Comments on Rossi and Harttgen & Klasen papers for Bellagio 2008 workshop on Migrant Youth and Children

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Introduction

I found all three papers (MT, AR, and H-K) most interesting and informative. This was especially so because the literatures covered by the papers are unfamiliar to me. It was particularly interesting to learn from all three papers of the absence in those literatures of attention to the well-being of migrant youth and children. Given that there are very large literatures on this specific topic in various branches of psychology (e.g., 40+ books and several hundred research articles on migrant youth over the last 20 years – many of which have focused on mental health), I’ll attempt to review those literatures with a mind to how they might inform this effort and to note areas of logical linkages to points made in the papers. In addition to migrant youth in general, I’ve focused also on refugee youth as a specific, and in some ways unique, form of migration (and because it is closest to my area of expertise: youth functioning in and after political conflict). While not quite as large as the migrant youth literature, the literature on refugee youth is substantial (e.g., numerous books, hundreds of research articles). It goes without saying that reviewing such a bulk of work can only be crudely done in a short paper like this, and, therefore, I’ll focus mostly on general ideas, principles, trends, etc. to give a sense of the essence of the work (I’ll have detailed findings of specific studies with me in Bellagio in case of their relevance.) At the end of this essay, I’ll offer some few specific suggestions to the AR and H-K papers, but have not differentiated between the papers otherwise since my comments would be essentially identical for both of them. Suggestions for future research stemming from this review will be incorporated in the position paper.

Overview of Studies

Some reviewers of the literature on the well-being of migrants claim to locate as many as 1,000 articles (of any age). Focusing strictly on youth, we located 468 studies. Subjects of these studies were immigrants mostly to the USA (primarily Asian and Latino/Hispanic), Israel, and Canada. Of European countries, most studies were of immigrant youth to the Netherlands. In terms of outcomes, approximately 26% focused on mental health; 19% on social relationships (primarily family); 13% on academic performance; 9% on problem behavior; and 7% on physical health.

Our search for quantitative empirical articles on refugee youth located 279 articles. Receiving countries for the youth of these studies were primarily the USA (48%) and the Middle East (6%). The sending countries of the youth investigated in these studies were primarily countries in Southeast Asia (23%), Latin/Central America (11%), and the Middle East (10%). Estimates on the numbers of refugee youth vary widely from 12 to 38 million, with the inconsistency in estimates explicable by varying or vague definitions of who a refugee is (e.g., differing bureaucratic labels: asylum seekers; voluntary or forced unaccompanied minors, etc.; see H-K
Table 1). Some estimate that up to 50% of refugees are children and adolescents. The bulk of the studies on refugee youth have concentrated on psychological well-being.

The Structure of Migration

Scholars on migrant and refugee youth emphasize that an understanding of these transitions must include attention to multiple stages of the process. Thus, for migrant youth: pre-migration and post-migration components. For refugee youth: before, during, and after flight, or more elaborately: pre-departure, flight, first asylum, claimant period, settlement period, and adaptation.

A Human Development Perspective

By definition, developmental psychologists would want children to be differentiated from adolescents (or youth) because of theorized qualitative differences in physical strength, cognitive capacity, sophistication of social cognition, configurations and dynamics of social relations (e.g., parents and peers), etc. A growing “revisionist” developmental psychology – authored primarily by those who have taken seriously global and cultural variations in life experience of children in the second decade of life – would not insist that the study of migrant youth be constrained by the traditional (Euro-Western-dominated) theory (and method). In fact, the focus on the broader issues of educational attainment and health so present in both the AR and H-K papers is quite consistent with contemporary work, especially with the growing realizations in the conflict youth realm that well-being cannot be adequately captured with narrow, self-focused outcomes but rather with attention to the broader issues of educational and employment opportunity, socioeconomic status (e.g., including access to health care, etc.), and so on. (see AR on economic activity; see H-K Table XX)

The one area of classic developmental psychology that is quite relevant, however, is identity, where particularly for adolescents - whether because of enhanced abilities for hypothetical reasoning and future focus or proximity to key life transitions that are facilitated by reasonably solid and consistent identities - the consolidation of identities (intentionally pluralized; see below) is an important part of their life experience and challenge. This issue appears very relevant to migrant youth, particularly given the acculturation process (elaborated below) through which adolescents must reconcile the identity demands of at least two cultures (sending and receiving). To the extent, then, that adolescents face these identity demands more so than younger children, it would be preferable for any analyses to distinguish adolescents from younger children (no easy task given the variance across cultures in how adolescence is defined and circumscribed). The H-K approach of using 0-18 as the focal age range is certainly consistent with many past efforts, but not so with more recent recognition of the uniqueness of adolescents, and misses the ability to more precisely understand the experiences and needs of this age group.

General Characterizations: A Litany of “-ized”s

Consistent throughout the migrant and refugee youth literatures are (often self) criticisms of negative or constraining perspectives researchers have taken on such youth. Thus, the literature
can be read to infer that migrant or refugee youth are “traumatized” (by virtue of the predominant focus on traumatic experiences, especially for refugee youth), “pathologized” (by concentrating substantially – and often exclusively – on psychological difficulties, as opposed, for example to social integration and competencies of all kinds), and “individualized” (in following Western paradigms in isolating the individual from his/her community when considering well-being). Most limiting is the inference that migrant and refugee youth are “homogenized,” when in fact youth vary substantially in the political, economic, cultural, social, and personal dimensions of their migration experience (before, during, and after migration), such that any credible conclusion made about migrant youth would need to carefully factor in such critical differences in the nature of their migration-related experiences. This heterogeneity and its salience to understanding the well-being of migrant and refugee youth will be elaborated below.

Effects of Migration on Youth Generally

Details of the findings of specific research studies can be examined later, but as would be expected from the heterogeneity of the migration experience just noted, an accurate general evaluation of the migration and refugee youth literatures is that the findings are equivocal and inconsistent (as also noted in the two synthesis papers). Thus, for example, findings are regularly made that some migrant youth achieve better educationally than non-migrants in their host country, but also just as regularly findings are made that they perform less well (e.g., in extensive studies in the UK and USA). Explanations for this and other equivocation in the findings regularly invoke issues of host cultural values, degree of harmony between origin and receiving country cultural values, and socio-demographic-economic, within-host-country differences (e.g., poverty, neighborhood conditions, extent and quality of social support networks, etc.). There are of course reasons aplenty to attribute contrasting findings to methodological incompatibilities across studies (e.g., sampling, measurement, etc., or other basic design differences that don’t capture the real possibility that performance or well-being changes over time during the adaptation or acculturation process, and, thus, the point in time or the span of time of a study is determinative in making specific findings). But it is certainly also the case that discrepant findings are entirely credible in that they reflect the fact that migrant and refugee youth do indeed function very differently - compared to each other and to non-migrant/refugee youth (as well as to local youth, see AR) - depending on the variations and vicissitudes of their various ecologies (pre- and post-migration), cultural values, and individual differences (see H-K Tables 2 and 3).

Competent Functioning

A related, more specific pattern of findings throughout the migrant and refugee youth literatures is the consistent documentation that most youth – despite the strains of their migration experiences – function quite well and adaptively. This finding echoes that of recent trends in studies of adolescents in general (i.e., the large and growing positive youth development movements) but also that of adolescents in very extreme circumstances (e.g., political violence, including the most severe example of child soldiers). The finding is made repeatedly among migrant and refugee youth (and families) that substantial dysfunction is neither inevitable nor necessarily durable. In order to better identify those youth who do struggle, therefore, attention
must be paid to the heterogeneity of experience, the essence of which – according to these literatures – lies in fundamental components of the ecologies of migration (at all of its stages).

Culture

Perhaps the strongest message from the psychology literatures on migration is the indispensable role of culture in understanding migration processes and degrees of well-being. (see AR’s acknowledgement of the cultural appropriateness of extended family care for example)

Acculturation

Most fundamental to much of the (cultural) psychology literatures on migration is the process of acculturation (a la John Berry) whereby cultural and psychological changes take place in migrating individuals as a function of contact between cultural groups and their members. At issue in this process are 1) the maintenance of heritage and identity and 2) relationships sought among groups, both of which play themselves out within ethno-cultural groups as well as in the larger society. In contrast to more uni-dimensional assimilation models, acculturation is seen as multi-dimensional and bidirectional with actors both retaining and adopting cognitions, behaviors, and values. Basic patterns of acculturation include the following profiles: integration (involved in the new society while retaining ethnic heritage); ethnic (largely embedded within own cultural milieu; little involvement within larger society); national (strong orientation toward larger society; little retention of ethnic culture; and diffuse (uncertainty and ambiguity about place in society). Acculturation stress and acculturation gaps figure in to the dynamics of the process. Issues that challenge the basic model include the recognition that integration (demonstrated to be the most adaptive profile) is itself culturally or nationally variable (e.g., essentially meaning assimilation in the USA, but multi-culturism in Canada), the need to consider domain-specific acculturation (e.g., different profiles at home and at school), and the content of acculturation (i.e., what changes, what maintains).

Language

Book length treatments have been given to the role of language in the adaptation of migrating families, with children – especially adolescents – being key figures in “brokering” language. Parental inability to speak the language of the receiving country is identified as critical, affecting their ability to understand the host country social institutions, cooperate with social systems (e.g., schools), enter the workplace, act as role models, and teach relevant social survival skills.

Family Roles

Language brokering is one part of broader, often culturally-determined, family role patterns that are impacted by the migration experience. Migrant and refugee children often acculturate more rapidly than parents which can lead to intergenerational tension and result in role reversals and status inconsistency whereby youth assume adult roles, adults become dependent on children for practical needs, youth may attempt to dominate the family, and parents may respond to their dependency with depression or substance use. Shifts in maternal/paternal work can also lead to realignment of parental authority. These role perturbations likely interfere with or complicate a
basic provision that caregivers can make to facilitate adolescent development: namely, establishing appropriate structure through reasonable and consistent monitoring and rule setting—a provision that has been widely demonstrated across cultures to be protective against antisocial behavior among adolescents generally.

Cultural Values

Explanations for differential patterns of adaptation often center on cultural values, including values and traditions related to economic pursuits, health, recreation, age, sex roles, courting, marriage practices, childrearing, etc. Higher youth achievement can be found in families that have little disagreement about key cultural values and when parents can support youth as they negotiate adaptation to the competing values of receiving cultures. Discontinuity in cultural values is viewed as a risk condition.

Identity

The challenge of two cultures is viewed as particularly salient for the identity development of migrant and refugee adolescents, in terms of potential marginalization, felt loss of culture, intentional rejection of culture, feeling trapped between two cultures, and the complexities of developing multiple identities.

The Social Ecology

A second and equally urgent message from the migrant and refugee youth literatures would be the exhortation to focus intensively on the social aspects of migration experience. Social integration and social resources are central concerns of these literatures in interpreting the degree of realized or potential adaptation to the migration experience. (see MT on social integration, social development; AR on social costs; H-K Table 7, social exclusion, social networks). Thus, one reads regularly about the power of family and community support in rooting and protecting youth, with the loss or disruption of such social support structures as a dominating force in (particularly refugee) youth experience. This focus on the sustaining power of social connections is very consistent with the broader literature on child and adolescent development that has clearly demonstrated that stable, positive, supportive relationships with key adult caregivers are facilitative of health and competent functioning in youth across cultures. The same cross-cultural literatures have demonstrated how sensitive youth are to being respected for their competencies and inherent worth, an issue that might well be substantially complicated given the role tensions between parent and youth described above.

Other Relevant Ecologies

Cultural and social forces operate within the bounds of other aspects of the broad ecology of migrant youth and family experience. In terms of the political environment, visa status (facilitating among other things, access to healthcare, employment, education), the receiving country’s orientation to immigration, and (for refugees) the presence or effectiveness of resettlement programs are relevant. The power of the economic environment (i.e., poverty, material deprivation, neighborhood disorganization, lack of employment opportunity, etc.) is
regularly mentioned in explanations of migrant and refugee well-being, even as overriding in predictive power past experiences with stress or trauma. Local ethnic hierarchies, minority status, and racism are aspects of the ecology that have been considered as instrumental in determining youths’ well-being.

Youth Outcomes

The literatures on migrant and refugee youth focus on an array of outcome variables when investigating the effects of migration on youth well-being, including a variety of measures of: mental health, internalized problems, externalized problems, coping, academic performance, interpersonal relationships, ethnic identity, and service provision. Below are some themes that appear salient in the literatures.

Community Integrity

Consistent with this ecological approach, scholars on the well-being of migrant and refugee youth increasingly emphasize the salience of the community (as opposed to concentrating on individual-level indicators), and particularly the integrity of social support systems within it (of which family is but one level), when assessing the well-being of youth. This is particularly critical for refugee youth and families given that often the conflict that made them refugees did considerable damage to community integration and support (with divisions underlying the conflict sometimes being re-instantiated within refugee camps). Risk portends the disruption of education in both form and content, whereby the flow of (identity-enriching) socialization is interrupted and then resumed, but in a different culture that is often discontinuous or incongruent with the home environment.

Family Process and Parent Well-Being

Family cohesion, family violence (spouse or child abuse), marital relationship quality, and the integrity of extended family after migration are all aspects of family experience viewed to be salient to the adaptation of migrant and refugee youth. Particular attention has also been given to parental well-being, whereby substance use and various mental disorders (in addition to the role disturbance mentioned early) compromise parents’ ability to discharge their socializing responsibilities effectively. (see H-K on family cohesion)

Adaptation and Acculturation Stress

The outcome portion of Berry’s acculturation model is termed adaptation, referring to relatively stable changes in response to external demands. Adaptation can be domain-specific, as illustrated, for example, by increases followed by declines for psychological well-being but linear increases in social well-being. Individuals have three strategies of adaptation: adjustment (increasing the cognitive fit between individual and environment); reaction (change that retaliates against the environment), and withdrawal (change that reduces pressure of the environment, as in forced exclusion or voluntary withdrawal). Acculturation stress refers to stress that occurs in the acculturation process, as opposed to stress behaviors that can accompany
acculturation (e.g., confusion, anxiety, depression, feelings of marginality and alienation, confused identity, etc.)

Marginalization

The risk of marginalization is particularly high during adolescence as youth deal with dual cultures; without full access to both cultures, they can feel trapped or in limbo between cultures. (MT, AR)

Loss

Consistent with the emphasis on social integration described above, particularly salient for refugee youth is assessing the degree of loss. This includes nuclear and extended family, peers, possessions, and homes.

Health

Indicators of health in studies of migrant and refugee youth include: poor perceived health, oral health, infectious disease (parasites, tuberculosis), lead levels, and, particularly for refugee youth, malnutrition and brain impairment. (see H-K on poverty indicators). Studies assess also the use of health services and rates of health insurance. Inadequate language translation during health service is itself a substantial risk.

Unique Aspects of Refugee Experience

Virtually all that is described above applies equally or nearly so to both immigrant and refugee youth. There are, however, several unique issues faced by refugee youth that would need to be considered in research and programming (consonant with the H-K distinction between forced and non-forced migration). Related to the degree of loss mentioned above are the issues of (often involuntary) displacement and resettlement, all of which may create substantial uncertainty about the future, mistrust, suspicion, hostility, and greater vulnerability to psychological and emotional problems. Violence and destruction (of property and social networks) are common exposures of many refugee youth, as is also deprivation (e.g., food, healthcare, and housing). Stigmatization (e.g., for having been a youth soldier) and sexual violence (particularly for females) are also common. Refugee youth can feel a sense of rejection from their homeland, resentment from their non-refugee counterparts, and, particularly for those who were actively involved in the conflict, disillusionment if they perceive their efforts were fruitless. (see AR on refugee children impact)

Specific Comments on Synthesis Papers

Both papers are very well-written and cover a lot of territory. Tables were particularly helpful in capturing the complexity of migration. One general suggestion would that it might be useful if both papers used some of the same tables to provide a clear bridge between the two papers.

For the AR paper, Tables 1 and 2 lead to the expectation that all of that detail would be covered; perhaps they, or part of them, could come later to illustrate just how much of that detail has yet
to be covered in the literatures. It would have been helpful to learn earlier about the absence of work on south to south migration, and to present some theoretical rationale why it can be expected to be different from the more abundant south to north literature. The detail in Tables 3 and 4 is very interesting; some explanation of some dramatic differences might be helpful (e.g., the vast difference in percentages of child/youth from Chile compared to Argentina). I had a bit of difficulty following the logic of the placement of Section 4.1. The Stevens & Vollebergh (2008) reference is missing from the bib.

For the H-K paper, although announced early the detail on well-being came rather late in the paper, with sections 2.3 and 2.4 feeling a bit long and distracting from the focus on youth and well-being. Some explanation of large differences in the tabled data would be helpful (e.g., why such growth in Italy and Spain for 2000-2005). It might be useful in Table XX (pp. 35-36) to include some indicators of “self,” for example, identity, as there is in Table XX (p.38). It would be nice to have some discussion of how these very useful tables were compiled, and some discussion of the risk table.

Main Sources


