

Migrant Well-Being is a Multilevel, Dynamic, Value Dependent Phenomenon

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Abstract Research demonstrates that the well-being of migrants is a multilevel, dynamic, and value dependent phenomenon. It is multilevel because risk and protective factors are present at various ecological planes, from the individual to the social sphere. It is dynamic because objective and subjective risk and protective factors interact across ecological levels, creating favorable or unfavorable conditions for migrants to adjust to the new surroundings. Finally, it is value dependent because access to resources is conditioned by norms of justice prevalent in the host society. Findings from this special section on acculturation are combined with previous literature to support the three claims advanced in this article.

Keywords Migration · Well-being · Adaptation · Immigration

Introduction

I have trilingual dreams, roots in four continents, and five countries I call home. I was born in Cordoba, Argentina, and have lived in Tel Aviv, Winnipeg, Waterloo (Canada), Melbourne (Australia), Nashville and Miami (United States of America). I cannot help but approach this issue from both scientific and personal perspectives. I have lived in five countries and migrated four times, which probably makes me a professional immigrant. The first time I migrated from one country to another was due to political upheaval and social violence. The next three times were due to exciting

opportunities in life. As a Jew in my native Argentina I was never at home. In Israel, Canada, Australia, and the United States, I was an immigrant lucky enough to study, get good jobs and participate in society in meaningful ways. Some host communities afforded me and my family great comfort and social support. Others were less welcoming and perhaps even a little hostile. In some places my accent was not a problem, in others, like Nashville, the locals had trouble understanding me, even though I had been speaking pretty good English for nearly 20 years.

All these experiences helped me to connect with the struggle of migrants reported in this special section. As a community psychologist, I have worked with migrants coping to learn a new language, yet thriving at the same time. It is then from both personal and professional experience that I approach this topic.

Upon reading the contributions to the special section, it struck me that most of them dealt primarily with efforts to improve the well-being of migrants. Structural, cultural, and organizational changes in the host communities were designed primarily to serve the newcomers. Very little information was provided on how local communities benefit from migrants and their customs. It is for that reason that I chose to focus my analysis on migrant well-being.

The papers in the special section make the point that migrant well-being is a multilevel, interactive, and value dependent phenomenon. In this article I draw on the preceding contributions to substantiate these three claims.

Migrant Well-Being is a Multilevel Phenomenon

Well-being is a positive state of affair in individuals, relationships, organizations, communities, and the natural environment, brought about by the simultaneous and

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balanced satisfaction of material and psychological needs; and by the behavioral manifestation of material and psychological justice in these five ecological domains. The first part of this definition builds on some of my previous writings (Prilleltensky and Prilleltensky 2006; Prilleltensky 2005), whereas the second part dealing with the expectation of justice is more recent (Prilleltensky 2007a, b). My argument concerning the first part of the definition is that people, relationships, organizations, communities, and the natural environments are all sites of well-being. In other words, well-being is not just a personal phenomenon, but a social and ecological one as well. Organizations, communities, and the natural ecology can have their own well-being. Each site can have distinct sources of well-being and a variety of strategies to improve its respective wellness.

Upon close examination of the sources and strategies for well-being, it became apparent to me that the resources needed for thriving and striving are tied to justice, and that justice is not just about material goods, but also about psychological goods. In this section I will concentrate on risks and protective factors for migrant well-being at various levels of analysis. I will deal with the issue of justice in detail in the third and final portion of the manuscript.

The papers in the special section elucidate migrant well-being at various levels of analysis. At the individual level, the paper by Smith (this section) on Utica demonstrates that immigrants who were eager to improve their lot in life also helped the local community by investing in depressed housing stock and in revitalizing the area. Immigrants also helped themselves and the community by taking difficult jobs that others may not have wanted. The work ethic and motivation of migrants was welcome by the community, which, in turn, reciprocated with favorable attitudes reflected in behavioral flexibility toward the newcomers. In turn, the paper by Dinh, Weinstein, Nemon, and Rondeau (this section) asserts that hosts' awareness of discrimination against Asian Americans leads to more understanding of their struggles to cope and thrive in the United States. Still at the individual level, the paper by Hsiao and Wittig (this section) points out that with curricular interventions, ethnic identity exploration in a variety of groups can increase. This exploration might lead to enhanced appreciation of one's background and communal pride, not only among newcomers, but among dominant group members as well.

At the relational level, Smith's paper emphasizes the importance of patience and empathy in relating to the newcomers' struggles, whereas Dinh et al. support the contact theory hypothesis, whereby increased exchanges with other groups lead to enhanced mutual understanding. The paper by Dominguez and Maya-Jariego (this section), in turn, reminds us that bonding social capital is as crucial

as bridging social capital. According to Putnam (2001), the former kind relates to social capital built on relationships with people from similar backgrounds, whereas the latter pertains to contact with dissimilar groups. Dominguez and Maya-Jariego rightly point out that both for hosts and newcomers it is easier to relate to people with similar ethnic and geographical backgrounds. Their research reminds us of the challenges articulated by Putnam in achieving the ideal balance between bridging and bonding social capital.

At the organizational level, Sakamoto, Wei and Truong (this section) note the positive effects of hiring Chinese professional staff in human services to serve that community in Toronto. In Utica, New York, Smith documents several changes made by hospitals, schools, and refugee services to meet the needs of newcomers. Though insufficient to cope with demand, the cases of Toronto and Utica reflect efforts to change organizational practices to support the transition of immigrants. While prompted by the need to serve better the immigrant community, these changes have the potential to raise awareness within the host community of diversity and justice issues.

Multiple risk and protective factors are present at the community level. Sakamoto et al. identify cultural norms within the Chinese community that make it hard for their members to seek help. Within that group, some members had a hard time understanding what social workers do, on top of reluctance to seek outside supports. Hsiao and Wittig found intra-ethnic stereotypes and discrimination within the Hispanic community. Stereotypes also played a role in the Torontonians Chinese community. Further to the challenge of bridging cultures, some newcomers have to deal with rejection from their own ethnic groups. But protective factors are also present at the community level. Structured interactions with newcomers (Dinh et al.) as well as identification with their struggles (Smith) can lead to mutual appreciation and respect for diversity.

At the societal level, educational policies can block recognition of professional credentials (Sakamoto et al.), unleashing chain reactions associated with underemployment. Housing policies can be equally troublesome when there is limited stock for low income families. In Utica, the depressed housing market actually helped the refugees from Eastern Europe, who helped to revitalize the area.

When we add the contributions of the special section to what we already know about risk and protective factors at multiple levels (e.g., Easley Allen and Easley 2006; MacLachlan 2006; Prilleltensky 1993; Toole 2006; Totikidis and Prilleltensky 2006), we can see a vast array of variables impacting migrant well-being. Table 1 organizes risk and protective factors according to four general levels: individual, family/relational, organizational/communal, and societal/ecological.

Table 1 Risk and protective factors for migrant well-being at multiple levels

Levels	Protective factors	Risk factors
Individual	Psychological preparation	Loss and grief
	Physical health	Guilt and shame
	Migration by choice	Status inconsistency
	Friendships	Life change events
	Language knowledge	Homesickness PTSD
Family/relational	Good parenting	Absence of family
	Mutual support	Family expectations
	Good mental health	Marital conflict
		Isolation Intergenerational conflict
Organizational/communal	Child care	Acculturation stress
	Adequate housing	Loss of social network
	Cohesion and support	Marginality
	Access to health care	Bigotry
	Culturally sensitive	Iatrogenic morbidity
	Services	Role strain
	Language preparation	Unemployment and
	Bridging social capital	Underemployment Absence of services
		Poverty
Societal/ecological	Environmental health	Toxins
	Employment	Air quality
	Justice	Forced migration
	Safety nets	Injustice
	Multiculturalism	Exclusion
	Quality education	Discrimination

Migrant Well-Being is a Dynamic Phenomenon

According to the definition of well-being stated above, there are material or objective conditions, and psychological or subjective conditions leading, in turn, to objective or subjective well-being outcomes. An example of positive objective well-being is physical health, whereas an example of negative objective well-being is incapacitating illnesses. Positive subjective well-being is self-esteem and sense of control over life. Negative subjective well-being is lack of control and low self-efficacy or internal, stable, and global attributions for adverse events (Grob 2000).

We have, then, possible interactions among negative and positive objective and subjective conditions and negative and positive objective and subjective outcomes for well-being. Theoretically, there are numerous interactions among all these variables. Two examples illustrate the complexity of these dynamic relationships. After we review them, we will explore how this type of analysis might be applied to migrant well-being.

The first example pertains to a phenomenon I call “happy but dead.” In the nineties, Colombians reported the

highest level of happiness in the world (Haller and Hadler 2004) (positive subjective well-being) at the same time that they were experiencing the highest levels of violent deaths, crime, and kidnappings in the world (negative objective well-being). Some theorists explain (Haller and Hadler 2004) that in the nineties there was a renewed sense of hope and optimism in Colombia that might explain the elevated happiness despite the death and destruction around them.

The second example pertains to a phenomenon called by Marmot (2004) the social gradient. In both Sweden and the United Kingdom, when you compare people who completed higher degrees, or achieved higher occupational status with those with lesser education and status, the former are healthier and live longer (Marmot 2004). The comparisons were not between very rich or educated people and very poor and uneducated ones, but rather among people with doctorates, master degrees, undergraduate, and so on. Similarly in the occupational realm, comparisons were conducted among executives, professionals, clerical, and unskilled. In both instances, the comparisons were among people who were similar (higher education or pretty

high levels of employment) in many respects but varied in profile along a gradient and not a dichotomous variable. These were not people on extremes but rather along a continuum. What the research demonstrates is that there is a social gradient according to which people with higher education and social status always achieve better health outcomes than those in the rank immediately below them.

Despite good incomes and financial conditions, both Swedes and English people in lower echelons did worse than those immediately above them. Keep in mind that these people were making good money and did not face grave social problems, but still, compared to the group immediately above them, they suffered from more health problems and died early. This social gradient demonstrates that relative deprivation is at play here. It is not absolute deprivation that is causing premature death and illness but rather the envy and stress associated with being in a lower position relative to somebody else. Marmot claims that the favorable financial situation (positive objective conditions) was undermined by the relative lack of control that people of lower occupational status experienced (negative subjective conditions), leading to premature death and illness (negative objective well-being).

In the field of migration, there is an enhanced chance that interactions among objective and subjective conditions and well-being might lead to untoward outcomes for immigrants. In the papers by Sakamoto et al. and Dominguez and Maya-Jariego, negative objective conditions such as geographical distance from same ethnic group and lack of funding for services and no recognition of educational credentials might interact with intra-ethnic prejudice and stereotyping to produce negative objective and subjective well-being. On the protective side, it is possible that supportive communities like Utica and its residents help in buffering the stress associated with migration, leading to positive subjective well-being, or at the very least to a reduction in the adverse effects of risk factors.

Although the special section refers to acculturation and the relationship among host and migrant communities, we have to keep in mind that it is very hard to generalize

across host and migrant groups (James and Prilleltensky 2002). The social and historical background of Utica made it more conducive for newcomers to feel welcome than other regions of the country. Other parts of the United States are less likely to open their arms to newcomers. Civilian vigilantes along the Mexican border make it abundantly clear that economic refugees are not welcome in that part of the world.

Given the diversity of host and migrant communities, it is difficult to predict with accuracy how their relationship might evolve. What is clear is that such a relationship is very dynamic and given to multiple permutations, depending on the geographical, historical, and political contexts.

Migrant Well-Being is a Value Dependent Phenomenon

At the outset of this paper I claimed that well-being must include social justice. In this section I argue my case. Using the case of migrants we can identify, as I do in Table 2, positive and negative objective and subjective signs of well-being. The presence or absence of these signs depends, to a large extent, on the presence or absence of certain values exhibited by the host community welcoming newcomers. Thus, at the individual level, positive signs such as health and sense of control depend on positive values such as self-determination and autonomy. These values, in turn, may be regarded as goods subject to the distributive laws of social justice (Nussbaum 2006). If we define social justice as the fair and equitable allocation of burden, resources, and power in society, then autonomy and the ensuing sense of control and health associated with them are transitively dependent on social justice.

In simple terms, the opportunities afforded individuals to exercise control over their lives depends on social justice norms. Some parents, employers, and governments afford their children, reports and citizens more or less control over their affairs. If children, subordinates and citizens deserve

Table 2 Migrant well-being as a value dependent phenomenon

	Sites of Well-being				
	Individual	Relational	Organizational	Communal	Environmental
Objective signs	+Health	+Networks	+Resources	+Social capital	+Clean air
	–Illness	–Isolation	–Lack of resources	–Lack of trust	–Pollution
Subjective signs	+Efficacy	+Voice	+Support	+Belonging	+Safety
	–Lack of control	–Repression	–Isolation	–Rejection	–Fear
Values as source and strategy	+Autonomy	+Caring	+Participation	+Diversity	+Protection of resources
	–Lack of power	–Neglect	–Marginality	–Discrimination	–Depletion of resources
Justice as source and strategy	My due/our due	Your due/our due	Its due/our due	Their due/our due	Nature's due/our due

control over their affairs but are not given that opportunity, we can justifiably argue that justice has not been served.

Justice is alternatively defined as to each his or her due (Brighouse 2004; Fleischacker 2004; Prilleltensky in press). In Table 2 we can see that for each site of well-being there is a different entity claiming its due. As an individual I wish to claim my due. In a relationship I have to pay attention to your due. When it comes to an organization, it is appropriate for it to claim its due, and so on. But notice also that for each site, the due entitled to each entity is accompanied by the words *our due*. This is in order to avert the threat of individualism or collective egoism. If I worry exclusively about my due and neglect our collective due, I run the risk of engaging in self-centered behavior, either for my own personal benefit or the collective benefit of my own group. In the case of every entity in Table 2, it is important to note that our due must accompany that entity's due. Applied to the case of migrants, bonding social capital might be considered part of my due, but bridging social capital might be regarded as part of our due. It is perfectly justified for migrants and host communities to wish to commune with like-minded people, but in the absence of bridging social capital, we forget our collective well-being and the duty to balance our needs with the needs of others.

In some of the examples discussed in the special section, such as Utica and Toronto, there were efforts to distribute resources more fairly. The presence of newcomers might trigger reflection on the part of the host community as to how it treats people from different backgrounds. The extent to which the presence of newcomers makes a lasting impression on host residents is not documented in the special section, but having lived near Toronto for nine years I can attest that it is one of the most integrated cities I know. I cannot attribute causation to this statement. We do not know whether migrants come to Toronto because it is friendly to migrants, or whether their presence makes Toronto a kind place. Perhaps it is both. In the Canadian context, however, it is important to keep in mind that the federal government has been promoting multiculturalism for decades now, as opposed to melting pot policies prevalent in the United States. It is likely that multiculturalism is embraced more strongly where migrants reside, creating a magnet for newcomers to settle.

Conclusion

I tried to build a case for the argument that migrant well-being is a multilevel, dynamic, and value dependent phenomenon. The multiple factors involved in host-migrant relationships interact in complex ways. Objective and subjective conditions interplay to produce positive or

negative objective and subjective outcomes. The balance among positive and negative conditions is not a chance phenomenon, but a value dependent phenomenon. How we allocate resources is not a chance occurrence either. Individuals, groups and societies choose to distribute resources according to notions of justice. Martha Nussbaum (2006) recently argued that “in this increasingly interdependent world, we need to consider issues of justice raised by inequalities between rich and poor nations that affect the life chances of their citizens” (2006, p. 18). The issue involves a “serious asymmetry of power and capacity” between one national group and “some dominant group” (2006, p. 22). These dynamics operate not only across countries but within countries as well. Migrant well-being is not a matter of chance, or charity, but a matter of justice. Host communities would do well to consider their obligations to newcomers, and treat immigration as an opportunity to reflect on their aspiration to become a just society.

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