

The Impact of Migrant Selectivity on Cognitive Skills, Non-Cognitive Skills and Academic Outcomes in the Second Generation

Per Engzell, per.engzell@sofi.su.se
SOFI, Stockholm University

*Submission to the Population Association of America 2015 Annual Meeting.
A full paper is available from the author on request.*

April 4, 2015

“[M]igrants are not a random sample of the population at origin” (Lee 1966: 56). This phrase, or versions of it, are heard oft enough in migration literature to sound trite. Yet much work remains to integrate this insight into the study of intergenerational assimilation. One way in which migrants might differ from stayers is in socioeconomic status, which, once in the destination, is often surprisingly difficult to gauge in conventional datasets. As they might have shouldered a burden of downward social mobility in moving, current occupational standing is unlikely to fully reflect pre-migration status (Akresh 2008, Chiswick et al. 2005, Rooth and Ekberg 2006). In contrast, education does not change as a consequence of migration, but its interpretation might (Feliciano 2005b, Ichou 2014). Because countries differ in average education, a given education level can signal a different standing in sending and receiving countries.

This paper addresses migrants’ educational selectivity and what it implies for the trajectories of their children in the new destination. I focus on Sweden, with a highly diverse immigrant population in terms of ethnic and socioeconomic makeup. My data comprise a representative sample of more than 3,500 parents from over 100 countries of origin. Drawing on a combination of survey data (the Children of Immigrants Longitudinal Survey in Four European Countries), administrative registers, and the Barro-Lee Dataset on worldwide education (Barro and Lee 2013), I construct a measure of each parent’s percentile position within the education distribution of the origin country, relative to their own gender and cohort. I compare this measure with absolute measures of education – years of schooling and credentials obtained – and assess the association of all these with a range of academic outcomes in the second generation.

Analyses from other contexts suggest that immigrants are more often positively selected on education than not (Feliciano 2005a, Lessard-Phillips et al. 2014), and that the degree of selectivity impacts favorably on their offspring’s education (Feliciano 2005b, 2006, van de Werfhorst et al. 2014, Ichou 2014). Yet, the precise pathways through which this occurs remain opaque. This stems in equal parts from a lack of detailed study of child trajectories, and a lack of understanding about the patterns that drive migrant self-selection in the first place. Economic models (Borjas 1999, Dustmann and Glitz 2011) see migratory decisions as the outcome of rational economic assessments in the light of earnings potential, often conceptualized in terms of

innate ability. Against this we may pitch a sociological model, which sees pre-migratory access to socioeconomic resources as crucial in determining migration (Feliciano 2005b).

Like previous studies I am unable to assess directly what drives migrant self-selection, so my approach instead relies on the wide range of outcomes I observe in the second generation. The idea here is that whatever traits determine selection, they will be passed on and manifest themselves similarly in the next generation. Because I am able to unpack offspring's educational attainment in unusual detail, the results are also indirectly informative about the resources that migrant parents bring. For example, if innate ability is an important driver of migration, assuming that ability is to some part inherited, we should expect this to reflect on curriculum-independent measures of cognitive ability. Conversely, if socioeconomic resources determine migration and assimilation is driven mainly by status reproduction motives, we should find the strongest impact of selectivity on children's attitudes and aspirations.

I estimate a structural equation model on some ten different latent and manifest outcomes drawn from more than twenty items of survey and register data. Results show that that when parents' absolute years of schooling are controlled for, educational selectivity (i.e., parents' relative position in the origin distribution) exerts none or even a negative association with indicators of cognitive and language skills. The associations with non-cognitive traits, school behavior, and teacher-assigned grades are moderate. The strongest impact of selectivity is instead found on attitudinal measures, aspirations for occupational status, and actual transition to academic education. The results are robust to a number of controls and alternative specifications. This seems to suggest that educational selectivity in migration largely results from selection on socioeconomic resources, and that a status reproduction motive is an important mechanism whereby it influences outcomes in the second generation.

References

- Akresh, I. R. (2008). Occupational Trajectories of Legal US Immigrants: Downgrading and recovery. *Population and Development Review*, 34(3), 435-456.
- Barro, R. J., & Lee, J. W. (2013). A New Data Set of Educational Attainment in the World, 1950–2010. *Journal of Development Economics*, 104, 184-198. doi: 10.1016/j.jdeveco.2012.10.001
- Borjas, G. J. (1999). The Economic Analysis of Immigration. Ch. 28 in D. Card, O. Ashenfelter (eds.), *Handbook of Labor Economics* Volume 3, Part A, pp. 1697–1760. Elsevier.
- Chiswick, B. R., Lee, Y. L., & Miller, P. W. (2005). A Longitudinal Analysis of Immigrant Occupational Mobility: A test of the immigrant assimilation hypothesis. *International Migration Review*, 39(2), 332-353.
- Dustmann, C., & Glitz, A. (2011). Migration and Education. Ch. 4 in Hanushek, E. Machin, S., & Woessmann, L. (eds.), *Handbook of the Economics of Education*, Vol. 4. Elsevier, pp. 327-439.
- Feliciano, C. (2005a). Educational Selectivity in US Immigration: How Do Immigrants Compare to Those Left Behind? *Demography*, 42(1), 131-152.
- Feliciano, C. (2005b). Does Selective Migration Matter? Explaining Ethnic Disparities in Educational Attainment among Immigrants' Children. *International Migration Review*, 39(4), 841-871.
- Feliciano, C. (2006). Beyond the Family: The Influence of Pre-migration Group Status on the Educational Expectations of Immigrants' Children. *Sociology of Education*, 79(October): 281–303.
- Ichou, M. (2014). Who They Were There: Immigrants' Educational Selectivity and Their Children's Educational Attainment. *European Sociological Review*, early access, doi: 10.1093/esr/jcu071.
- Lee, E. S. (1966). A Theory of Migration. *Demography*, 3(1), 47-57.
- Lessard-Phillips, L., Fleischmann, F., & van Elsas, E. (2014). Ethnic Minorities in Ten Western countries: Migration flows, policies and institutional differences. Ch. 2 in Heath A. F. and Brinbaum Y. (eds.), *Unequal Attainment: Ethnic Educational Inequalities in Ten Western Countries*. Oxford University Press.
- Rooth, D. O., & Ekberg, J. (2006). Occupational Mobility for Immigrants in Sweden. *International Migration*, 44(2), 57-77.
- van de Werfhorst, H. G., van Elsas, E., & Heath, A. F. (2014). Educational Disadvantages of Second Generation Immigrants in Ten Nations. Ch. 9 in Heath A. F. and Brinbaum Y. (eds.), *Unequal Attainment: Ethnic Educational Inequalities in Ten Western Countries*. Oxford University Press.