

Migrant youths: Typical aspects of development during the adolescent years, specific challenges of growing up somewhere else, and some things we need to understand better

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Abstract

The research presented in this Issue impressively documents the great variety of conditions of life that impact child and adolescent migrants' development. The studies conducted in various receiving countries include young refugees as well as the first- and second-generation offspring of migrant families who left their homes in different areas of the globe. Despite this diversity, theories and empirical findings on processes of normative development could be successfully applied, yielding insights into more general aspects of development. At the same time, drawing on conceptualizations that were introduced to specifically address experiences and challenges linked to the situation of migrant and minority populations, such as ethnic identity or acculturation, the articles notably contributed to a more comprehensive understanding of migrant adolescents' lives. While the discussion of the studies in this Issue highlights what we have learned, it also points out what we do not know yet, and where future research is needed.

KEYWORDS

acculturation, migration, normative development, refugees, youths

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About two decades ago, Larry Steinberg entitled his presidential address on parent-adolescent relationships to the Society for Research on Adolescence “We know some things: ...” (Steinberg, 2001). This was a bold claim, and by its very nature, his summary of the state of the art of research offered a portrait in broad strokes, plain and clear, intentionally bypassing differentiations and more subtle knowledge gaps that he, of course, could have addressed.

In the same vein, the research brought together in this Special Issue, as demonstrated by its theoretical and empirical foundations as well as its contributions to the field, shows that we do know a lot about the development of migrant youths. The state of scholarly work offers a rich reservoir of theoretical tools and empirical insights we can draw on to address the challenges that young people with a migrant background face when growing up in societies that often consider themselves as host contexts, but sometimes are hostile contexts. As can be clearly seen in the work presented in this Issue, a considerable portion of our knowledge results from theory development and empirical research on normative adolescent development. Still, there is a growing body of work and thus understanding that focuses on the specificities of growing up as a young migrant. At the same time, it is in the nature of this research field to spell out the blind spots of our insights and, thus, to point out directions for future research.

The outline of this commentary is as follows. First, some quantitative facts on migration, as already presented in some of the contributions to this Issue, are called to mind, and the diversity of migration situations as illustrated by these papers is discerned. Second, against this background, the role that concepts and findings on normative youth development play in understanding the situation of young migrants is discussed. Third, as the two theoretical review papers by Vos and colleagues (2021) and Perez and colleagues (2021) that open this Issue show, it is highlighted how theorizing and empirical studies that specifically target the development of migrant youths invaluable add to our understanding. Finally, this commentary closes with an attempt to identify present gaps in our knowledge.

1.1 | Migration and migrant youth

Various institutions on the international (International Organization for Migration United Nations, 2020), European (European Commission, 2018), and national level (e.g., Statistisches Bundesamt, 2020) provide information on migration. While this information is mostly quantitative and the figures provided are typically estimates, these reports give, at least, an idea of the scale of worldwide migration. While according to these sources the share of migrants on the globe has only slowly grown during the recent years, there has been a swift increase in absolute terms exceeding 270 million by now which is about 3.5% of the world population. However, the figures vary markedly between areas of the world and countries. For example, the share of migrants in Europe is slightly above 10% at present, in some European countries such as France, the UK, and Germany the corresponding figures range between 13% and close to 16% (International Organization for Migration and United Nations, 2020).

Roughly two-thirds of those who left their home are considered migrant workers, while about 80 million were displaced involuntarily. Obviously, this distinction is somewhat fuzzy, as the situation that drives somebody to look for work and income away from home could be severely or even existentially threatening. Of those displaced by conflict and violence, about 45 million seek shelter in other regions of their home country. Three-quarters of the refugees who left their country live in a neighboring country, often waiting for an

opportunity to return. In general, economically disadvantaged countries receive the vast majority of refugees (85%). Thus, most migration occurs in the same region, and most migration takes people from a poor home to a poor destination country.

Almost 14% of the international migrants are minors. Among refugees, the share of children and adolescents is much higher. Estimates vary between 40% and 50% below the age of 18. These young people mostly migrate together with close family members or their whole family. Even though only a small percentage of young people belongs to the group of unaccompanied adolescent migrants, their absolute number is startling given the particular vulnerability of these youths. In the EU, it reached its peak in 2016 with about 60,000 unaccompanied young migrants applying for asylum (European Commission, 2018). Somewhat higher figures were reported for the United States in 2019 (U.S. Customs and Border Protection, 2020).

These sheer migration statistics are already suggestive of a wide variety of conditions and experiences that drove young migrants away from the places of their origin and that they faced in the course of the migration journey, as well as at their temporary or final new homes. Challenging and often painful factors impact many of these young during a dynamic time of individual development. Processes of identity development during adolescence (e.g., Kroger, 2007; Luyckx, Schwartz, Goossens, Beyers, & Missotten, 2011) are but one example of this dynamics, as is the often pivotal role this phase of the lifespan plays in the course of the educational and later occupational career (Porfeli & Lee, 2012).

It is a particular merit of this Issue to have brought together studies that shed light on the many and varied conditions of development of adolescents who experienced migration themselves or are children of migrant parents. The different host contexts where this research has been conducted are a case in point including countries such as the United States (Patel et al. 2021; Yan et al., 2021), Chile (Chávez et al., 2021), Sweden (Gyberg, Svensson, Wängqvist, & Syed, 2021), the UK (Cavdar, McKeown, & Rose, 2021), Germany, Israel (Benbow, Aumann, Paizan, & Titzmann, 2021), Turkey (Akgül, Klimstra, & Çok, 2021; Karataş, Crocetti, Schwartz, & Rubini, 2021), and China (Wang, Chen, & Gong, 2021).

By the same token, the former home countries or contexts of heritage of the adolescents who participated in the studies presented in this Issue vary widely and, thus, the reasons that resulted in migration. Refugees who left other Middle East countries such as Syria and Iraq because of armed conflicts and civil war (e.g., Akgül et al., 2021; Karataş et al., 2021) are represented as are young people who escaped from gang violence and crime in Central America (e.g., Patel et al., 2021), or the offspring of Turkish families who migrated to the UK hoping for more favorable economic and occupational opportunities in Northern Europe (Cavdar et al., 2021). Different again is the case of within-country migration as addressed in a study of sons and daughters of migrant workers who left their homes in rural China to make their living in a large Chinese city (Wang et al., 2021). While the majority of studies in this Issue focuses on young people who experienced migration themselves, some also shed light on the situation of the second generation (e.g., Cavdar et al., 2021; Gyberg et al., 2021).

The comprehensive picture given is clearly a strength of this Issue. At the same time, it raises the question of whether our theories and analytical tools are adequate to capture the diversity represented. Moreover, some types of migration experience and thus conditions of adolescent development faced by a significant group of young migrants are not covered here, namely those who stay in the area of their origin. This observation cannot be understood as a criticism given the possible scope of a single journal issue. Rather, it has to be kept in mind when trying to put into perspective what can be learned from these studies and will be taken up again in the final part of this commentary.

1.2 | Applying concepts of normative youth development to young migrants

Looking at young migrants not only as victims of bad and partly horrific circumstances but taking an agency perspective on the way in which they deal with the challenges of their everyday lives and development is a major point made in the review paper that Perez and colleagues (2021) contributed to this Issue. It is suggestive of seeing these young people as normal adolescents in the first place. Then, it makes sense to draw on theories and findings addressing normative development in this period of life. In fact, this is the approach taken in several of the studies presented here.

A case in point is the role that parents play in adolescent migrants' development. Wang et al. (2021) examined patterns of experiences of young Chinese who left their rural homes together with their parents and now attend schools in a big city. Even though a comparison with their urban school-mates pointed to differences in academic trajectories across the year of study, it also showed that both groups of Chinese youths systematically benefited from authoritative parenting in mastering the demands faced in school (cf. Spera, 2005). Drawing on theorizing on processes of parent-child transmission, Karataş and colleagues (2021) focused on same- and cross-ethnic friendships among young Syrian refugees living in Turkey. Neither parents' same- and cross-ethnic friendships were correlated, nor were these two types of friendships of the youths studied. There was, however, a clear correspondence of the frequencies of parental interactions with same-ethnic friends and adolescents' interactions with same-ethnic friends and the same was true of parental and adolescents' cross-ethnic friendships, pointing to the assumed processes of transmission. This finding is in line with what could be generally expected (cf. Glick, Rose, Swenson, & Waller, 2013). It should be added, however, that lively cross-ethnic friendships are, by far, of greater importance concerning the development and psychosocial adaptation of adolescent refugees as for their age-mates representing the majority culture (Jugert & Feddes, 2017). Effects of refugees' same-ethnic friendships were less strong and had an impact on psychological adjustment only, whereas cross-ethnic friendships also fostered aspects of social adjustment, such as feeling accepted and having something to contribute.

Benbow and colleagues (2021) focused on trajectories of overall social support as well as support received from different sources among young migrants from former Soviet Union who had moved to Germany or Israel, respectively, as well as a comparison group of adolescents born in Germany. The analyses yielded comparable patterns of social adjustment over time in all three groups. Then the authors examined associations of social support and self-efficacy as an indicator of psychosocial adjustment. While there were mean-level differences, relations between experienced support and self-efficacy did not differ between groups.

Assessing negative social experiences, namely the frequency of episodes of perceived discrimination, Gyberg and colleagues (2021) studied effects on several aspects of psychosocial adjustment among first- and second-generation migrant youths, on the one hand, and young Swedes without migration background, on the other hand. Also in this case, analyses yielded parallel patterns. The findings showed that in both groups feeling discriminated has the same detrimental effects on adjustment. Still, one clear difference between the two groups could be observed. Whereas overall perceived discrimination was most frequently related to gender and age, experiences of discrimination due to ethnicity were more frequently reported by minority adolescents.

While this summary could be further continued, it already shows that various processes which are well-documented in the literature on normative adolescent development are equally relevant among migrant adolescents. It should be noted that the examples given

are not confined to a homogeneous subgroup of migrant adolescents who share the same background as well as living in the same host country. They included second-generation youths born in the host country as well as within-country migrants and refugees from war-torn regions of the world. The studies referred also to represent a great variety of receiving societies.

At the same time, applying our knowledge on normative development to migrant adolescents also allowed us to identify certain aspects, such as migration-specific trajectories of academic achievement or particular patterns of sources of discrimination, which are characteristic of the experiences of young minority members. We can, thus, learn a lot from the wealth of studies on processes of development typical of adolescents growing up in the Northwestern hemisphere of the globe. However, the applicability of these findings cannot be taken for granted but clearly calls for an empirical test.

1.3 | The value of theorizing and evidence specifically addressing young migrants

While several of the studies reported before already point to specificities of the situation of young migrants, theory development in the field has yielded conceptualizations devised to capture phenomena typical of migrant and minority adolescents. Theorizing on ethnic identity and acculturation ranks prominently among those and has been particularly influential in research on young people who experienced migration themselves or who were born in a context that is a receiving country for their parents.

Even though there is not just one theory of ethnic identity, the different approaches (e.g., Phinney, 1993; Quintana, 1998; Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014) show a considerable correspondence due to the often shared reference to Marcia's (1966) status model of identity development. While most adolescents have to find their responses to the question of who they are in the normative domains of educational and occupational career, in the social and romantic sphere, and regarding political and moral orientations, the challenges of ethnic identity differ markedly between majority and minority youths (e.g., Crocetti, 2018; Crocetti, Fermani, Pojaghi, & Meeus, 2011). Many young members of the majority population may not even spend a thought on his or her ethnicity as a potentially self-defining feature. Migrant youths grow up somewhere in between their context of birth and their receiving society. They are constantly challenged to find their place and to define who they are (e.g., Barros & Albert, 2020). Such condition pushes them to explore these different cultures and to, if possible, arrive at a commitment which then would mean to have reached, drawing on Marcia's model, an achieved identity status in the domain of ethnic identity. While this could also include an identity as a minority member in a given country, some may not arrive at a commitment, be it in terms of achievement or foreclosure (i.e., committing without prior exploration), but remain in ethnic diffusion or further searching in a moratorium status. Even second- or third-generation youths may often feel challenged by the identity issue. Imagine a girl or boy of Turkish heritage in mid-adolescence who has been born in Germany, has acquired German as native language, has a poor command of Turkish, is a German citizen and is asked "Where are you from?" time and time again just because of physical features or the name. For example, in Gyberg et al.'s (2021) study conducted in Sweden, a little more than one-third of the adolescent sample had at least one parent not born in the country. About 30 % of this group self-identified themselves as a minority, close to 70% as minority and majority, and a few as belonging to the majority.

Quite some research has focused on ethnic identity development, and findings clearly point to the benefits of a strong ethnic identity for minority adolescents (Rivas-Drake et al., 2014). It is predictive of well-being and mental health. Interestingly only one study in

this Issue (Cavdar et al., 2021) included measures of ethnic identity in the assessments (for Yan et al., 2021 see below). Drawing on conceptualizations introduced by Umaña-Taylor, Yazedjian, and Bámaca-Gómez (2004), the authors not only considered exploration and commitment dimensions in their study but also the dimension of affirmation that captures the (positive or negative) meaning or content of ethnic identity. While Marcia's model implicitly proceeded on the assumption of a positive evaluation of young people on what they feel committed to, the situation of young migrants may challenge this understanding. It could be assumed that migrant adolescents often cannot help but accepting the minority identification ascribed to them by the majority population and perhaps also their parents and same-ethnic peers and, at the same time, adopt negative views on their group. Studying second-generation youths of Turkish heritage in the UK, Cavdar and colleagues could confirm the beneficial effects of a positive ethnic identity. Replicating earlier findings among minority adolescents in other countries, this study could confirm the systematic association linking ethnic identity and mental health.

However, Cavdar and colleagues (2021) not only looked at ethnic identity but also included the acculturation orientations held by the young minority members in their study, that is, measures of another concept that figures prominently in migration research. The concept is strongly linked with Berry's (1980) model designed to capture acculturation in terms of two dimensions that refer to the extent to which migrants strive for retaining the values and practices of their context of origin, and for merging into the receiving culture. On the basis of these dimensions Berry defined four acculturation strategies such as integration (high values on both dimensions), assimilation (strong orientation towards host culture and low adherence to culture of origin), and so forth. While Berry's model certainly offers a rough approach to the complexities of migrants' life in their new contexts and specific aspects of the model have elicited some criticism, there is converging evidence for integration to be the most advantageous acculturation strategy for many migrants as opposed to assimilation that was typically expected from newcomers from outside and often still is (Schwartz, Unger, Zamboanga, & Szapcznik, 2010). Not surprisingly, Cavdar and colleagues (2021) found that ethnic identity among the participating adolescents of Turkish origin was positively related to a strong adherence to their culture of heritage and low orientation towards the receiving British culture. At the same time, ethnic identification had a negative association with the acculturation strategy of assimilation. While the authors could not provide evidence for a positive effect of an integration strategy on indicators of psychosocial adaptation, assimilation clearly predicted poorer mental health.

Even though ethnic identity and acculturation orientations can be distinguished conceptually, a strong affinity of both concepts catches the eye. In fact, in their study of first and second-generation adolescents of Mexican heritage in the US Yan et al. (2021) included scales of ethnic identity in their measure of acculturation. As expected by the authors, adolescents showing a strong integration profile scored higher on different aspects of academic competence and well-being (cross-sectional), as did those who were characterized by a stable (high) integration profile (longitudinal). The findings reported by Benbow and colleagues (2021) on young migrants from former Soviet Union add to the positive appraisal of an integration strategy. High host and heritage culture orientations predicted favourable trajectories of perceived social support in both included receiving countries (Israel, Germany).

Both ethnic identity and acculturation are prime examples of concepts developed with a particular focus on migrants and, by their predictive power, have importantly contributed to our knowledge. The challenges of bi-cultural stress (cf. Vos et al., 2021) that are unique to migrants and minority members or the potential advantages of bi- or multi-cultural competence (cf. Perez et al., 2021), which is an often-overlooked asset, are further cases in point. Thus, the present state of research on normative adolescent development as well

as conceptualizations and empirical findings of migration research provide a promising basis for future efforts towards a better understanding of migrant adolescents' lives and development.

1.4 | Where to go from here?

The broad range of concepts, of participants in different situations of life and, thus, of migrants' contexts of origin and host countries which, in turn, are linked to different reasons for migration as represented in this Issue impressively documents the variability of conditions impacting migrant adolescents' development, as already stated earlier in this discussion. Taken together, the reports in this Issue can contribute to hypotheses on common processes and may help to speculate under which conditions they could be expected to take place. Staying with acculturation as a sample case for a second, findings reported here and in the prior literature point to the beneficial effects of integration strategies. Gyberg et al. (2021), however, also mention that integration seems to work well as a strategy for migrants in Sweden – but not in Norway (cf. Virta, Sam, & Westin, 2004). This raises questions concerning interactions between conditions characterizing host societies and the workings of acculturation strategies. More research is needed that allows for such comparisons that help to arrive at a more differentiated understanding. About half of the research reported in this Issue studied samples that were designed to compare migrant or minority adolescents, on the one hand and age-mates who belong to the majority group, on the other hand. Only in the study of Benbow and colleagues (2021), however, migrant subsamples in two different receiving societies were included, a research strategy that promises valuable insights. The call for studies employing designs that allow for informative and more comprehensive comparisons extends to a considerable number of variables. Cultural distance between the context of origin and the receiving society, different groups of migrant adolescents in the same host country, families representing different strands of life in their country of origin, or variations between neighborhoods or communities where migrants live are but a few examples.

While we could learn a lot from the research gathered in this Issue, the summary of migration statistics given at the beginning of this contribution already is suggestive of a severe limitation of our knowledge. The destination of many migrants is not a faraway country which often is more affluent than the place left. The journey of at least the vast majority of worldwide refugees leads them to other areas of their own country or to neighboring countries (cf. Vos et al., 2021). This group of migrants within or to neighboring countries is not only important in a quantitative sense. Their members can be assumed to suffer from particular hardship, insecurity, and potentially traumatizing experiences, which is a specific situation in which boys and girls maneuver through the shallows of adolescence. Obviously, studies with members of this group are difficult to conduct. Employing designs as reported in most of the studies in this Issue may then not be the route to follow. Research based on qualitative interviews as in the work of Patel et al. (2021) could be a viable alternative and promises important insights.

Those young migrants who made the poor-to-rich transition often meet stronger challenges facing the developmental tasks of their period of the lifespan than do majority youths in the receiving country. Several studies in this Issue focused on the mastery of, for example, academic demands and the educational career (e.g., Wang et al., 2021; Yan et al., 2021) as well as on the domain of establishing peer relations (Chavez et al., 2021; Karataş et al., 2021). However, we did not learn about how migrant youths approach the domain of romantic relations. Understanding the ideas they have, the strategies they choose, and the barriers they have to overcome could importantly add to our knowledge. In many

cases, migration took these young people from a “tight” to a “loose” culture (cf. Vos et al., 2021). The “tight”/“loose” difference can be assumed to be particularly pronounced when it comes to values, norms, and beliefs concerning gender roles, sexuality, and romantic relations. On a related note, it is not too speculative to expect that tackling this developmental task should be a systematically different endeavour for migrant boys and girls. It thus seems likely that this domain of development is a particularly challenging one for migrant youths.

Following Perez and colleagues (2021), it is important to consider that quite some young migrants enter a receiving country not fully unprepared. Perez and colleagues made this point referring to the concept of remote acculturation, a process that is of particular relevance in the case of migration to countries of the Northwestern hemisphere: While not many migrant adolescents have visited their future host country before migration, a substantial number of young migrants will have developed ideas concerning how life is like at the place they go to based on, for instance, traditional and social media, or contact with international tourists. They, thus, bring along expectations as to norms and customs typical of the receiving society, as well as to the opportunities and threats waiting for them. Obviously, their ideas may be misleading, and their expectations could be disappointed. Still, many young migrants do not set their feet on entirely uncharted territory. It would be interesting to shed light on the role that realistic as well as erroneous preconceptions play in the course of face-to-face acculturation.

Perez and colleagues (2021) also point out that not only many poorer countries are characterized by ethnic and cultural diversity but that the population of the rich industrialized countries on the globe is also far from being homogeneous. Taking Germany as a sample case, census statistics document a migration background of 26% of the inhabitants (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2020). In the country's capital Berlin the share is 35%, and the city hosts more than 25 different national groups comprised of at least 10,000 people (Amt für Statistik Berlin-Brandenburg, 2021). In some other major cities of Europe diversity is even higher. Cases in point are London and Amsterdam, where more than half of the inhabitants or their parents arrived as migrants. Thus young migrants often grow up in multicultural contexts. This situation, on the one hand, raises the likelihood of intercultural contacts. On the other hand, the social and cultural segregation that characterizes many larger cities may also result in places where migrant adolescents grow up among migrants of the same origin. In fact, majority-minority relations on the societal level could be mixed up locally. For instance, in inner-city schools students belonging to minority groups could well outnumber students from the majority group by far. Moreover, it may be not only intergroup relations of majority and minority youths that matter but also the quality of relations between members of different minority groups. This constellation may or may not be an advantageous condition of adolescent development. In any case, a considerable mixture of influences impacts these young migrants during a dynamic period of their development. With only a few exceptions (Hindriks, Verkuyten, & Coenders, 2014), social psychological research on intergroup relations is confined to the study of the majority-minority constellations, as is developmental research building on social psychological theories and basically all studies in this Issue. Given the reality of diversity in many present-day societies, it is a pressing desideratum for research to make headway in considering this widespread aspect of adolescents' migrants' everyday contexts.

In summary, the work presented in this Issue has greatly contributed to our understanding of migrant adolescents' development. At the same time, the authors have clearly spelt out the limitations of their research. Thus, they offered answers and raised questions and pointed out directions for future scholarly efforts, only some of which could be highlighted in this commentary.

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