Parental Migration and the Emotional Well-Being of Children in Ghana, Nigeria, and Angola

Panel session 608: International migration and family dynamics

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BACKGROUND AND THEORETICAL FOCUS

In the last decades migration from the Global South to the North has led to increasing numbers of transnational families, where one or both parents migrate nationally or internationally while children stay in the origin country under the care of a caregiver, resulting in transnational child raising arrangements (TCRAs). Recently, transnational studies have focused on the phenomenon of families living across borders and have tended to highlight the negative impact on children’s general well-being outcomes (Carling 2007; Dreby 2007; Frank and Hummer 2002; Kandel and Kao 2001).

Studies indicate that children experience substantial behavioural problems (Wu 2004; Fan, Su et al. 2010) related to their separation from their migrant parent. Child psychology literature explains this through attachment theory – that is, emotional development occurs normally when the child has a stable relationship with one parent/caregiver (Bowlby 1958; Lee and Hankin 2009; Graham and Jordan 2011) or object relations – that is, children behave in the way that they experience their relationship with their parents (Ainsworth, Blehar et al. 1978).

Yet, despite the prevalence of TCRAs, most studies on children’s emotional outcomes are qualitative case studies and do not include control groups leaving a question as to whether the outcomes observed are particular to transnational families (Mazzucato 2008). Furthermore, most studies obtain information on children’s well-being from adults’ assessments (teachers, parents,

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caregivers) (Mazzucato & Schans, 2008). The limited research on children’s emotional effects of living in transnational families emphasizes the trade-off between economic gains and emotional wellbeing (Orellana, Thorne et al. 2001) with emotional hardship seeming to tip the balance (Elmhirst 2007). In the later event, children are more liable to suffer from severe anger, feelings of abandonment, being unloved and worried (Parrenas 2005).

This paper provides a systematic analysis of survey data on emotional wellbeing outcomes of Ghanaian, Nigerian, and Angolan school children and youths between the ages of 11 and 21 living in transnational families by comparing them to children not living in transnational families. The aim is to investigate whether being in a transnational family has emotional well-being outcomes for children and if so, what characteristics of their child raising arrangements lead to the observed outcomes.

This study employs a complex indexed measure for children’s emotional wellbeing – the Strength and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) (Goodman 1997; Goodman 1999). The SDQ is a self-reporting scale filled-in by children/youths that measures the emotional outcomes on a scale of 25 emotional symptoms. The final index is an added measure of 20 emotional symptoms which generate the total difficulties score (TDS) (0-40). The SDQ has been widely used also in non-Western contexts and has acceptable reliability and validity (Palmieri and Smith 2007).

**THE DATA AND SAMPLE**

This analysis is conducted in the framework of the TCRAf-Eu² project. The analysis is based on a large-scale survey conducted among secondary school children in 3 African countries: Ghana (N=2,760), Nigeria (N=2168), and Angola (N=2243) in 2010/11. The sample is composed of children living with both biological parents, as well as children living in different types of transnational child raising arrangements (TCRAs). In all countries, the survey was conducted in urban areas with a high out migration profile. A stratified sampling procedure was used to select children/youths from public and private, low and high quality schools in each surveyed area. The data contain over 190 indicators pertaining to TCRAs, socio-economic characteristics, educational performance, health, and emotional well-being.

**RESEARCH METHODS**

The paper includes both descriptive and inferential analyses. The descriptive statistics summarize the most relevant characteristics influencing emotional outcomes. Independent variables include 4 clusters of indicators: child demographics (gender, age, ethnicity, religion), family characteristics (education parents, age parents, marital status), child’s living condition (self-assessed living condition, number of people living with the child), and different child raising arrangements settings (who is the migrant parent, location of the migrant parent, child’s caregiver, stability of caregiving arrangement). The effects of these characteristics are tested by means of advanced regression techniques (multiple regressions models) to observe the interlinked causal relations between these clusters of indicators and children’s emotional outcomes.

**PRELIMINARY FINDINGS**

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Results are based on a preliminary set of regression analyses. Overall, we find that being in a TCRA does not necessarily negatively impact children’s emotional wellbeing. Rather, specific TCRA characteristics are found to have a negative effect. Results show that children are associated with greater emotional difficulties when the mother or both parents have migrated, live with nobody or non-kin, incur changes in their caregiving situation, and have their migrant parent(s) away internationally. There is also evidence that particular types of caregivers (grandparents, uncles, relatives) add to the likelihood of developing emotional problems among children in Angola. In all countries, negative emotional well-being is further associated with low economic conditions and transnational families. In some cases, controlling for living conditions of children, the effects of TCRA variables on emotional well-being become insignificant. More work will be conducted to refine, control for, and enhance the available characteristics in relation to emotional well-being of children in our data.

REFERENCES


