Toward a child-centric migration agenda

Miles Corak
Graduate School of Public and International Affairs
University of Ottawa
April 2008

1. Introduction

This position paper for the Princeton/Rockefeller conference “Migrant Youth and Children of Migrants in a Globalized World” offers a tentative framework for organizing research directions on the subject of children and migration. This is informed by several themes that are a part of the position paper by Tienda, Taylor, and Maughan (2007), as well as of the survey papers by Harttgen and Klasen (2008) and Rossi (2008). In particular, I pick up in a general way on two broad issues: the need to inform the migration literature with an understanding of the child development literature; and the need to appreciate that policy relevant research must not only bring new facts and trends to the awareness of the broader community, but also to formulate and investigate the underlying causal relationships. These issues also span a third that is also very much at the centre of the conference papers: the need to develop appropriate information sources.

In beginning, it is important to underscore the important distinction that Harttgen and Klasen (2008) make between an intrinsic and an instrumental interest in child well-being. We care about children because they are citizens in the here-and-now with their own, sometimes distinct, set of needs and rights. But unlike other citizens, children in most societies lack formal voice and power to articulate these rights in the public policy process. We also care about children because they are in the process of becoming adults, and therefore their development is an investment that promotes their capacities to become all that they can be. We might think of these two dimensions as reflecting a need to explicitly recognize the role of time in any research agenda around children, and consequently in the development of appropriate indicators of “well-being” and data: “well-being” in the here-and-now as intrinsic, and “well-being” in adulthood arising from past investments and hence as instrumental. This said, I do not address these issues to the extent that they should be, and sometimes fall implicitly into an “instrumental” perspective on how a research agenda should be developed.

That is to say, what motivates the following is the idea that migration can be in some sense thought of as human or social capital that changes the capacities of children. Indeed, Tienda, Taylor and Maughan (2007) begin their discussion in this way by posing two central questions: (1) how does migration influence the well-being of children; and (2) how are migrant children faring in their host countries. These are related but speak to different policy concerns, and in what follows I amplify on these questions after reflecting upon the suggestion Rossi (2008) makes concerning the need to review the existing empirical literature with sensitivity to issues of causality. In thinking about the basic research questions it is important, in other words, to articulate the counterfactual.
use this exercise to expand the list of questions appropriate for a child-centric migration agenda.

2. Articulating a counterfactual offers a framework

We can imagine answering the question “how does migration influence the well-being of children?” in different ways depending upon what we imagine the counterfactual to be. Different counterfactuals lead to different questions, neither of which is intrinsically correct. They are just different questions with different implications. Together they offer a way of framing the research agenda.

1. How does migration influence the well-being of children compared to what those individual children would have experienced had they not migrated?

2. How does migration influence the well-being of children compared to what those individual children would have experienced had they migrated at a different point in their life-cycles?

3. How does migration influence the well-being of children compared to what those individual children would have experienced had they been from a different origin country?

4. How does migration influence the well-being of children compared to what those individual children would have experienced had they gone to a different host country?

5. How does migration influence the well-being of children compared to what those individual children would have experienced had they been born in the host country?

All of these questions are addressed in one form or another in the three papers that form the backdrop and core of this conference. But it might be helpful to make them explicit and to address a similar series of sub-issues to clarify both the opportunities and the challenges they present. In particular, the discussion of each of these questions considers the following three sub-themes:

A. Why ask the question and what is the link to the child development literature? Or put another way, why is it important from the perspective of the child?

B. How in principle can it be answered? Is it feasible to answer? What is an appropriate control group? What are the data requirements?

C. What are the policy implications?

This said, more often than not in what follows these questions are left hanging and not fully addressed: in large part because of my limited knowledge, but also to an important degree because the three conference papers offer answers. That said, I do try to illustrate some answers with aspects of my own research agenda, or with the data from Canada, the country with which I am most familiar and which I sense is a bit understudied in the existing reviews of the literature in spite of the relatively successful experience of migrant children.
3. A framework

1. How does migration influence the well-being of children compared to what those individual children would have experienced had they not migrated?

   a. Why ask the question?
      i. Sometimes the answer will be central to both the child and to public policy as in discussion of child trafficking or other forms of abuse. It will also be central with respect to other forms of involuntary migration such as the experience of some refugees from war-torn situations. It will also be central if the focus is on the very short term.
      ii. Other times this may not be a question immediately apparent to the child, particularly the adult child. That an adult child is in some sense better off than they would have been in the origin country if their parents had not decided to migrate may be of more relevance to the parent than to the child, whose concern is with relative standing in the host not the origin country.
      iii. Notwithstanding this fact, the question ultimately has bearing on the social evaluation made of global movements of children.

   b. How in principle can it be answered?
      i. The counterfactual to this question is what an individual child’s well-being—however measured—would have been had that individual child not migrated.
      ii. We observe the child in only one state—the post migration state—and we do not in a very fundamental sense know what would have happened had the migration not taken place. This similar to many counterfactuals of interest in the social sciences, and requires a careful consideration of what an appropriate control group might be.
         1. Sometimes this might be very easy to answer: as suggested for victims of abuse or of refugees the counterfactual is self-evident.
         2. But in other cases, probably in most cases of voluntary migration, there is need for careful consideration of a control group.
      iii. There is a need to develop a control group in the host country and the research program is one that is integrated, both children in the origin and host country need to be part of the analysis.
         1. For each child in the host country detailed information on the locale/region of their origins is needed. And a similar geographic detail is needed for a comparable cohort of individuals in the country of origin.
         2. It must be assumed or recognized that the migration experience does not change those left behind.
         3. Mexican Migration Project type data would be helpful. Also case study approaches such as a recent Canadian proposal to study West Africans in Montreal and then to conduct
interviews in their village of origin, if properly structured, could serve as another illustration.

4. But there is also potential to do this with large scale surveys if appropriate information like geography, ethnic origins, and time since migration could be used through matching methods. But this does predispose the availability of representative data in both origin and host countries and an integrated research capacity.

c. What are the policy implications?
   i. There is a need for clarity on just what “well-being” means and a clear and accepted way of measuring it. Health, education, and material well-being both during childhood and ultimately in adulthood are all important and would have different policy implications
   ii. But clearly a question like this must be at the root of evaluating public policy in the host countries from a child’s perspective. Even if ultimately the host country feels it benefits from the migration of children there is a need to inform this by a cost-benefit analysis of what happened to the child.

2. How does migration influence the well-being of children compared to what those individual children would have experienced had they migrated at a different point in their life-cycles?

   a. Why ask the question?
      i. The feeling among many is that the child development literature, both the social and biological aspects, suggests that there are windows of opportunity in a child’s life cycle in which investments and opportunities for development lead to the development of long-term capacities. This is illustrated most forcefully in the literature around brain development, and also readiness-to-learn in the pre-school years. This literature forms the backdrop for Heckman’s work on the returns to investment at different points in the life cycle. Another particularly important illustration when the context is migration concerns the acquisition of a new language, which apparently is much more successful if undertaken before the age of 12.
      ii. Answering this question is therefore important from the child’s point of view because it may inform how migration influences the ultimate capacities of children.
      iii. Another way of thinking about this is to consider migration as an investment in person-specific human capital, and this question will help to understand the degree and changes in rates of return.

   b. How in principle can it be answered?
      i. The counterfactual to this question is the outcome for an individual child had he or she migrated at a different age
ii. It would be interesting to explore how outcomes would have varied if migration occurred:
   1. during the pre-school years so that in a sense it is influencing readiness to learn in the early years
   2. between the ages of say five or six and 12 when there is still capacity to develop fluency in a language and before the challenges and risks of puberty are faced
   3. after the age of 12 years when learning a new language is more difficult and the child is also facing other important socio-psychological changes

iii. Once again we cannot observe the child in two states, and there is a need to develop a comparable control group.
   1. There is potential to do this with large scale surveys or censuses in the host country. This would require large samples in order to develop analytical files on children from similar ethnic and family backgrounds, facing similar health and education systems, but who differ in age at migration.
   2. Children of migrant parents who are born in the host country can also serve as a control. There is also some scope in using siblings or neighbours as controls. It is not clear that longitudinal data have an inherent advantage over large scale cross-section data, but there is also no doubt that an immigrant based longitudinal data set or a general panel that has sufficient sample sizes on immigrants would be helpful.
   3. There is a need to conduct this sort of analysis within an immigrant community, but also to have many different immigrant communities—each with potentially different degrees of fluency or costs of learning the host language—part of the analysis

c. What are the policy implications?
   i. Again there is a need for clarity on just what “well-being” means, but certainly education and labour market outcomes are a central part of this story. The policy implications will be framed by what metric is used.
   ii. This question could respond to issues dealing with the migration decision: when is the best time to migrate or to accept migrant children. But it could also be important for the conduct of social policy and designing the countervailing social investments that may be necessary to support children who are facing challenges associated with the age at which they migrated.

3. How does migration influence the well-being of children compared to what those individual children would have experienced had they been from a different origin country?
a. Why ask the question?
   i. If the previous question can be framed in terms of understanding the rates of return to migration as individual based human capital this question can be framed as referring to the rates of return to family and perhaps community based social capital.
   ii. In particular the child development literature teaches us that there is a good deal that parents and the family do to influence both the current and long-term outcomes of children. These influences in large measure are not monetary. There is more debate on the role of the broader community but it is also clear that social investments do matter. But it is clear that different communities offer different kinds and degrees of social capital to the child: ranging from attitudes toward education and risk-taking to the nature of job contacts and occupational choices.
   iii. It is important to phrase this question in terms of not just the non-monetary investments that parents and immigrant communities make in their children but also in terms of how the broader host country values the nature of those investments.
   iv. This question also explicitly recognizes that there can be a good deal of diversity in child outcomes depending upon the immigrant community to which they belong and how the characteristics of this community mesh with the mainstream of the host country.

b. How in principle can it be answered?
   i. The counterfactual to this question is an individual with similar individual abilities and human capital but from a different origin country.
   ii. This involves an analysis of the diversity of child migrant outcomes within the same host country by community of origin. The informational requirements are such that large sample sizes are needed to obtain reliable information by country of origin, and to study the characteristics of these communities.
   iii. Alternatively one could imagine a research agenda based on case studies of particular communities in response to some of the differences highlighted by large-sample studies.

c. What are the policy implications?
   i. If the counterfactual is correctly specified this question would in principle permit a clarification of the role of the migrant community versus the mainstream community in determining child well-being and outcomes. It is, for example, in this scenario that research would be able to respond to ongoing concerns about discrimination and the challenges faced by visible minority youth. If two children have the same level and nature of individual and social capital and differed only in their visible minority status then differences in labour market outcomes might be more clearly attributed to the outside community.
   ii. But in general this refers to the role of broader contexts on the well-being of the child and while it is helpful to distinguish differences
among immigrant communities it will be difficult to discern the role of mainstream.

iii. This said appreciating the non-monetary investments that different communities give their children speaks to the challenges that social and education programs in the host country must address.

4. How does migration influence the well-being of children compared to what those individual children would have experienced had they gone to a different host country?

a. Why ask the question?
   i. Cross-country comparisons of the outcomes of children from the same migrant origins can help complement the information from studies framed in terms of the previous question. In principle, this would help bring focus to the influence that the host country has on child outcomes.
   ii. As such from the child’s perspective this is again a question of the impact of social investments, but more strongly so as it addresses issues that may be out of the control of the family and immediate community to which they belong.

b. How in principle can it be answered?
   i. The counterfactual to this question is an individual with similar characteristics and background growing up in a different country. There is also scope to frame this question within a country if there are different jurisdictions responsible for programs like education.
   ii. Large-scale representative data across host countries is necessary. PISA is the prototype. But having sufficient sample sizes to control for individual differences is important; particularly there is a need to control for the community of origin rather than just “immigrant” status.
   iii. But there is a need to recognize that selection rules vary across countries and the challenge is to develop a counterfactual that accounts for these differences.
   iv. Census information across different countries would also be helpful. The US, Canada, and the UK for example might permit this sort of analysis if there is sufficient and appropriate information on child outcomes.

c. What are the policy implications?
   i. If the counterfactual is correctly specified this question speaks directly to the appropriate design of social policies in support of child development, particularly education systems. But this can also illustrate the way in which different labour markets function, or different attitudes/institutions directed towards citizenship and belonging.
ii. Studies of this sort would be a natural complement to those addressing the previous question.

5. **How does migration influence the well-being of children compared to what those individual children would have experienced had they been born in the host country?**

   a. Why ask the question?
      i. This question is the book-end to the very first question, in that the comparison group is not peers in the origin country but those in the host country. As such together these two questions offer a broad omnibus measure of the influence of migration on child well-being
      ii. This question is also a broad litmus test of the capacity of a society to be socially inclusive.

   b. How in principle can it be answered?
      i. The counterfactual to this question is an individual with similar background but born in the host country.
      ii. A sibling might be considered as forming a counterfactual. Children of the same family who migrated and those who were born in the host country could be compared, but this would confound life-cycle issues and would have to assume that birth order is not important.
      iii. Other counterfactuals would include children from the same community and age but who differ depending where they were born. As such this incorporates the second generation children in the analysis, and can be extended to also include a comparison between them and third or higher generation children.

   c. What are the policy implications?
      i. This question abstracts from the process of migration and the impact it may have on the child. As such it focuses on the extent to which the host country offers equality of opportunity. The OECD has used this sort of design to effectively highlight the role that education systems can have. My co-authors and I have also used this design to address issues of generational mobility.

4. Summary