which benefit shared parental duties, childcare and personal wellbeing. Analysis shows that participants conceive that their experienced and interpreted life satisfaction derives from and is constructed in the context of intertwining societal–structural and personal–relational resources which they perceive to promote fulfilling work and family life. It is the personal meanings of and cherished values and norms in such resources that increase or decrease their life satisfaction, although those meanings, values and norms naturally vary among immigrants. The main findings suggest that they are overall satisfied with their two life domains. Beyond the classical resources of income, organisational structures and occupational mobility in the work domain, most participants found that the values and norms of work environment, like family-friendly work conditions and interprofessional relationships, significantly influenced their job satisfaction – namely, the esteem, recognition, support and trust they cherish for their social status, which eventually nurtures self-realisation. Regarding the family domain, their life satisfaction is mainly associated with resources which nurture family relationships – i.e., social and personal life security and family stability.

The findings confirm that thriving is considered to be a process of social change, meeting their aspirations-capabilities for a better life abroad. Reciprocal relations between work and family domains have now been acknowledged by existing research. Additionally, the standards of what counts as good work–family life conditions are socially constructed and they can reflect the immigrants’ pecuniary satisfaction; however, such qualitative personality traits as career success, self-realisation, self-esteem, recognition and respect also count towards what material conditions can mean to them. For Russian physicians, life satisfaction obviously seems to be driven by the quest for professional self-achievement and social promotion of family life in a safe and secure country. Also, what is needed for a ‘good life’ is also gendered and varies across migratory careers of men and women; hence, how women and men construct their life satisfaction differently was not analysed. However, one important finding featured among a few single mothers who experienced low emotional wellbeing due to loneliness and a lack of enjoyment in their social life. Nevertheless, their narratives signal that their migratory careers represent a route to empowerment at both personal and professional levels. Thus,

an important contribution in this study is the cross-disciplinary theoretical underpinnings of the ‘migratory career’, which encapsulates the migration process and multidimensional analyses. Such an approach allows us to connect broader empirical analysis of immigrants’ evaluative life satisfaction from sociological and psychological theories and to capture the identified resources as they unfold from the narratives.

We need to consider certain limitations. First, our qualitative analysis does not allow us to claim causality and generalisability. Based on this sample and qualitative method, we cannot stipulate the amount of variability of subjective life satisfaction which accounted for migration, neither can we assume that all Russian physicians are satisfied with their migratory experiences. Second, the findings capture the dynamics of the migratory careers from Russia to Finland. Hence, it might be expected that their pre-migration situations can translate into different individual motivations and perceptions, while Finland provides its own specific context for immigrant physicians. Moreover, differences are expected to be found in other studies in countries with different structural–societal resources to the Nordic countries. Last, because they represent a potential knowledge and developmental asset and resource for receiving countries, understanding the facets of subjective life satisfaction would add value to the diversity in scholarship and would help human resource managers to benefit more effectively from their *savoir-faire* and work experiences.

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### Conflict of interest statement

No conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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## Annex

**Table 1. Socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents**

Name*	Age	Gender	Year of entry	Profession	Career stage	Citizenship	Civil status	No. of children
Tatjana	55	Female	2005	GP	Late	Repatriate	Married	2
Maria	31	Female	2011	Specialist	Early	Russian	Married	0
Ljudmila	47	Female	2011	GP	Middle	Repatriate	Married	1
Marina	59	Female	1993	Specialist	Late	Repatriate	Divorced	1
Katarina	54	Female	1985	Specialist	Late	Naturalised	Married	3
Natalia	46	Female	1994	Specialist	Middle	Naturalised	Married	1
Alla	47	Female	1984	GP	Middle	Naturalised	Married	2
Julia	31	Female	2009	Specialist	Early	Russian	Married	1
Ksenia	42	Female	2000	Specialist	Middle	Naturalised	Divorced	2
Anna	60	Female	1993	Generalist	Late	Repatriate	Married	1
Tania	33	Female	2006	GP	Early	Naturalised	Single	1
Galina	33	Female	2008	GP	Early	Naturalised	Married	3
Olga	55	Female	1990	GP	Late	Repatriate	Married	2
Yulia	55	Female	1999	GP	Late	Naturalised	Divorced	2
Irina	36	Female	2004	GP	Middle	Naturalised	Married	1
Elena	39	Female	2008	Specialist	Middle	Naturalised	Divorced	1
Inga	55	Female	1998	Specialist	Late	Repatriate	Married	2
Slava	40	Female	2007	Specialist	Middle	Repatriate	Married	2
Anastasia	43	Female	2012	Specialist	Middle	Naturalised	Married	2
Larisa	36	Female	2010	Specialist	Early	Repatriate	Married	1
Milla	42	Female	2009	Specialist	Middle	Naturalised	Married	1
Alexei	28	Male	2009	Specialist	Early	Naturalised	Married	2
Vladimir	53	Male	1990	Specialist	Late	Naturalised	Married	2
Ivan	52	Male	2003	Specialist	Late	Naturalised	Married	1
Igor	49	Male	1991	Specialist	Late	Naturalised	Married	2
Anatoli	35	Male	2002	Specialist	Early	Naturalized	Married	0

*Note:* \*All names are pseudonyms to protect the participants' identity.