

Well-being and Sociocultural Adaptation in Relation to Return Intentions: The Case of Italian Retirees in Ticino

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I Introduction

This study aims to examine the relationship between psychological well-being, sociocultural adaptation, and return intentions among elderly Italian migrants residing in the Swiss canton of Ticino.

The study of return migration requires a broad analytical lens, attentive to the interaction between host environments and countries of origin. Return trajectories unfold along a continuum shaped by affective, identity-based, and instrumental dynamics that permeate the entire migratory experience.

Theoretical reflection on return migration has deep historical roots: Ravenstein, as early as 1885–1889, recognized its centrality (Bovenkerk, 1974), and subsequent contributions such as Eldridge (1965) expanded its conceptual scope. From the 1970s onward, Bovenkerk's monograph highlighted the scarcity of dedicated studies and laid the groundwork for a more nuanced understanding of the phenomenon in relation to integration processes.

More recent literature has moved beyond the notion of return as a conclusive event, interpreting it instead as part of a dynamic process encompassing circular mobility, transnational practices, and multiple belongings (Carling & Erdal, 2014). Within this framework, although many elderly migrants express the intention to return to their country of origin, only a minority actually do so, more often maintaining transnational ties instead (Bolzman et al., 2017; Ciobanu & Ramos, 2016).

Despite the increasing number of elderly migrants in Europe, the concept of return migration is still not well understood, especially in relation to well-being and sociocultural adaptation, which are usually considered separately (Cela, Bettin & King, 2025). This study adopts an integrated approach that brings together psychological adaptation, migration sociology, and ageing studies, interpreting return as a multidimensional process interwoven with identity, relational, and emotional dynamics.

II Well-being, Sociocultural Adaptation, and Return Intentions

Return intentions in later life are shaped by a plurality of interconnected factors, including family ties, cultural identities, economic conditions, and access to services. The literature has shown that return does not necessarily represent a definitive choice, but can manifest as hybrid and multilocal forms, in which migrants maintain active ties with multiple contexts (Hunter, 2011; De Haas & Fokkema, 2011). From this perspective, welfare regimes play a crucial role, as they influence ageing conditions and residential choices (Dwyer & Ackers, 2004).

Among the dimensions that contribute to shaping return intentions, well-being emerges as a central element. Defined as a combination of positive emotions, low levels of negative emotions, and life satisfaction (Diener et al., 1985), it is influenced by factors such as physical and mental health, income, employment, social relationships, and educational attainment (Diener & Seligman, 2004; Barbiano di Belgiojoso et al., 2022). This balance may be fragile in older migrants: advanced age entails greater emotional vulnerability which is exacerbated by linguistic and cultural barriers, disadvantaged socioeconomic conditions, and limited access to services (WHO, 2018).

The relationship between well-being and the intention to return is complex. Those who experience high levels of well-being do not necessarily want to return, and those experiencing discomfort do not necessarily see return as a solution. As highlighted by Bolzman et al. (2017) and Ciobanu & Ramos (2016), the decision to return may emerge as a response to unresolved

tension, or as a search for emotional and symbolic continuity, rather than as the linear outcome of an objective condition.

A further interpretive axis is represented by sociocultural adaptation, which is defined as the ability to navigate norms, institutions, and everyday practices in the host country (Ward & Kennedy, 1999; Matera et al., 2012). This process is linked to acculturation strategies such as integration, separation, or marginalisation (Berry, 1997), and is shaped by cultural distance and adaptation difficulties (Searle & Ward, 1990). Sociocultural adaptation is not a static outcome, but rather a dynamic process influenced by past experiences, individual resources, and the conditions of the receiving context. Within this process, many migrants tend to develop multiple forms of belonging, giving rise to hybrid or multilocal identities (Campomori & Boccagni, 2017). This configuration may weaken the desire to return, redefining the boundaries of belonging and the relationship with places of origin and residence.

These theoretical perspectives find application in the case of Canton Ticino. Located in a border area historically characterised by migratory flows, Canton Ticino shares language, cultural references, and family networks with Italy, offering a privileged setting to observe how return in later life takes differentiated forms, shaped by levels of perceived well-being and sociocultural adaptation.

III Data and Methods

The study investigates two central questions: How are psychological well-being and sociocultural adaptation related to return intentions? While sociocultural adaptation is hypothesized to be negatively associated with return intentions, the role of well-being is examined in an open-ended manner, given its conceptual ambiguity.

To explore these hypotheses, a quantitative survey was conducted using an online questionnaire (available through Qualtrics). The research protocol received approval from the Ethics Committee of the University of Milano-Bicocca.

The target sample consists of approximately 200 Italian immigrants aged between 60 and 80, residing in the Canton of Ticino. Participants were selected according to representativeness criteria based on the demographic distribution of the reference population.

The questionnaire was disseminated through multiple channels: social media, local press, public events, and the direct involvement of over twenty local associations, including *Generazione Più*, *ATTE*, *Fondazione Vita Serena*, and *Aila-Oil*. To encourage participation, a prize draw was organized, offering Migros shopping vouchers provided by *Generazione Più* in Lugano. The questionnaire collected data regarding several domains: sociodemographic characteristics, psychological and sociocultural adaptation, acculturation strategies, identity, and return intentions. Specifically, well-being was measured using the *Psychological Adaptation Scale* (Kosic, 2002), while sociocultural adaptation was assessed through the *Sociocultural Adaptation Scale* (Demes & Geeraert, 2014).

IV Expected Findings and Preliminary Evidence

The data were analysed using logistic regression models, with the Firth method (Firthlogit) applied to correct for bias due to the low frequency of return events in the dataset. The dependent variable is the intention to return to Italy (0= 'stay' and 1= 'return'), and the main predictors are well-being and sociocultural adaptation. The current sample comprises approximately 200 respondents. As illustrated in Figure 1, sociocultural adaptation is significantly associated with a lower intention to return (odds ratio < 1), whereas psychological well-being shows a positive, but non-significant association. These preliminary results provide a first empirical indication of the link between sociocultural and psychological factors and return intentions among older Italian migrants in Canton Ticino.

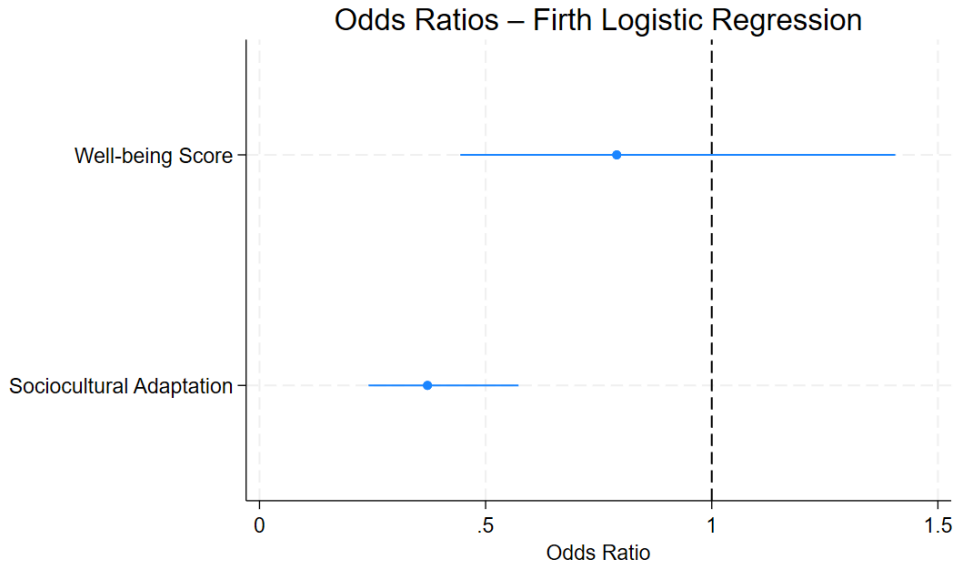


Figure 1 Odds ratios estimated through Firth logistic regression for well-being and sociocultural adaptation

To deepen the interpretation of the results, we estimated the predicted probabilities of return (Figure 2) by the levels of well-being and sociocultural adaptation, categorised into three groups (low, medium, high). Both variables maintain an inverse relationship with the intention to return: as well-being and adaptation increase, the probability of return tends to decrease. However, sociocultural adaptation shows a more stable and consistent effect, whereas well-being follows a less pronounced trajectory, particularly at lower levels. The wider error bars associated with low adaptation suggest greater internal variability, likely linked to the heterogeneous composition of this subgroup.

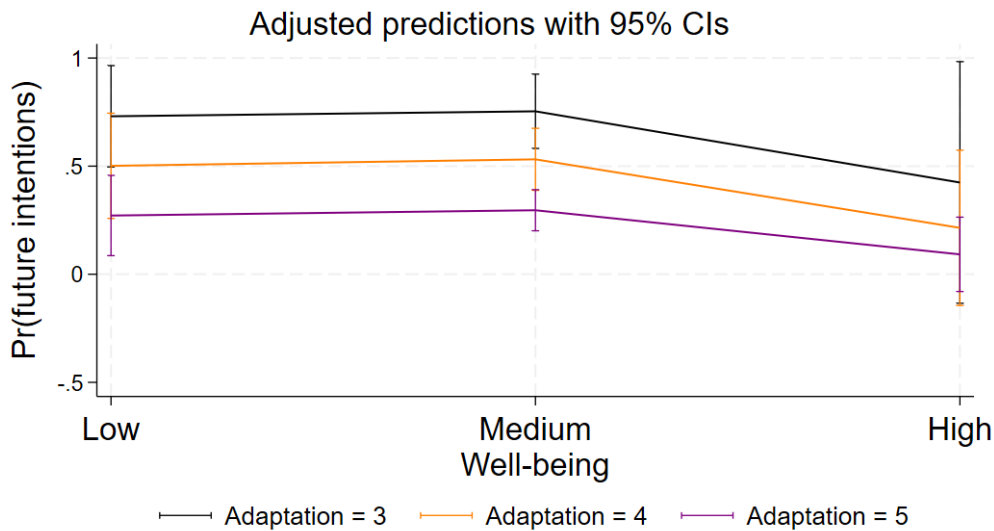


Figure 2 Predicted probabilities of return in relation to levels of well-being and sociocultural adaptation.

The analyses confirm that higher levels of sociocultural adaptation are associated with a lower intention to return, outlining a more rooted and stable migratory profile. In contrast, the role of psychological well-being appears less defined, indicating the need for further investigation, particularly in light of the still limited sample size. These preliminary findings appear to partially support the initial hypotheses: return migration tends not to represent the culmination of a

successful migratory experience, but rather may arise as a potential response to sociocultural integration challenges. The association with well-being, however, remains less clearly delineated, pointing to a more nuanced or context-dependent relationship. Taken together, these findings outline an open-ended framework that calls for more layered interpretations and future developments on both empirical and theoretical grounds.

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