

Exploring children's experiences of migration: movement and family relationships



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Authors and acknowledgements

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Exploring children's experiences of migration: movement and family relationships

The focus on child migration is relatively new. Child migrants have been portrayed as lacking agency, passive victims of – at best – their parents' decisions – at worst – adult exploitation. Recent research evidence challenges this portrayal, revealing the diversity and complexity of children's experiences (e.g. Gardner, 2012; Hashim and Thorsen, 2011; Punch, 2009; Whitehead and Hashim, 2005). Migration features strongly on public policy agendas worldwide, resulting in an increase in research activity and literature focusing predominantly on labour migration and adults' experiences. This briefing paper highlights the main themes emerging from a recent seminar to explore the ways children's migration impacts upon their family relationships and vice-versa, whilst also considering the similarities and differences in experiences of children from across the world.

Terminology

There are a number of labels commonly used in migration literature that can impact on how child migrants are described and understood in policy and research terms.

A child who moves independently of his/her household can be described in a number of ways, such as child migrant, trafficked child, refugee or "separated, unaccompanied, autonomous" (Wells, 2011). The label used reveals assumptions and perceptions of the child and his/her status, as well as having implications for a child's rights to access support of various kinds. For example, if a child refugee was instead described as a 'looked after child', the focus of the child's care and support would shift, as well as the extent to which he/she is seen to exercise agency or not. Similarly, differences between origin and destination communities when defining the age of transition from childhood to youth and adulthood can have implications on a child's access to appropriate support.

Key points

- The ways child migrants are labelled in policy shape their experience and can include or exclude children from support.
- Differences in how childhood and young adulthood are defined, between origin and destination communities, can have implications for support.
- Children can, and do, play a role in migration decision-making and are not passive victims of adults' decisions.
- The concept of 'place' can become very complex for child migrants, encompassing both physical and imaginary places.
- Having to negotiate identity in a new community can be isolating and lonely, especially in places where there is a lack of ethnic diversity.
- Social networks are key routes into migration and can sometimes help child migrants settle.
- Use of communication technologies can help maintain family relationships but technologies are not universally available.

Who is a child migrant?

Whilst it is important to recognise the contentious nature of the term 'child migrant', in this briefing we have used it to describe a wide-range of experiences and causes, including:

- Those who travel on their own, and those travelling within a family unit.
- Those who are forced to move because of political, economic or social reasons.
- Those who move internally within a country, as well as those who move internationally.

Looking more broadly at migration terminology, the use of categories 'majority world' and 'minority world' suggest a simple division. Majority world refers to the poorest countries where the majority of the world's population live. These countries typically have low average incomes, high birth rates and a

¹Now, research programmes are being undertaken by the Development and Research Centre on Migration, Globalisation and Poverty at the University of Sussex, the Marie Curie Migrant Children Research Project at the University College Cork, and the UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre. Researchers from these programmes, and others from practice, policy and academic contexts, were brought together in the last seminar of the CRFR seminar series 'Exploring Children's Relationships across Majority and Minority Worlds' (funded by the Economic and Social Research Council).

low-carbon footprint. In comparison, the minority world are the richest countries, with populations who generally have more privileged, high-carbon lifestyles. Many countries, such as those of the former Communist block and those like Brazil, China, and India that are undergoing intense economic transition, cannot easily be placed into such rigid categories. In reality, there are substantial within-country inequalities that can affect migration experiences: socio-economic resources can constrain or facilitate choices with regard to children's migration experiences and subsequent impacts on their family relationships.

The terms we use matter. Terms can exclude or include children from particular types of services and legal protections: like the example of 'refugee' in comparison to 'looked after' children above. 'Child migrant' has taken on particular meanings in parts of the world, becoming associated with particular types of child mobility and not others, and leading to particular interventions or stigma. With this, other types of child mobility are ignored (e.g. 'child fostering'). The choice of terms has implications for services, legal protections, public perception and research agendas.

During the seminar, the term 'mobility' was offered as having the potential to encompass a diverse range of movements of people.

Who makes mobility decisions in families?

The seminar demonstrated the importance of exploring the extent to which children are key decision-makers (Hashim, 2011; Punch, 2011; Thorsen, 2011), or included in adult decisions (Tyrrell, 2011; de Lima, 2011; Moskal, 2011).

Households, like other social institutions such as work and education, are based on gendered and generational power relations that may constrain children's independent choices (Thorsen, 2011). Recognising the need to avoid viewing children simply as 'victims', Punch (2011) refers to the restricted opportunities and limited choice available to Bolivian young migrants. These limitations may be due to factors affecting society, such as the labour market, poverty rates, or available education as well as constraints placed upon them by their family. Relationships with adults and peers outside the family unit may also influence decisions regarding where children travel to. It is important to recognise therefore that decision making is a complex process, shaped by factors at different levels (from global to local) and involving many people with varying amounts of power and agency.

Place - the relationship between the material and the imaginary

The concept of 'place' can become very complex for child migrants, encompassing both the physical (providing a sense of belonging, etc) and imaginary (as sites of remembered relationships and experiences). For example, drawings produced by Polish child migrants in Scotland



“I placed under the tree all the important people: In Poland my father, brother and grandmum and granddad and in Edinburgh my mum. I won't place any things because the people are more important than the things. There are also my friends there in Poland and in Scotland.”

highlight the ways in which the imaginings of place and social relationships left behind are still important parts of their present identity (Moskal, 2011) (see above).

In de Lima's (2011) paper, the deep rural experience and the apparent homogeneity of Scottish Highland places and people resulted in a racialised sense of belonging for some migrants. The lack of presence of other people from ethnic minority groups and their own visibility (e.g. appearance, accents, language, etc) can make it difficult for children to sustain their complex identities, which often transcend both the world they have left behind and their new community. In this context maintaining connections, which are stretched across space and places, requires double effort. de Lima (2011) discusses the ways children and adults transform hostile places and spaces by 'home-making activities' such as celebrations of festivals, food and dance to bring together current location and culture with the places they have originated from. Moskal (2011) illustrates the ways in which adult migrants' connections with places and communities change when their children go to school. The everyday realities of going to school bind the adults and children to communities, highlighting the importance of neighbourhood places in creating spaces for important social interactions.

Social networks

Migration involves coping with leaving a familiar place and relationships behind, as well as establishing life in the

new destination. This creates a double emotional burden for migrant children as they strive to maintain existing, but distant, relationships as well as develop new ones (Tyrrell, 2011). Moskal's work (2011) with children suggested they saw migration as something that moved people away from friends and other family members and into situations that were isolated and lonely.

Social networks, such as friends, relatives or co-migrants, provide key routes into migration for many children, as well as enabling them to settle in at the new destinations (Thorsen, 2011; Punch, 2011; Wells, 2011). The role of informal networks was important in the papers on West Africa (Thorsen, 2011; Hashim, 2011) and Bolivia (Punch, 2011). Chain migration through social networks to particular destinations, such as Bolivian children migrating to farms in Argentina, result in stretched social relations between the destination and place of origin. By staying with friends or relatives from their origin communities, and finding jobs through them, they settle into a cultural and social world that is familiar and known, despite being in a new and unknown environment.

The role of social networks in the migration process is, however, contingent on the context of why the migration is taking place, status of the people involved ('migrant' or 'refugee' for example) as well as gender. These ideas have been explored by Wells (2011). She suggests that institutional links were often better resources for the young separated asylum seekers and refugees in her London study. Their status is dependent on fleeing from conflict and seeking leave to remain so that, rather than 'performing family', they 'perform family absence'. They must steadfastly maintain that they have no families; these social relations remain in the imaginary.

The impact of social networks on migrant children can be both protective as well as restrictive (Thorsen, 2011), raising the question of the extent to which children can and do exercise agency in these contexts and how best to conceptualise their relationships with adults, siblings and peers.

Maintaining relationships and the role of communication technologies

Access to communication can provide important opportunities to help maintain social relationships, both in real-time and in the use of technologies such as email which can be delayed. The use of such technologies has transformed the level of contact many young migrants and their families can maintain (de Lima, 2011; Moskal, 2011). Tyrrell (2011) in her study of Central and East European migrants to Ireland comments of the frequent use of internet technologies, such as Skype and Facebook, to maintain family relationships stretched across spatial boundaries. This is not universal, however, and many countries have limited availability and accessibility to such communication tools, predominantly because of the

Policy/research implications

- Children can have important and active roles in their own migration experiences, and are not always simply part of whole-family decisions.
- Access to communication technologies is important to child migrants, enabling them to maintain strong relationships with friends and family they have left behind.
- Having social networks to assist, both prior to migration and to welcome children into new communities, is an important part of the migration process.
- Future research agendas should include:
 - Cross cultural comparative studies on children's migration.
 - A focus on the impact migration has on family relationships in the context of both source and destination countries.
 - Longitudinal studies of the emotional impacts of separation, migration and disrupted family lives.
 - Further thinking about how child migrants are defined in policy terms.

lack of infrastructure (eg power, bandwidth) and costs. Developing technologies enabling cheap travel and instant communications via computer or mobile phone do enable some migrants to bring distant friends and families closer (Tyrrell, 2011). Wells' (2011) use of phone photos to record and discuss young refugee/asylum seeking men's social networks in London indicates the possibilities for using such technologies as methodological tools.

A future research agenda

This seminar highlights some similarities and differences in the ways in which migration shapes, disrupts or enhances family relationships across countries, regions and cultures. Further research is required to explore the impact of migration on the relationships children have with their families. A comparative focus on origin and destination communities will be important, as will acknowledgement of cross-cultural differences. The papers also show the need for research to capture longer time spans. For example, Moskal's (2011) and Tyrrell's (2011) papers are suggestive in giving access to particular early moments, when migration experiences and disrupted family relationships have negative emotional impacts on children. Larger scale longitudinal studies are key to understanding not only the emotional impacts of separation and migration, but also the changing experiences of migrant children over time and the longer-term implications for their family relations.