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Migrating to the Mediterranean makes Britons unhappier, says research

Migrating to the Mediterranean in search of a better lifestyle makes people unhappier than if they stayed at home, the British Sociological Association's annual conference in Leeds heard today [Wednesday 23 April].

Dr David Bartram, of the University of Leicester, said that migrants from the UK and five other northern European countries who went to Spain, Portugal, Greece and Cyprus were less happy than people who stayed behind.

Dr Bartram analysed survey data on 265 migrants from Belgium, Switzerland, Germany, Netherlands, France, and 73 from the UK, who resettled in the Mediterranean countries.

When asked how happy they were on a scale of 0-10, the migrants scored 7.3 on average, compared with the average of 7.5 for 56,000 people studied who had remained in the northern countries.

Dr Bartram then analysed the data to take account of differences between migrants and those who stayed in terms of age, health, income, education, employment and religious beliefs, to make sure these factors did not distort the results.

This confirmed that it was the fact of having migrated that made the respondent less happy, by about 0.3 of a point on the ten-point scale on average (3 in 100), compared with those who stayed behind. For British migrants the gap was larger, with migrants 0.4 of a point (4 in 100) less happy than those staying in the UK.

“The key finding from the analysis is that people from northern Europe who migrated to southern Europe are less happy than the stayers in northern Europe,” said Dr Bartram.

He said that the migrants had higher incomes than the average in their new country, because they were often better educated and less likely to be retired. Some theories predicted that this would make them happier because they had higher status.

However, he had found the reverse, perhaps because “migration itself can be disruptive to other dimensions of people's lives – social ties, sense of belonging – possibly with consequences for their happiness.

“Perhaps any positive subjective consequences were outweighed by negative consequences arising from the more general disruptive effects of international migration on one's life.

“Within the European Union opportunities for such migration are abundant, and migration flows in this mode have reached significant dimensions. The analysis in this paper, however, raises doubts about whether migration in this mode will result in greater happiness for the migrants.”

- Dr Bartram studied data from the European Social Survey which were recorded between 2002 and 2010.

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The 2014 British Sociological Association annual conference is being held at the University of Leeds from 23 - 25 April. Over 600 social scientists will present their latest research, and 750 people will attend. The British Sociological Association's mission is to represent the intellectual and sociological interests of its members. The BSA is a Company Limited by Guarantee. Registered in England and Wales. Company Number: 3890729, and a Registered Charity Number 1080235 www.britsoc.co.uk