YOUTH MOBILITY AND WELL-BEING:
Transitions and Intersections

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Introduction

This introductory paper, reflecting the rubric of the special issue, brings together two themes that have recently become prominent in migration research: a focus on *youth mobilities*, and a concern to analyse the process and outcomes of migration through a *well-being* lens. The five papers that follow approach this intersection in a variety of European contexts and from a plurality of theoretical, methodological and thematic angles. The special issue is a product of the Horizon 2020 YMOBILITY research project on 'New European Youth Mobilities', which ran from 2015 to 2018, and most of the papers were first presented at a dedicated session on Youth Mobility and Well-being at the IMISCOE Annual Conference in Rotterdam, 28–30 June 2017.[1]

The purpose of this editors' introduction is to 'map the fields', which we do by organising our presentation in the following way. In the next section, we open up a discussion on the nature and diversity of youth mobility, looking, in particular, at the way in which young people's international mobility interfaces with their youth transitions to 'adulthood'. Then, we review the well-being approach to migration and mobility, with special reference to youth mobilities. The final section of the paper summarises key findings from the five papers that follow.

Youth mobilities and transitions

The spatial mobility of young people has attracted increasing attention in migration scholarship in recent years (Cairns 2014; King 2018; King *et al.* 2016). This literature, and

the papers in this special issue, make us recognise that 'being young and mobile' is a very complex intersection, which is always, and inevitably, contextual and situational. On the one hand, there is a policy assumption, reflected in everyday discourse too, that international migration, or too much mobility within a country, can be disruptive for children and young people – a view that is critiqued by Mazzucato and Schams (2011). On the other hand, there is an alternative construction of youth mobility as positive, either because it enables young people to escape from negative situations (in terms of poverty, unemployment or difficult family circumstances), or because it is a route to faster maturation in terms of accessing better education and career opportunities (King *et al.* 2016).

Most of the qualitatively orientated papers in this issue focus on understandings of reflexivity, in other words, the ways in which research participants formulate and reflect on the realities of international mobility for themselves. We question the taken-for-granted approach that examines the lives and mobilities of young people in a linear, chronological fashion. Taking the examples of three papers that follow (by Çelikaksoy & Wadensjö; Kılınç; and Lulle & Bankovska), we highlight how youth mobility can be analysed in enriching ways by including reflections on childhood and adolescent experiences from the current, much-later positioning in the life course. We also want to stress that 'youth' is an intrinsically relational category, reflected off meanings associated with childhood on the one hand and adulthood on the other. This relationality becomes even more complex when it is affected in a variegated way through various social and geographic mobilities, positionings, as well as family and social systems. Hence, we envisage that youth is less an age-defined life stage (say 16–30 years) and more of a state of 'being', which – however – is not static; rather, it is seen as a process of 'becoming' a younger person, followed by a transition of 'unbecoming' young (cf. Worth 2009).

There have been important advances in theorising youth–adult transitions through the traditional 'markers' of adulthood: moving from education and living with parents, to work, and then progressing to full-time stable employment, building a career, alongside partnership formation, establishing a 'home' and a family-based household (see, *inter alia*, Arnett 2004; Ball, Macrae & Magurie 2000; Cairns 2010). Other recent literature, however, suggests more complex transitions: less of a linear and staged progression (as outlined above), more based on uncertainty (Blatterer 2007; Blossfield *et al.* 2006), and more likely to be 'decoupled' or even reversed (Du Bois-Reymond & López Blasco 2003; Hörschelmann 2011). Diverse reasons underpin the trend towards more de-standardised youth transitions: precarious social and economic conditions, especially labour market de-structuring; lack of support from societal institutions (fewer apprenticeships, less welfare assistance, general social atomisation, etc.); and a conscious postponement of adult roles and responsibilities, encouraged by consumer lifestyle products that purportedly prolong 'youth' (Hardgrove, Rootham & McDowell 2015). Moreover, in deregulated labour markets and with the flexibilisation of work, precarity does not necessarily end by becoming an adult chronologically (McWilliams & Bonet 2016).

Such decoupled youth trajectories and transitions become more complex with the addition of spatial mobility, especially international migration. Although grounding these

more de-standardised patterns in theories of the life course remains a valid approach (Kulu & Milewski 2007), the addition of migration also makes these transitions less linear. Just to cite some concrete examples, working in the home country might be necessary to finance a programme of study abroad; or working for a period abroad might be the best way of earning quick money to support university studies at home. Both are examples of how international mobility interfaces with 'reverse' transitions, from employment to education, rather than the norm of education to employment. And although income maximisation and career building might be the rational choice motivation for such a strategy, not to be forgotten are the ways that youth mobilities are also framed by other aspirations and desires, relating to lifestyle, culture, as well as personal and romantic relationships (King 2002, 2018).

Well-being and migration

Alongside the intertwined concepts of youth transitions and youth mobility, we bring in an emphasis on human well-being, an approach to evaluating migration outcomes which has been gaining traction in recent years, spearheaded by the pioneering research on Peruvian migrants by Katie Wright (2012).

Instead of a focus on what migrants lack (although this might be studied via the flipside concept of 'ill-being'), we want to place theoretical focus on what young migrants aspire to and what they do to pursue and achieve what is, in their eyes, a 'desirable', 'satisfactory' or 'good' life. We also need to appreciate that aspirations before, during and after migration may lead to revised well-being needs and outcomes (Carling & Collins 2018; Carling & Schewel 2018); but little is known about how these dynamics play out in the lives of young migrants in different geographic contexts.

How is well-being to be defined? How is it constructed, what are its constituent elements and how does it 'travel' across spatial boundaries when people migrate? As Wright (2012: 2) points out, its origins are found in the shifts in the conceptualisation of 'development' from a focus on economic growth, income and material goods to a concern with quality of life – what is worthwhile and enjoyable. Furthermore, from a development studies perspective, Gough, McGregor and Camfield (2007: 34) define human well-being as 'a state of being with others, where human needs are met, where one can act meaningfully to pursue one's goals and where one enjoys satisfactory quality of life'. This clearly emphasises the relational aspect ('a state of being with others') but does not specify the 'human needs' that have to be attained to enjoy a 'satisfactory quality of life'. Probably, the 'needs' are deliberately kept vague in this definition since they will vary from one developmental context to another. Moreover, of course, migration can be seen as a route to well-being for migrants originating from societies and contexts where their well-being aspirations are denied: they either seek an improvement in their (and their families') well-being in a new place, or their longer-term objective is to 'use' migration to achieve greater well-being when they return home.

In her exploration of the well-being concept in the context of Latin American migration, Wright (2012: 4–5) draws a number of fundamental distinctions, the most important

of which is between the *functional* and *psychosocial* domains of human well-being. The functional dimension encompasses 'objective' conditions of a person's standard of living and general health and welfare, including income, employment and housing, as well as migrants' (and others') subjective assessment of these – their importance and to what extent these needs have been met. The psychosocial domain of well-being includes perceptual dimensions – values, perceptions and experiences relating to how people think and feel about what they can 'do' and who they can 'be'. This includes, in turn, identity issues, norms and values; psychological states such as contentment, self-esteem or anxiety; and the relational dimension of social and intimate relations with family, friends and lovers. Wright stresses that, rather than considering the functional and psychosocial domains as discrete categories, greater analytical purchase is gained by considering the interplay that exists between them in migrants' lives.

Cutting across the distinction between functional and psychosocial well-being is another analytical duality discussed by Wright (2012: 9–10) and already hinted at above: that between *objective* and *subjective* well-being. Despite the important conceptual shift in development studies from measuring quantitative development (or poverty) indicators to more 'people-centred' approaches, there is still a tendency to 'measure the measurable' and study the so-called objective circumstances that characterise, for instance, a low-income migrant's life – typically, their real income, employment, calorie consumption or health status. Equally, if not more, important, Wright contends, is the study of subjective well-being – based on migrants' subjective experiences and their own assessment of these. This enables researchers and policy-makers to identify what is important to the research participants or the targets of policy. Moreover, subjective well-being goes beyond mere perceptions and also incorporates understandings that are culturally embedded. Wright (2012: 10) gives the example of how understandings of what constitutes a 'large house' depend on a range of historically and culturally specific contexts, which do not merely reflect socioeconomic status. Likewise, a migrant who moves cross-culturally will be exposed to, and may to a certain extent internalise, different culturally specific understandings and indicators of both functional and psychosocial well-being.

Wright's is not the only prominent voice writing about the 'migration–well-being nexus'. Three other significant initiatives can be noted. The first is the International Organization for Migration's (IOM) *World Migration Report* for 2013, subtitled 'Migrant Well-Being and Development'. Like Wright's work, the IOM's initiative also examined well-being in a development context. It included a substantial review of previous studies of migration, happiness and well-being, concluding on the basis of this evidence that, on the whole, migrants improve their well-being through migration, such that they achieve a higher level of well-being than non-migrants in their countries of origin, but remain at a lower level of well-being than the general populations of their countries of destination (IOM 2013: 86–102). The IOM study also presents a major piece of primary research, based on Gallup Poll survey data, which reports differentiated outcomes for different sets of international migrants (those moving within the global North, within the global South, from South to

North, and from North to South) and for five well-being indicators (financial, career-wise, community-based, social and health; IOM 2013: 104–170).

Second, a recent book by Philomena de Lima (2017) also has '*The Well-being of Migrants*' in its title. Upon closer examination, this text proves to be mainly about the health aspects of well-being, in terms of both migrants' poor physical and mental health, as well as in terms of their occupational health and access to health services (de Lima 2017: 71–104). Although de Lima briefly references the IOM study, it is surprising that she does not mention Wright's important contribution.

Finally, a recent essay by Zana Vathi (2017) explores in a more nuanced way the interface between return migration and psychosocial well-being. Vathi points out (2017: 1) that return migration has rarely been examined through a well-being lens, and stresses that, for returnees, the emotional, subjective and personal dimensions of return decisions and experiences mean that a psychosocial well-being approach is appropriate. Vathi also mentions an important distinction between human well-being, which she sees as a *state*, and psychosocial well-being, which is more of a *process* (2017: 5). Her useful overview of the psychosocial well-being field is the introduction to a book (Vathi & King 2017) that contains 13 case studies of the psychosocial well-being of returning/returned migrants in a variety of global contexts and across a spectrum spanning forced and voluntary return.

The articles

Based on the above theoretical props of youth transitions and migrant well-being applied to the study of international youth mobility, as well as the privileging of methodological approaches that emphasise actual experiences and young migrants' self-reflective narratives, we propose a research platform to explore the evolving forms and outcomes of youth migration/mobility, which are not picked up by standard survey datasets. Each of the five articles that follow makes a specific contribution to this platform. This is achieved by operationalising well-being aspirations and experiences through the analytical tools of reflexivity and insightful critiques – including those articulated by the research participants themselves – of discourses on youth mobility in immigration and return. Geographically, the papers in this special issue cover diverse contexts in the Nordic region and beyond, including reference to both 'Western' and post-socialist European countries.

In the first of the substantive articles, Himmelstine and King advance the research agenda of youth mobility and well-being through an analysis of young Spaniards in the London region. They bring in the context of the post-2008 Spanish crisis to show how economic factors interlink with personal and emotional circumstances and feelings in migration decision-making. The migrants' personal well-being is strongly conditioned by the collateral well-being of partners, family and friends in different places, even if migration is sometimes the escape channel from difficult personal and family relations at 'home'. Yet, while celebrating individualistic youthful migration, one should not overlook feelings of

loneliness and the fundamental role of social networks, which are also articulated by some of the participants in this article.

Next up is a very different article, the only explicitly quantitative analysis in the set. Çelikaksoy and Wadensjö compare the education and career trajectories of refugee youth who arrived in Sweden as unaccompanied minors with those who arrived with their families as accompanied minors. Results show that the latter group stays longer in the education system, whereas the former group makes an earlier entry into the labour market, including combining education with paid work, and so advances their 'career well-being' at a faster pace, at least in terms of earnings. The Swedish case is instructive because Sweden has been the largest receiving country for unaccompanied minors over recent years and because of the quality of data for tracking them through the education and labour market systems. Strong state and municipal systems of support for vulnerable migrants create new social conditions for families and individual migrants, as well as posing new questions about life chances and youth transitions for refugees (cf. Borlagden 2015).

In the succeeding article, by Emilsson and Adolfsson, we stay in Sweden and look at the trope of 'dreaming' as a way to frame the aspirations of young people from Latvia and Romania who seek a good life in a well-managed, socially liberal Nordic state. The study reveals that, despite economic difficulties, unemployment and the challenges of finding accommodation, young higher-skilled Latvians and Romanians see and experience Sweden as 'the country of their dreams'. Some are actually supported economically by their families back home, or by a partner in Sweden, so economic betterment is not the prime source of their well-being. Drawing on narrative interviews, the authors identify six main factors driving the migrants' move to Sweden: free university and language education, romantic relationships, cosmopolitan lifestyle, widespread use of English, the idealisation of Sweden, and a good work–life balance. The findings show that, in this particular case, young migrants' well-being aspirations and sources are not high wages per se, but rather the lifestyle achievable in a cosmopolitan welfare state.

In the penultimate article, Lulle and Bankovska pursue the methodological strategy of giving maximum space to the reflexive voice of their research participants – young Latvian and Latvian-Russian women who were taken to Finland as children. Reflecting back over long periods of childhood time ranging from the late 1980s to the 2000s, their participants reveal the impact of changing circumstances, both personal/familial and structural, for instance, the systems and ethos of education for migrant children. When looking back to their 'child selves', the now-adult participants realise how quickly they had to become adults – 'childhood adultification' in Burton's (2007) words – by becoming independent and staying strong alone when parents' help was limited. The findings of this article challenge views on youth transition as an event that occurs after childhood: in fact, such transitions may begin much earlier in life in cases where childhood coincides with migration. Theoretically, Lulle and Bankovska reconceptualise youth transitions through a narrative strategy of a 'reorientation of the self'; by emplacing their 'young selves' in certain places and times, the research participants try to build an ontologically coherent life story (Wiles, Rosenberg & Kearns 2005).

The final article takes the journal's readers to the other end of Europe and the Turkish seaside resort city of Antalya. Here, Kılınç explores the little-known but fascinating story of second-generation Turkish-Germans who were deported to Turkey due to their conviction for youth crimes in Germany. She reveals that, although deportation was a sudden and traumatic event, snatching the participants from their former lives in Germany, it opened up possibilities for life transformation and the attainment of a new level of psychosocial and functional well-being. The key to this encouragingly positive instance of restorative youth transition is the work and business environment of Antalya's tourist economy, which offers good employment opportunities to incomers with language skills (Turkish, German and English, the key tourist languages) and a willingness to 're-make themselves'. Antalya offers not only the possibility of material success but also the open and cosmopolitan spaces of a more liberal lifestyle in an attractive climatic, scenic and cultural setting (see also Kılınç & King 2017). The article thus calls attention to the importance and singularity of 'place' as a theoretical framing of future studies of youth mobility and well-being.

Notes

1   IMISCOE is the largest European network for migration research and started life as a European Union (EU)-funded Network of Excellence on 'International Migration, Integration and Social Cohesion in Europe'. The Horizon 2020 project on Youth Mobilities consists of nine partner countries and is coordinated by Prof. Armando Montanari at the University of Rome 'La Sapienza', Rome, Italy. The IMISCOE panel on 'Youth Mobility and Well-being' was organised by the two guest-editors of this special issue. Çelikaksoy and Wadensjö were invited to contribute their paper after the IMISCOE session. Lulle and Bankovska's paper is the work of the research project 'Inequalities of mobility: relatedness and belonging of transnational families in the Nordic migration space' (TRANSLINES), Academy of Finland funding 2015-2019, PI Prof. Laura Assmuth, University of Eastern Finland.

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