The Well-Being of Immigrant Children in Canada

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Proposal for Parallel Session 8B: Immigration and Well-Being

Abstract
Twelve to seventeen year-old children born outside Canada have lower levels of self-reported life satisfaction and are less likely to feel a strong sense of ‘belonging’ to their local community than native-born teens (based on preliminary analysis using public use data from the Canada Community Health Survey for 2005). This is troubling from a policy perspective. Not only might we be concerned about equity in the present if immigrant children have lower levels of self-assessed well-being than their native-born peers, but since evidence suggests that lower self-assessed quality of life is predictive of future negative outcomes for children (Huebner, Funk and Gilman 2000), we should also worry about the future.

Although there is a rapidly expanding economics literature studying subjective reports of life satisfaction for adults (e.g., Diener, et al., 2009 for a recent overview), the literature on child happiness is much smaller though children are capable of providing meaningful assessments of their own quality of life from about the age of eight (Ben-Arieh, 2005 or Huebner, 2004). In particular, very little research has focused on understanding self-assessed well-being of immigrant children (though see Aronowitz, 1984; Beiser, et al., 2002; Zhou, 1997). In this paper, we are interested in how immigrant children themselves experience well-being and belonging. Specifically, we ask, first, “why are Canadian immigrant children less happy than native-born children?” and “why don’t they feel they belong?” A second goal is to ask “are immigrant children who have lived in Canada longer happier?” That is, do the negative associations between immigrant status and self-assessed well-being appear to diminish over time? In both cases, we hope our results might suggest policy directions with the potential to improve quality of life for child immigrants.

Several hypotheses seem plausible explanations for lower levels of well-being for immigrant children. First, adolescents with lower socioeconomic status have been found to have lower levels of subjective well-being (e.g., Ash and Huebner 2001; Burton and Phipps, 2008b); as is also true for adults (e.g., Barrington-Leigh and Helliwell, 2008) not only absolute income but also relative income has important associations with the self-assessed well-being of young teens (Burton and Phipps, 2008b). Children from immigrant families have, on average, lower incomes than otherwise similar native-born children (Burton and Phipps, 2009). Lower absolute and relative incomes may thus help to explain the lower self-assessed well-being of immigrant children.

Second, social relationships have particularly important associations with adolescent subjective well-being (e.g., Burton and Phipps, 2008a; Nickerson and Nagle 2004 and 2005; Ma and Huebner 2008). If immigrant children have moved away from extended family and close friends, this may also help to explain lower reported levels of well-
being; on the other hand, if children have moved to re-join extended family friends, this should be less an issue.

Third, in the literature on adult happiness, participation in social groups outside the family has also been emphasized (Helliwell and Putnam 2004). For young teens, participation in extra-curricular activities has been found to correlate positively with subjective well-being (e.g., Gilman 2001). If immigrant children participate less in such social groups (e.g., perhaps due to language or cultural barriers), this may also help to explain lower reported feelings of belonging and over-all life satisfaction. For each of these three potential explanations, we might expect to see diminishing importance as years in Canada increase (e.g., if the child’s language skills improve, if family income catches up).

Finally, changes in the source countries of more recent immigrants to Canada mean that 75 percent of immigrant children are non-white in the 2005 CCHS public use sample. Discrimination potentially faced by immigrant children from visible minority groups is a fourth plausible explanation for lower levels of well-being and lack of a sense of belonging among children born outside of Canada. To examine these hypotheses, we plan to use the Canada Community Health Survey (CCHS), a very large cross-sectional survey carried out by Statistics Canada, representative of the Canadian population aged 12 and over; we will focus on respondents aged 12 through 17. For children, interviews were only carried out if the privacy of the child’s responses could be guaranteed (i.e., parents were not able to see the child’s responses). Central to our purposes, respondents are asked to assess their satisfaction with life over-all (on a 5-point scale) as well as the strength of their sense of ‘belonging to the local community’ (on a 4-point scale).

The size of the CCHS is an advantage for this project. In the public use version of the 2005 CCHS, we have, for example, self-assessed life satisfaction and belonging for nearly 7000 children. But, in order to maximize sample size we will pool 3 cycles of these data (2002, 2005 and 2007). As well, we plan to utilize master files of the CCHS within the Atlantic Research Data Centre in order that we know exact year of immigration, country of birth and the child’s ethnic background. The master files also allow us to merge in data from the 2006 census describing attributes of the child’s neighbourhood at the level of the ‘forward sortation area’ (first 3 digits of postal code). As examples, we will know median neighbourhood income and ethnic composition of the neighbourhood.

Our proposed methodology is a simple de-composition analysis. We will estimate ordered probit models for both ‘life satisfaction’ and ‘belonging’ and assess how much of the difference in child well-being can be explained by differences in characteristics; how much can be explained by differences in correlations between characteristics and well-being for immigrant compared to non-immigrant children. We hope to extend the analysis to distinguish, for example, white and non-white immigrants (and further, if sample size allows).

Characteristics included in the CCHS include: child’s age at arrival, country of origin, ethnic background (and visible minority status) and (self-assessed) knowledge of English or French, age, gender and health status of the child, family structure, region of residence, own family income, median income in the neighbourhood of residence,
percent of population in neighbourhood sharing respondent’s ethnic background, hours spent visiting family and friends, frequency of participation in church and school groups as well as involvement with sports teams, in swimming or dancing classes, for example. For variables expected to diminish in importance as time in Canada increases (e.g., language), we will look at interactions with years of residence. We will examine gender differences throughout.

We hope these analyses will contribute to the existing literature on more traditional economic outcomes for immigrant children (e.g., Aydemir et al., 2005; Galloway et al., 2004); links to the literature on the social exclusion of children (e.g., Micklewright, 2002) should also be evident.

References

1 Given that children of immigrants are doing well in terms of education (e.g., Aydemir, Chen and Corak, 2005), yet another hypothesis is that children from immigrant families face more pressure from parents to succeed at school. It is not possible to assess this hypothesis using the CCHS data, though it would be interesting to do so using the National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth. The NLSCY also asks children directly about experience of discrimination. This would be another interesting avenue to explore.

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