Position Paper
Bellagio 2008 workshop on Migrant Youth and Children

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This brief outline for future directions and possibilities for developing a child-centric perspective of migration flows directly from the commentary paper I wrote to introduce the vast literatures in psychology on migrant children and youth that focused also on the refugee experience.

First, the recommendation for a child-centric perspective is very much in harmony with calls from these literatures which widely exhort – as did both AR and H-K – for careful attention to the perspectives of the children and youth themselves. This attention to their perspectives can be viewed as a matter of theory/philosophy of science to the extent that it endorses the subjective perception of individuals as valid data to be considered. Such an acknowledgement of the value of a subjective perspective is particularly important for adolescents (as compared to younger children) given the developing sophistication of cognitive abilities during this period of development, as in enhanced ability for self-reflection and perspective taking. Those who have spent much time genuinely soliciting youth perspectives would strongly endorse this approach as well, given how apparent it is how much youth wish to express themselves, how capable they are in doing so, and because often they are the best source of identifying the essential elements of their experience – the very elements we researchers wish to identify and assess.

The call for a child-centric approach also has important methodological implications for, as AR, H-K, and many commentators on their papers have indicated, a key way of achieving this approach is via “qualitative” methods, an approach that is still not adequately included even in the extensive psychological research. Qualitative approaches that “listen” to the perspectives of children and youth offer two key benefits. First, as mentioned above, they assist in identifying just what is critical in the migration experiences of these individuals. Far too often we presume to know what is important to measure (however well it may be grounded in available theory). For example, the classic illustration of this in the youth and political violence literature - much of the findings of which are generalizable to refugee and other migrant youth - has been the researchers’ often exclusive interest in assessing negative psychological states as valid (and adequate) indicators of well-being. One learns from consulting youth themselves and allowing them to speak broadly about their conflict experiences, however, that personal well-being (i.e., intra-psychic experiences of stress, anxiety, etc.) is only one of an array of experiences or domains of their life that matter to them (and often is not mentioned at all as an indicator of well-being). A second benefit of a qualitative approach is the richness of the information that can be gleaned. Particularly for adolescents, this richness comes in the form of their identity-relevant efforts to interpret and make meaning of their on-going experiences, depth that cannot be accessed via closed-ended survey but through probing interviews. This is most particularly so for youth whose migration forces the task of integrating multiple cultures into their identity.
The irony of a child-centric approach when it comes to studying migrant and refugee youth is that that center substantially incorporates culture and sociality. Thus, even when one goes to the child or youth to hear his or her perspective what one learns about is a socially- and culturally-situated self. What we too crudely characterize as the external environment is actually very much part of the internal self of the individual. In the case of migrant and refugee children or youth particularly, culture is key because of the discontinuities imposed on the migrating individual (i.e., in the requirement to reconcile dual cultures) and the social realm of experience is critical because the migrating experience can often challenge the integrity of the sustaining social networks that connect children to others and that give them the arena to validate self and identity.

Whether through qualitative or quantitative means (ideally both as many have recommended), therefore, what appears most relevant to understand better is the complexity of these realms of child and youth experience and challenge. The research is clear that children and youth adapt to the migration challenge very differently, both psychologically and culturally/socially. An important source of explanation of this difference should be sought in the complexities of these basic cultural and social experiences.

As for culture, theoretical and empirical research would emphasize that several elements are critical. First, the overall strategy of acculturation an individual and family adopts – that is, the degree of integration or separation between the dual cultures. Berry’s work would suggest that integration, in comparison to any form of separation (whether national, ethnic, or diffuse), is most facilitative of successful adaptation. (In addition to classifying youth and families accordingly, levels of parent-perceived [as well as youth-perceived] acculturation stress would figure into an appreciation of where the family is in the transition process.) Second, an important element that impacts both the acculturation process and outcome is the issue of language – specifically the degree to which children and youth must become the language broker for their parents who cannot function in the receiving country’s language.

Third, this language brokering is one main factor in the disruption of roles and authority hierarchies within migrated families, which can cause intra-familial tension and frustrate the development of a stable identity in youth. Fourth, key cultural values for behavior and interaction that migrate with families must be better understood to fully capture the degree and nature of tension that arises when confronting the new culture. All of these factors speak to the salience of assessing youth identity formation, and, more specially, call for a more nuanced approach in that effort that acknowledges that (especially migrated) youth can and do have multiple identities, as opposed to the classic insistence that identity must be unitary and prescribed in its process of development (i.e., exploration followed by commitment as the essential sequence toward an idealized, unitary, coherent, achieved identity). Monitoring the degree of perceived marginalization by youth would be important.

As for social integration, the research is equally clear that the maintenance or restoration of enriching social networks is critical to the well-being of children and youth. Thus, not only do we need to understand the nuanced cultural values that inform the salience of these networks to children and youth (as above), but careful assessments of the adequacy of these networks should be made in evaluating their well-being. Consistent with the general recommendation to attend to the multiple stages of the migration experience (i.e., pre- during, and post-), it would be
important to learn what the nature and quality of key social connections were prior to migration in addition to whatever disruption occurred during the process (particularly degree of loss), and, critically, the degree to which children and youth have been able to maintain or replace them in the new country or culture. While the salience of social connection is critical for children of all ages (as well as for adults), the network is often more extensive for youth, who, by virtue of their education, employment, and preparation for own family formation are amplifying their family connections with key relationships with peers, teachers, mentors, and relationship partners. I use the word verb “amplify” rather than “replace” because even in Euro-Western populations of youth the once popular notion that adolescence is a time of emotional separation from family has been shown to be inaccurate, with youth from all cultures continually endorsing the salience to them of family relationships (particularly with parents). Thus, careful assessments of family functioning (e.g., cohesion, satisfaction, quality of the parent-child bond, degree of migration-related tension, etc.) would be valuable signals of child and youth well-being. Parental psychological and social well-being is also important to monitor as it impacts their ability to maintain positive relationships with their children.

Importantly, such focus on culture and social networks would be assessed in conjunction with careful attention to the economic conditions (e.g., SES, poverty, neighborhood disorganization) and political opportunity (e.g., visa status, access to health care, etc.) that may well predominate in explaining adaptation.

Consistent with a focus on type and adequacy of acculturation and the integrity of social networks, the psychology literature would exhort to a broad and holistic view on child and youth well-being. In so doing, the literature would appeal to expand past a predominant focus on assessing well-being via indexes of difficulty or dysfunction (particularly apparent in the refugee literatures) to incorporate assessments of positive and constructive functioning within interpersonal relationships (i.e., family, peer, non-family adults, etc.), institutional settings (e.g., school, religion, sports groups, etc.), and civic life (e.g., civic engagement, volunteer service, political involvement, etc.).

Given the magnitude of the issue of migration – both in terms of numbers people and breadth of regions of sending and receiving countries – quantitative assessments of the migrating experience are indispensable. But, as many have noted, existing instrumentation does not adequately cover relevant topics. The value of smaller, more concentrated qualitative assessments will be to inform as to what better indicators can be used in national or regional studies. One key challenge here, of course, is the limited amount of space available in large surveys, with survey designers often permitting a single item to represent a construct. Typically, important constructs are measured with multiple-item indexes, and it is a significant challenge to researchers to select individual items to carry the load of a construct.

In many cases, qualitative research is used as the initial step in a multi-method design, particularly when subjects or cultures under study are not well-known. This “discovery” of locally-relevant issues then guides the creation of content for surveys which can be administered to much larger, representative populations. Since so little is actually known to date from the perspectives of migrating children and youth about the breadth and meaning of their migration experiences, this method of initial discovery via interview work is likely warranted. However,
that does not mean that the design could not be shaped by existing knowledge of the framework of migration. Thus, for example, samples for interviewing could be selected from youth who are via survey classified into recognized profiles of acculturation. To use Berry again to illustrate, populations of youth distribute themselves across 4 profiles, which appear to signal the eventual degree of satisfying and successful adaptation. Therefore, selecting samples of youth with each of these profiles for intensive interviewing might well more efficiently advance understanding of the migration experience by detailing the experiences of youth already identified to be at meaningfully different levels of acculturation (as well as providing validity assessments on the credibility of the profiles themselves). Ideally, such a design would be carried out in a community or city that has immigrants from differing cultures and at different stages (i.e., time since migration) so that fundamental cultural values of varying migrating groups and the degree of their continuity with receiving country values could be figured into the equation, as well as the degree to which time in-country facilitates adaptation.