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Strangers in paradise? The wellbeing of migrant professionals across professional and personal environments

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Abstract

Highly skilled migration is increasing both in absolute terms and as a relative share of international migration. The increasing number of migrant professionals (MPs) raises questions about the consequences of their migration - for themselves, for society and for the employing companies. While the wellbeing of different occupational groups is well researched, the wellbeing of migrant professionals remains understudied. In particular, migration studies have not yet captured the implications of migrant professionals' wellbeing. We theorise an understanding of wellbeing that integrates both professional (workplace) and personal (family and non-work socialisation) dimensions. Following Allardt's conceptualisation of wellbeing as 'Having, Loving, Being', we answer the question of how and what affects migrants' subjective wellbeing in their professional and personal spaces. We show how the professional-personal interface is defined in the context of transnational labour mobility. To do so, we draw on our unique sample of 42 two-stage interviews with 21 MPs recruited from abroad to high-level positions in Danish companies. We identify four key factors that affect migrants' wellbeing at the intersection of their professional and personal lives: 1) social alienation at work, 2) professional autonomy, 3) work-leisure balance, and 4) perceptions of equality and meritocracy. Our work is the first to provide a comprehensive understanding of the factors that shape migrant professionals' wellbeing in the context of their personal and professional lives.

Keywords Migrant professionals, Subjective wellbeing, Allardt, Highly skilled migrants

Introduction

Wellbeing as an individual and social outcome is increasingly recognised as central to the lives of migrants, and the impact of migration on life satisfaction is the subject of a growing body of research (Hendriks & Bartram, 2019). Migration is often associated with aspirations to improve one's life and, therefore, wellbeing (Hendriks, 2015; Kou et al., 2010; Mrittika & Marina-Selini, 2020; Spadavecchia & Yu, 2021). In this paper, we focus on the subjective wellbeing of migrants. Migration studies have focused on wellbeing in comparison of post-migration and pre-migration and often in terms of financial or professional satisfaction (Vohra & Adair, 2000). Related studies have looked at comparisons

between the levels of wellbeing of migrants and natives (Hendriks & Burger, 2020; Safi, 2010; Verkuyten, 2008). Our own approach instead looks at the mobile group of migrant professionals (MPs) (Meier, 2014) and how their professional and personal experiences affect their wellbeing. We go beyond existing studies and take a comprehensive view of all facets of an individual's life (Allardt & Uusitalo, 1972).

Wellbeing is a desirable state that is associated with overwhelmingly positive outcomes in various aspects of life (De Neve et al., 2013; Lyubomirsky et al., 2005; Nikolova & Graham, 2015). We draw on Allardt's (1973, 1976, 1990, 1993) understanding of subjective wellbeing based on 'Having, Loving, Being' (HLB). The concept allows us to deconstruct the relationship and identify the dimensions of wellbeing by addressing the three fundamental characteristics of subjective wellbeing. Such a comprehensive approach allows MPs' wellbeing to be understood across professional and personal domains, rather than having a narrow focus on each dimension and treat subjective wellbeing as a uniform construct. The theoretical concept has also proved fruitful in qualitative empirical analyses (e.g., Helne & Hirvilammi, 2015; Ivony, 2018).

The relevance of 'migrant professionals' lies in the fact that they are becoming an increasingly large group, partly as a result of the growing international demand for qualifications (Bhardwaj & Sharma, 2023; Parsons et al., 2020) and the growing expectation that the experience of mobility is necessary to advance one's professional career (Meier, 2014; van der Bergh & Plessis 2012). We define migrant professionals as employed professionals who are working in an appropriate position according to their higher education and professional background, and who have come from another country to work in that position (Meier, 2014). There are almost no studies on the wellbeing of this group (for an exception, see Spadavecchia, 2017). Being in work involves the recognition of formal education and skills, which allows MPs to have a relatively high social status in the host country, allegedly leading to greater wellbeing than other migrant groups (Sun & Li 2023). For example, in terms of preferential treatment in visa and labour market regulations and family-related policies (Yeoh, 2006). Given their social positioning, MPs' wellbeing is significantly linked to their professional aspirations and professional fulfilment (Mozetič, 2020). Professional fulfilment is therefore central to their mobility and settlement decisions.

Even when migration is professionally driven, wellbeing cannot be reduced to the professional alone, as mobility always has an impact on personal life (Kou et al., 2010), i.e. on neighbourhood and community interaction. Although everyday life is defined by professional development and professional wellbeing, migrants inevitably lead personal lives in which wellbeing is found and realised along HLB (Headey, 2010). In this paper we look at 21 Copenhagen-based MPs. In order to capture their experiences comprehensively, we approached them in two stages - a total of 42 interviews - about their professional and private lives. Our analysis outlines how these two dimensions of wellbeing - professional and personal - can be jointly examined to understand wellbeing in highly skilled migration more broadly. Based on a common understanding of the professional and personal domains, we identify four key factors that affect migrants' wellbeing.

Wellbeing of migrant professionals

There are various concepts and theoretical approaches to and around wellbeing. All these approaches share a common understanding of a two-dimensional division that constitutes overall wellbeing (Allardt, 1993; Andreasson, 2018; Birkjær et al., 2020; Davern et al., 2007; Veenhoven, 1984; Wiking, 2014). The two dimensions are hedonic-affective and rational-evaluative, which form an overall subjective wellbeing. They are subjective because they can only be measured on the basis of the individual's subjective self-assessment. While the hedonic-affective dimension refers to the everyday 'feeling good' and is measured by affects (Wiking, 2014), the source of information for the rational-evaluative dimension is reflection and rational thinking (Veenhoven, 1984). The evaluative dimension of wellbeing is accessed through reflection, evaluation and comparison of individual aspirations in the past, present and future (Wiking, 2014). In the context of labour migration, this means that pre-migration life and previous migration experiences are taken into account in shaping wellbeing.

Our analysis uses participants' reflective narratives and therefore focuses on the evaluative dimension of wellbeing, whereas the analysis of hedonic-affective wellbeing would have required a different data set. Specifically, we draw on Allardt's (1973, 1976, 1990, 1993) concept of HLB to structure and interpret our empirical findings along our research interest of personal and professional wellbeing. This approach is appropriate because it emphasises the relational nature of economic-materialistic needs and incorporates complex social needs. It is therefore a viable option for exploring the relationships between professional and personal wellbeing. HLB are understood as necessary conditions for human existence and flourishing by being able to survive, avoid misery and relate to other people. ***Having* refers to material conditions in terms of economic resources, housing, employment, health, education, security, social and legal rights.** These material conditions are necessary to avoid deprivation and provide the basis for survival by meeting basic needs and providing protection. Allardt (1993) acknowledges that 'the indicators are designed to describe social conditions in the Scandinavian countries' (p. 90) by already covering a broader understanding of material conditions, and that indicators in other parts of the world would need to be designed differently. Love is the need to relate to other human beings and to form social bonds and identities. Human beings are necessarily social, born and socialised in a network of relationships, constantly defining themselves through social relationships and seeking them in order to be cared for and to care for others (Allardt, 1973). **In the dimension of *Loving*, wellbeing can materialise in attachments to family and friends, friendships, local communities, fellow members of organisations and associations, and colleagues at work.** Loving is not correlated with Having, at least not in materially affluent societies such as Scandinavia (Allardt, 1993). Being, in turn, captures the need to become an integral part of society and to live in harmony with nature, with personal growth and self-realisation as a potentially positive outcome and alienation as a potentially negative outcome. ***Being* includes, among other things, the degree of agency and influence a person can exercise over his or her own life, opportunities for meaningful work, opportunities for leisure, and having a voice in society and politics.** In short, the realisation of a meaningful and agentic life. These three conditions must be met in order to fully understand and realise wellbeing. Since its development, Allardt's model has been applied to many empirical studies on wellbeing and has proven to be an important theoretical

explanation in contemporary discussions on wellbeing (Halleröd & Seldén, 2013; Helne & Hirvilammi, 2015; Ivony, 2018; Martela, 2024; Puroila et al., 2014), but it has not yet been applied to migrants' wellbeing.

The existing literature on migrant wellbeing draws on a variety of looser and narrower concepts of wellbeing, which they not necessarily call subjective wellbeing (see Wright, 2010) – and does not consider professional and personal wellbeing together as we do in this article. One argument is that highly skilled migrants achieve lower levels of wellbeing than their native counterparts due to their overly optimistic pre-migration expectations (Hendriks & Bartram, 2019; Hendriks & Burger, 2020; Zhao, 2019). This sobering effect is partly due to personal-related factors such as growing alienation in terms of social identity and a sense of loss of belonging and security (Miles & Leguina, 2018; Zhao, 2019), which reduces their wellbeing. Work-related factors, such as inadequate salaries and unsatisfactory opportunities for advancement and career development in their profession, may also play a role (Zhao, 2019). Pre-migration experiences and imagined future lives abroad are also central to migrants' wellbeing (Bürgelt et al., 2008). Institutional barriers and obstacles sometimes make it more difficult for migrants to access societal resources that are important for improving life chances and thus wellbeing (Zhao, 2019). Similar to the general population, the formation of local social networks is very important for migrants' wellbeing, but so is the acquisition of the local language, a sense of local belonging and identity, and also social relationships in the host country (Amit, 2010, 2012; Amit & Riss, 2014). The social networks that migrants weave tend to be weak, as they have little time to build their social contacts, which tend to come from a much smaller pool of people compared to locals (Hendriks et al., 2016). This results in more superficial contacts with less social support and, consequently, lower wellbeing. Overall, these literatures remain separate and do not explicitly address the dynamics between personal and professional factors that might shape wellbeing. This is the gap that our paper aims to fill. Following this logic, we approach professional wellbeing as a form of wellbeing that is related to work and professional development, as well as personal wellbeing, which is located in any area of life that is not related to work.

Wellbeing is positively correlated with the wellbeing of a nation, which is defined by institutional stability, environmental and geopolitical environment and continuity (Veenhoven, 2009). Bonini's (2008) cross-national study attributes 81 per cent of subjective wellbeing to individual characteristics and the rest to country characteristics. Higher national wealth has a positive effect on wellbeing (Veenhoven, 2009). Empirically, people are happier in politically and economically stable countries, which means that people, including migrants, thrive better in countries that are doing well as a system (Andreasson, 2018; Veenhoven, 2009; Wiking, 2014). The same can be said of social inequality, and personal perceptions of greater and systematic differences in living conditions between social classes or ethnic groups and genders in a country contribute negatively to subjective wellbeing. (Wiking, 2014). Individuals in Denmark have particularly high levels of wellbeing (Andreasson, 2018; Veenhoven, 2009; Wiking, 2014), which raises the further question of whether the concrete national context influences the interplay of MPs' subjective wellbeing in professional and personal areas once they move to a country with favourable conditions. This is particularly relevant as Allardt (1972) developed his theory in the context of the Nordic welfare state. Our findings will also highlight and reflect on the Nordic welfare state as central to some of the empirical patterns.

Our study will show how the professional-personal interface is defined in the context of cross-national labour mobility.

Methodology

The data collection was part of the project 'SkillsINCORP - Ensuring the Retention of Highly Skilled Professionals in Denmark'. The analysis is based on 42 interviews in English with 21 participants. All participants live in the Greater Copenhagen area and gave their consent to participate for research purposes, including the use of quotes from their transcribed interviews. The quotes presented have been slightly edited for better understanding and readability. The length of the interviews varied between 40 and 120 min, with the interviews on personal life tending to be longer than those on professional life.

We used a two-stage serial interview (Read, 2018). Each interviewee was interviewed twice, first about their professional life and then in a separate second interview about their personal life. The two-stage design allowed the MP to be placed in different contexts (personal and professional) during data collection, allowing for the analysis of wellbeing from two different perspectives. Rather than covering both superficially in one interview, participants were invited to delve into detail and reflect on wellbeing for themselves. As we anticipated that our participants would have busy schedules, we initially only asked for a short interview about their professional experience. Only after the first interview did we ask for a second (longer) interview about their personal life. The second interview also allowed them to open up about their personal life and details in a more narrative form and in a separate setting with more time allocated. This allowed us to collect in-depth data on the everyday lives of MPs at two different points in time. This form of interview allowed us to cross-check information about MPs' sensemaking around wellbeing.

The sample consisted of 10 women and 11 men. Their length of residence in Denmark varied from less than one year to more than nine years. In particular, the sample included a wide variety of different countries of origin, so that our understanding of highly skilled migration is not limited to intra-EU migration. The non-EU migrants are all on a work visa obtained for their current job. All names used in this article are pseudonyms (Table 1).

The interviewees were recruited through a flyer. The conditions for participation were: having migrated for a current high-skilled job, having at least a Master's degree, not having completed higher education in Denmark, living in the Copenhagen area and having migrated to Denmark after 2014 (the year of a major immigration reform in Denmark). These strict sampling rules were applied to ensure that only high-skilled migrants who came from abroad to take up a high-skilled job were selected. This restricted the sample to a predominantly occupational type of migration. Interviews took place between April and November 2023, mostly via Teams, as the online interview format suited the busy schedules of our high-skilled respondents. A few interviews were conducted in the office on campus.

In the semi-structured interview, people were first asked to talk and reflect openly about their work or life since moving to Denmark and to discuss anything that seemed relevant in this context. Later, specific topics such as the professional role, relationships with colleagues, various challenges in the company and management style (in the first interviews) and previous mobility patterns, social networks, chosen neighbourhood,

Table 1 Overview interviewees

Interviews on professional wellbeing	Interviews on personal wellbeing	Name	Nationality	Education	Job title	Family
22-03-23	08-05-23	Zalan	Hungary	Master	Compliance lead	Wife, no children
30-03-23	20-04-23	Charlotte	Belgium - Germany	PhD	Scientist	Partner, no children
03–04–23	04–06–23	Aparna	India	Master	Medical device engineer	No partner, no children
03–04–23	03–05–23	Emmy	United Kingdom - Denmark	PhD	Regulatory affairs lead	No partner, no children
03–04–23	01–05–23	Jing	China – United Kingdom	PhD	Head of department	Partner, one child
12-04-23	30-05-23	Agathe	France	PhD	Senior area director	No Partner, two children*
12-04-23	04–05–23	Nilay	Turkey	Bachelors	Software engineer	Partner, no children
13-04-23	25-04-23	Petro	Ukraine	Master	Senior programmer	Wife, one child
17-04-23	25-04-23	Benedict	United Kingdom	PhD	Senior researcher	No partner, no children
17-04-23	19-04-23	Madelaine	France	PhD	Senior scientist	Husband, two children
24-04-23	23-05-23	Mehdi	Iran	PhD	Applied data scientist	Wife, no children
15-05-23	07-06-23	Bartek	Poland	Master	Senior program manager	Wife, one child*
11-07-23	17-07-23	Elise	Austria	Master	Supply chain development lead	Husband, one child
12-07-23	16-08-23	Daniello	Italy	Master	Data scientist	Partner, no children
20-07-23	02–08–23	Samanta	Portugal	Master	Lead data scientist	Partner, no children
24-07-23	28-07-23	Nigel	United Kingdom	Master	Product director	Wife, no children
15-08-23	17-08-23	Joseph	United States – United Kingdom	PhD	Senior analyst	Wife, three children
28-08-23	05–10–23	Sumit	Australia	Master	Senior analyst	Wife, two children
07–09–23	29-09-23	Alfonso	Italy	Master	Analyst	Partner, no children
07–09–23	03–10–23	Matthijs	Netherlands	Master	Senior business controller	Wife, two children
12-10-23	17-11-23	Lisbeth	South Africa	Master	Head of area	No partner, one child

family and daily life (in the second interview) were addressed, using an interview guide to ensure that each participant covered the same range of topics. The combination of open questions and more closed questions allowed for a well-rounded and multifaceted collection of data that painted a rich picture of migrants' lives in Greater Copenhagen.

Coding

The NVivo coding was theoretically informed around wellbeing, but how wellbeing was understood was left open to each participant. The multiple responses collected were then transformed into open coding, which generated a large number of codes (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). We initially focused on wellbeing in professional and private settings, which was deductively guided by our HLB approach, but we were also open to the creation of new emerging codes. We then moved on to finding direct relationships in the data between the two coding groups. The number of codes was then reduced by focusing on the rational-evaluative dimension. This means taking into account the MPs' views on their life aspirations and career goals. Finally, we conducted a third round of analysis, linking the professional and personal codes and how these links relate to wellbeing outcomes. These interlinkages were expressed in four patterns related to: alienation dynamics, work flexibility, work-life balance and social values. HLB, as a sociological understanding of wellbeing, helped us to code and interpret our findings without relying on an overly psychological understanding of wellbeing in our abductive empirical approach (Saldaña, 2021). The coding and analysis process led to the identification of several key findings about subjective wellbeing, which is accumulated between personal and professional life. The positionality of the two authors in the analysis plays a role in that both are immigrants in Denmark and therefore have first-hand knowledge and experience of some of the forms of wellbeing interplay identified in the material. We do not discuss wellbeing in cases where it was limited to one of the two spheres (which we could also find in our analysis), but we look closely at the interaction between the two. In the following, we present four main findings as patterns of the relationship between personal and professional wellbeing for migrant professionals in Denmark. *Having, Loving and Being* cut across some of these patterns, but we can also see different dominances of one of the three dimensions in each of the patterns.

Subjective wellbeing in professional and personal lives of migrant professionals

This section presents our findings according to four patterns that we identified as central junctures of professional and personal wellbeing in our analysis of the material. The order does not reflect any hierarchy or importance of these patterns, nor are the four patterns mutually exclusive. Some MPs certainly show more than one pattern, which is also reflected in the use of quotes from the same participants.

Pattern 1: alienation at the workplace and beyond

One pattern we identified relates to the dynamics of alienation inside and outside the workplace. Previous experiences and expectations of MPs shape their perceptions of alienation at work. Both experiences in the country of origin and the migration process seem to create expectations of forming human bonds in the host workplace and in Denmark (*Loving*). However, there is a general feeling of a lack of consideration for cultural differences in terms of business ideas and change among MPs. For example, when it comes to openness to change.

> *'I would never hear from these internationals something like "we've always done it this way" or "this is how it's done in this company" and "[*company*] is great, it's the best company in the world", so "let's not change a thing". I hear that from a lot from*

Danes. So I think that is probably the biggest aspect I would call between an international and a national it's just this open-mindedness and acceptance. The embrace of change and the risk-taking aspects of managing.' (Jing).

The MP perception of rigidity of thinking at work suggests a poor degree of connection with locals. The difference becomes evident when MP are not able to manage teams in their preferred way. For instance, an MP whose managerial style was seen as unfitting, experience an inability to express herself (*Being*). She acknowledges not fitting as she believes to have a relatively more directive style than local managers. 'If you are too direct, even if you are soft, polite, respectful, that's not enough. People are not ready to face conflict.' (Agathe).

Alienation is also felt in informal everyday work situations, where communication is dominated by Danish and there is a sense of reluctance to switch to English.

'I've faced myself feeling that you're an outsider. I've been reminded multiple times during your day that you are different and its sort of this coffee machine chit chat always in Danish... I've had experiences where you sit next to a team who just speak Danish and completely leaving you out and eating your lunch yourself. It was also a shock coming from the UK who is much more ahead in terms of multiculturalism and, diversity and inclusion.' (Jing).

Such feelings of alienation suggest the existence of barriers to forming bonds with colleagues in informal settings (*Loving*). MPs experience contrasts when integrating into their new workplaces. The MP's previous experience of inclusion is used as a lens through which to view their social life. The perception of alienation dynamics in Denmark encourages an adaptation of the country's approach to migration. The difficulty of MPs to meet inclusion expectations is then linked to the need to change Denmark's approach to inclusion.

'It will be easier for immigrants if Danes could start considering mindset shift from collectivism to other trends i.e., not expect everyone to follow their culture completely - which is to be and behave like anyone else. Now the world demands something different: adaptability. Immigrants are from different places raised with different experiences and perceptions in and about life, so expecting them to completely go Danish way isn't healthy for anyone. It's about accepting the fact that need is from both the ends.' (Aparna).

Language can also have an alienating effect, despite the high degree of internationalisation of companies in Denmark. The Danish language remains a condition that MPs have to negotiate in their everyday lives outside work. The complexity of learning Danish becomes a source of frustration. This has consequences for MPs' personal wellbeing outside the workplace when assessing their continued stay in Denmark, as Petro did in a follow-up questionnaire six months after the first interview.

'I gave up on Danish and started to learn Spanish; I think I made more progress in Spanish in 1 month than for almost 2 years of learning Danish. My dislike for Copenhagen is rising. Nothing has changed, and my frustration about my career is rising.' (Petro).

MPs also often feel alienated from social activities. For example, social events outside the workplace that are intended to create more inclusion may paradoxically create alienation. Negative experiences in interactions in Danish-dominated environments could reduce the possibility of forming bonds with locals (*Loving*). The inconvenience of linguistic adaptation triggers feelings of discomfort, suggesting the impossibility of creating meaningful social connections.

> 'I usually love to go to social event but I don't go anymore. I felt I didn't really fit in, so it was more complex than just the language and being foreigner. I would be the only foreigner there and that was definitely on my mind. I knew I should go but in the end, I was too tired of this, so I'll just not go. I'll be comfortable at home and not having to go through this uncomfortable situation.' (Samanta).

Despite their high level of job security, (*Having*) not socialising illustrates the isolation of migrant professionals from the wider society and a progressive retreat into their own personal space. This personal space often consists of family and international friends. However, MPs turn to more meaningful social connections to alleviate their feelings of alienation in Denmark, which improves social bonding (*Loving*).

> 'I have to say living in Denmark didn't meet my expectations because everyone always boasted about it. But even as a half-Dane, I never felt like completely welcome here. All my international friends felt the same in the workplace, but also, I guess socially. So that's why I think I was quite lucky to have this network of internationals around me.' (Emmy).

Emmy has one Danish parent but has never lived in Denmark before immigrating as an adult. However, she faces the same social barriers. Overall, MPs have a weak link to local colleagues and friendships. The work culture and ethnic and linguistic barriers prevent the formation of strong social bonds in Denmark. The unfulfilled expectation of a desired mutual adaptation between locals and foreigners then encourages MPs to form meaningful social bonds with other internationals (*Loving*). This suggests the strengthening of strong community ties and alienation from the wider Danish society.

The first pattern reveals the complex challenges that migrants face as foreigners in Denmark in the workplace. Subjective experiences of alienation, as a lack of *Loving*, at work based on ethnicity, language and otherness, where prejudices and assumptions are made about international individuals, lead to frustration and lower professional wellbeing. It also prevents them from forming more meaningful social connections at work that can develop into personal friendships that would improve their *Loving* and have a positive impact on their personal wellbeing.

Pattern 2: flexibility, non-spatiality and autonomy of professional work

Another pattern that emerged from our analysis was the professional context of high degrees of freedom, flexibility and global digital collaboration, which is more typical for high-skilled professions because the use of their skills and work can be managed digitally and is not spatially bound (Kossek & Lautsch, 2018). At the same time, Denmark is known for offering flexibility in the professional sphere (Wiking, 2014). These professional circumstances are associated with higher professional wellbeing, as the work culture and environment encourages and values the contribution and agency of employees

and their level of responsibility - recognising them in the dimension of being as agentic and self-determined actors. Respondents value the flexibility and autonomy in their jobs (having favourable working conditions and employee rights), which allows them to have a better work-life balance (see third pattern) and to make independent decisions (being able to make decisions about their own lives). More importantly for our analysis, it also affects their personal wellbeing. This can have a negative impact, as the following example shows.

> 'I could often go alone actually. That can depend on finding a time when I'm available and my friends are available and my friends work weekends sometimes. That can be a little bit tricky because I work, you know, a weekday out, you know, standard working week hours, I would say, sometimes a little bit later because I have calls to New York.' (Benedict).

What Benedict is referring to is echoed in other reports. Working with colleagues and teams in different time zones often means longer working days with online meetings in the evening hours, especially when colleagues live in North America, which is quite common. Too much adaptation and digital and spatial flexibility to unusual and long working hours can have a negative impact on their personal wellbeing, as they feel that they are not able to meet their social activities and friends to the extent they would like within the standardised working day, resulting in a slight decrease in *Loving*. However, respondents also made it clear that the willingness to work such intercontinental hours across time zones is central to their career progression, especially if the company is headquartered in another country.

> 'You know, specifically, if I want to look at myself when I grow here in [*company*], I should be a manager. And to be a manager, I should work a lot with the U.S. And for this reason, I should somehow work in evenings. Currently, I also work sometimes in evenings. So it could be also one of the reasons. So it's not related to the country. It's more related to the time zone.' (Mehdi).

Mehdi clearly addresses the difference between a Danish company and an international (in this case American) company in Denmark. The career ladder and the orientation towards the US and henceforth the US time zone are essential to achieve his goal of becoming a manager in his company, where he can realise his professional wellbeing. Migrant professionals have a different perspective because, unlike their local counterparts, they have migrated for work and can compare how the relationship between the two spheres can change and take different forms. In this context, Mehdi also talks about getting the worst of both worlds, because he feels that his personal life suffers from his extended working hours, because he mostly follows US time zones, which means a decrease in *Loving*. But also that his professional life is not progressing as he had imagined because he is not in the US where he had imagined his career would be more to his liking, a decrease in *Being* as fulfilment in work.

Other participants emphasised the positive impact of their professional flexibility and autonomy on their personal wellbeing.

> 'I really like going back there and I get the flexibility from my current job and that's a big plus actually. To the point where I think at some point they came up with a new policy at the company that we couldn't work from other countries and there was like

> *a big no no, like there wasn't even like on managers approval. And for me it was like immediate call to my manager saying this is a deal breaker. I need to change my job. This doesn't work for me, simply, because I don't want to go there and stay like there one month or more. I want to go there a long weekend, work from there, not have to spend my vacation visiting my family and friends.' (Samanta).*

Samanta highlights a situation familiar to many migrant professionals who move back and forth to their home country, especially if it is on the same continent. In her case, the bond she has maintained with her family and friends in Portugal after moving to Denmark is very strong and demonstrates a strong *Loving*. This is so important to her that she was even prepared to change jobs if this degree of autonomy and flexibility in organising her work was taken away. This is obviously less central for domestic workers, who tend not to have such strong connections and social responsibilities outside their country. The wellbeing that Samanta experienced in her professional life as a result of the high level of autonomy (*Being*) she enjoyed therefore also had a clear positive impact on her personal wellbeing by maintaining a high level of Loving in her hometown.

The second pattern shows how the flexibility, freedom and globality (detachment from a specific spatiality) of MPs' work contributes both negatively and positively to their personal wellbeing in the HLB. Having a contractual right to a certain degree of flexibility in the organisation and performance of their work is more typical of highly skilled professions than other professions (Kossek & Lautsch, 2018). This freedom contributes to a greater sense of being, both personally and professionally, as MPs feel in control of their lives and can shape their lives and opportunities as they wish. The ability to combine work and travel without having to take leave has a clear and significant positive impact on their personal wellbeing, through a higher level of *Loving* for family and friends back home. On the other hand, working across different time zones can extend many working days into the late evening hours. This also has a negative impact on their personal wellbeing, as they feel unable to participate in social activities during normal leisure time, ergo a decrease in *Loving*.

Pattern 3: Danish work-life balance

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the demands of work and general attitudes to work-life balance are an area where professional wellbeing also influences personal wellbeing. At the same time, having time and opportunity for leisure is a key feature of *Being* (Allardt, 1993). These are rooted in the rights of employees and workers as defined in Danish legislation. This may be seen as normal for Danish workers, but migrant workers had comparisons that allowed them to contextualise and reflect on their situation.

> *'I've worked previously, I've worked in US as well. Europe seems quite heavy on the work-life balance part compared to East or the extreme East or extreme West I would say. So that's like super new for me. Like in the sense not just at work even outside work I see like the package people or anyone. It's almost like their work timings are only between like 10 to 5, or like not even 5 sorry. It's not 5 in Europe it's 4, 3 or 4 in Europe. So it's like beyond that, people don't work much… Here, it's more like I've kind of prioritized it [leisure time] in my life.' (Aparna).*

Comparing her current situation in Denmark with her experiences in the USA and India, Aparna came to a reappraisal of her priorities in her daily life, shifting from a

strong focus on work, typical of highly skilled professionals, to a more balanced mix of work and leisure (a key indicator of *Being*), which allowed her to incorporate more social activities and social activism, contributing even more to her satisfaction with *Being* as a politically active and agentic person. For her, this had a clear positive impact on her personal wellbeing through an increased sense of Being, as she felt that she had been too focused on work and it was only the change of location that allowed her to rethink and rearrange her priorities. This is all the more significant as she showed a high level of identification with the activism she was now involved in throughout the interview. Others also drew comparisons with their previous places of work. A prominent point of reference was working in the UK.

> *'Just the fact that we are enjoying living here. It seems to be a more sane place than when we go back to the UK. Things seem to just not work very well (laughing). People, again, are stressed. [...] So for me it's been a generally positive experience. I came from working in England, which has pretty different kind of philosophy when it comes to work-life balance, and so that's one thing that I do appreciate about Denmark is that people do respect your right to have your own time.' (Nigel).*

The absence of (too much) work-related stress and pressure has not only increased Nigel's professional wellbeing, but also his personal wellbeing, as he now associates his new life in Denmark with a state of relaxation (Being) and more time with his partner, expressed in the 'we' (*Loving*) that was missing from his previous life in the UK. A comparison about *Having* 'your right to your own time' can only be made by workers who have gained insights into different working cultures that may enable migrant workers to appreciate these circumstances more than their native counterparts. Achieving a good work-life balance is not common for highly skilled professionals in other labour markets (White et al., 2003), showing how *Having* legal rights to working time that are taken seriously can benefit both professional and personal wellbeing. More free time also meant that the interviewees were able to spend more time with their families, improving their Loving, which they explicitly praised and which contributed to their personal wellbeing.

> *'I mean, I'm a working mom in a very, depends on what you call, but like I'm a director, so it's not like I, people depend on me and I think in especially other countries it is a challenge as a mother to have both a career and be a good mom.' (Elise).*

Others highlighted the amount of holiday they had, which was new to them and allowed them to travel extensively, which was not possible in their previous roles in other countries.

> *'And since I had a chance inside the European Union with my work permit, I can, I don't have to have a visa. So it's, for me, it's easier to go out and see other cities. And for my free time for long vacations, I'm taking this opportunity.' (Nilay).*

Like the ability to work remotely in the second pattern, the ability to take a relatively large number of leave days allows migrant workers not only to travel a lot, but also to maintain transnational relationships that are crucial to their personal wellbeing through Loving. The fact that intra-EU travel is visa-free is a further incentive and booster of personal wellbeing for non-EU foreigners through a higher level of agency, which is an

indicator of a higher level of Being. The opportunity to combine a long holiday with a trip to an unfamiliar region far from home had a positive effect on personal wellbeing.

The third pattern shows how migrants, faced with a new work reality and culture in Denmark (Wiking, 2014), readily adapt to a more reasonable work-life balance compared to their previous experiences in other work environments, based on having rights that are formally and informally respected. This is particularly noteworthy as highly skilled occupations often require long working hours and above-average commitment from professionals (Cortes & Pan, 2019). The attribution of their new work-life balance to their personal wellbeing can only be adequately understood if we consider that migrants have comparisons at their disposal that their native counterparts do not. MPs' understanding and use of their newly acquired leisure time thus contributes significantly to their higher level of being as an opportunity to live a meaningful life beyond work. While the three patterns presented so far have mainly explored the influence of work circumstances on personal wellbeing, the fourth and final pattern takes a more cautious perspective and discusses how personal wellbeing also influences professional wellbeing.

Pattern 4: social values

A fourth pattern relates to the alignment of migrant professionals with the underlying social values of the host country. Social values are reflected in a general sense of support throughout their experience of life in Denmark. As they integrate into social life, migrant professionals find themselves in a society that they tend to perceive as socially just.

> 'Scandinavia has a culture more prone to social support– this is what I love in this country. My goodness! and chance for everyone. Equality, financial support.' (Aparna).

This often leads migrant professionals to reflect on their position between social spaces and their preferences for the dominant social values they see in Denmark. Their migration trajectory leads them to evaluate their own values in relation to what they perceive as Danish values. These evaluations relate to local social norms and habits.

> 'I think I've incorporated a lot of Danish values and ways of thinking of doing things both at work but also in my private life. I can see that when I go back to Italy.' (Alfonso).

Such overarching Danish values are reflected in the welfare state's policies on, for example, taxes and family benefits (*Having*). Sometimes high taxes - usually a deterrent for most foreigners - are justified on the grounds of trust in the system. One interviewee shows a strong alignment with these social values, stating that Denmark is a good place to settle in the long term. She agrees to be taxed because it also enables her broader family project (*Being*).

> 'I don't have a problem having to suddenly pay the 51% tax. There are benefits attached to that. And it depends on whether you came here for the money. Or whether you came here because you actually wanted a new life for you and your son.' (Lisbeth).

There is a strong link between MPs' personal beliefs and Danish social values (*Being*). This is repeated in an affirmation of the advantages of living in a welfare society compared to other countries (*Having*).

Personal wellbeing is closely related to professional wellbeing, as the acceptance of social values (personal) permeates and influences professional decisions. Working in Denmark necessarily involves experiencing Danish social values. While migration intentions appear to be purely professional, over time, the personal and the professional become intertwined as job satisfaction contributes to a broader sense of wellbeing.

> 'In the company I am right now is the best pharma company in the world for diabetes and obesity. So, I applied there because I knew that it was the best company and I have been hired. So, I was very happy. So, it was a whole package: family, work-life balance, education, social system, everything.' (Madelaine).

The acceptance of Danish social values influences the MPs' judgements. For example, there is a sense of fairness when it comes to evaluating their professional experience in Denmark. In terms of their professional satisfaction, migrant professionals insist on living through a meritocratic system. In Denmark, a MP can feel that her skills are recognised, apart from other ad hoc characteristics.

> 'In Denmark you gain a lot in the perspective of having a fulfilled work, living in an equal society, having really good opportunities based on your skills, not necessarily based on age or gender or anything else.' (Elise).

The perception of a meritocratic society is noticeable when it comes to social policies that have an impact on working life. These policies have a liberating effect, allowing the development of professional careers (*Having*). For example, in terms of gender equality. These two MPs reflect on the empowerment they have as mothers in Denmark compared to their home countries. They feel able to influence their professional life (*Being*).

> 'In Austria, a workplace wouldn't necessarily accommodate to you, you don't have kindergarten spaces available and you cannot work full-time. So one person (man or woman) needs to do go down otherwise nobody takes care of your child, and then in many cases it's the woman that does that. Whereas in Denmark me and my husband both work full-time. It matters to me that I have the freedom to make the choice to work full-time.' (Elise).
>
> 'I'm supporting my kids in France. I have two boys. Until February this year I was giving one of them money every month which means that at the end my salary was reduced by more than 8000 Danish crowns per month. You don't have to think of that in Denmark. This is the advantage.' (Agathe)

The participants believe that without Danish social values they would not have fully realised their professional emancipation. Family-friendly policies (*Having*) allow them to pursue their professional projects within a more equitable relationship with their partners. This seems to provide them with a high degree of professional empowerment, suggesting a high degree of influence and a strong alignment with Danish social values (*Being*). Such values are experienced as professionally empowering for MPs. For example, by perceiving a meritocratic workplace and fairness in welfare state interventions to

correct imbalances through taxation or gender-targeted policies (*Having*). This suggests that the acceptance of Danish social values is positively related to wellbeing.

The fourth pattern illustrates how higher personal wellbeing, which is structurally possible in Denmark, can also have a positive impact on migrants' professional wellbeing. Issues related to their personal lives, such as the availability of infrastructure for children, but also alignment with values and norms and the perception of a relatively high level of fairness and trust in Denmark as a central part of *Being*, also reflect higher wellbeing in their professional lives. This is due to greater fulfilment in their work and the perception that their professional evaluation and recognition is based on meritocracy rather than gender or other non-meritocratic indicators - an important aspect of *Being* respected and valued for their own qualities and contributions. The high value placed on personal aspects of wellbeing was again due to their ability to compare these factors with previous experiences, which led to their positive evaluation and consequently higher wellbeing.

Discussion and conclusion

Our paper presents four patterns of the links between personal and professional wellbeing among migrant professionals in Denmark. The patterns show a mixed picture of both positive and negative effects on MPs' wellbeing along alienation dynamics, work flexibility, work-life balance and social values. Our paper differs from other approaches that see wellbeing as migrants' professional success (Judge & Klinger, 2008), or as a comparative category with stayers and native populations (Hendriks et al., 2016; Hendriks & Bartram, 2019; Hendriks & Burger, 2020). We have developed a more comprehensive definition of wellbeing by articulating the professional and personal dimensions.

When we looked at individual subjective wellbeing, we found that it is very much interdependent with other individuals - e.g. partners - and embedded in larger social circles. This interdependence makes it ontologically difficult to separate the personal from the professional. Wellbeing is constructed individually, but this process takes place within larger social units (family, friendships, or society and the economy) that MPs perceive as providing sufficient levels of security, leisure, flexibility and meritocracy, as our findings show. This is particularly relevant as Allardt developed his model within the Nordic welfare state and we looked at migrant professionals in Denmark. Each of our patterns is, to varying degrees, the result of a specific Danish/Nordic context in which our empirical analysis is embedded, with its specific consequences for wellbeing. However, the underlying dynamic between personal and professional wellbeing could also be found in other countries, possibly with different outcomes depending on their political-cultural approach to inclusion (pattern 1), work culture that allows freedom, trust and flexibility (pattern 2) and the concrete arrangement of work-life balance (pattern 3), as well as societal values and policies of meritocracy, fairness and transparency (pattern 4). While all four patterns explore the dynamics and relationships between professional and personal wellbeing, it is more often the professional wellbeing (patterns 1–3) that seems to affect the personal wellbeing. One explanation for this could be that MPs migrate specifically for a high profile job and place their professional identity, wellbeing and work at the centre of their daily lives. We therefore suggest that the study of the wellbeing of highly skilled migrants should sensitise the social context by taking these dimensions into account. This is particularly the case because the existing literature on work-life

balance among migrants, in the Nordic countries or elsewhere, does not focus on MPs (e.g. Ali et al., 2017; Dyer et al., 2011).

Our analysis contributes to the literature on migrant wellbeing, which often neglects migrants and mostly focuses on quantifiable cumulative outcomes (Hendriks, 2015). Through a situated, two-stage analysis of MPs' experiences, we show how the relationships between professional and personal dimensions shape post-migration wellbeing. We show how the personal-professional linkages established by migrant professionals push wellbeing towards a more holistic understanding (Wright, 2012). In the study of migrant groups, it is difficult to separate wellbeing from work and professional aspirations. We also contribute to the migration studies literature by focusing not only on migrant professionals, a group of migrants that is understudied given their increasing numbers and importance, but also on their wellbeing in the context of their work-related migration (Pollenne & Vargas-Silva, 2024). This has allowed us to conceptualise wellbeing beyond work and professional development, although work plays a central role in their lives and migration decisions, and to consider wellbeing in its full spectrum of life experiences, whether personal or professional. The relationship between the two was also shown to be often circular, demonstrating their close interconnectedness. These findings can be used to inform future studies on the wellbeing of migrants in general, and migrant professionals in particular, by considering the professional and personal aspects of wellbeing as closely linked and reciprocal, rather than examining them in isolation.

In addition, the reality of international migration of highly skilled workers forces an update of Allardt's theory of wellbeing. Based on the case of international migration to Denmark (a Nordic welfare state) under more flexible and international in professional careers and personal lives and the influence of globalisation and internationalisation on wellbeing, as the four patterns have shown. This confirms and challenges some of the original assumptions of the HLB as, for example, *Loving* is not exclusively found within the national container, but is transnationalised for most migrant professionals. At the same time, their level of *Being* increases, often based on their ability to experience a higher level of agency and trust than what they were used to in other countries. The new level of self-fulfilment in being derives directly from their comparison, which necessarily transcends borders and the welfare state, and its amenities and advantages are not taken for granted. We suggest that the comparative horizon that migrants bring to their host workplaces and countries expands Allardt's concept of wellbeing.

Finally, our findings also show how the country of destination, Denmark, in some cases plays a central role in shaping the relationship between work and personal wellbeing. Existing research shows (Martela, 2024) how strongly wellbeing is embedded in trust in institutions and other people, a dimension in which Denmark ranks very highly (Wiking, 2014). By providing a framework of material and immaterial societal cornerstones (welfare state infrastructure and social values) and a common agreement on professional settings (workplace culture), the country plays a sometimes favourable and sometimes unfavourable role in promoting wellbeing in both spheres of life. Although we only interviewed MPs in the capital area, we generalise our findings to the whole country because the issues identified, such as welfare or social and professional norms and values, are set and shaped at national rather than regional level. Similarly, flexibility in the organisation and performance of work or social alienation at work are not rooted in a

capital-specific approach to work culture. Other countries offer different frameworks, which are likely to produce different relationships between personal and occupational wellbeing. In this sense, our results show how the host society contributes to wellbeing, even if the lion's share depends on the individual's premises (Bonini, 2008). A study on wellbeing in the Nordic countries comes to the same conclusion (Andreasson, 2018), but also highlights that high income contributes significantly to wellbeing compared to other income groups. This is certainly true for the group of professional migrants we studied, who work in their field of expertise and specialisation, which allows them to earn good salaries. This raises the question for future research as to how high income might mitigate the diminishing effects of migration on wellbeing, especially when migration is work-related, as in our sample. Future research on the wellbeing of migrants should also consider and develop our understanding of how the four patterns identified intersect and overlap.

There are also limitations to our empirical findings. We worked mainly with contentment, the rational aspect of overall subjective wellbeing, as the emotional-affective part of subjective wellbeing is too difficult to reconstruct from our interview material. Interviewees sometimes talk about feeling good, satisfied, happy or bad, unsatisfied and unhappy as a general feeling since moving to Copenhagen, but these reports were underrepresented and remained selective in the overall sample. At the same time, regardless of whether rational or emotional dimensions of wellbeing were mentioned, there may have been a positivity bias, as it may be easier for respondents to focus on positive aspects rather than on negative emotions and impressions. This has been discussed in previous research with highly skilled migrants (Scheibelhofer et al., 2023). However, there are also good reasons to interpret the MPs' situation as actually positive overall, based on their accounts in the full interviews and the identification of their comparative horizons.

Data availability
No datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

Declarations

Ethics approval
Approval Committee or the Internal Review Board (IRB): not applicable; Human Ethics and Consent to Participate declarations: not applicable.

Competing interests
The authors declare no competing interests.

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