

Book review: Katie Wright: Gender, migration and the intergenerational transfer of human wellbeing

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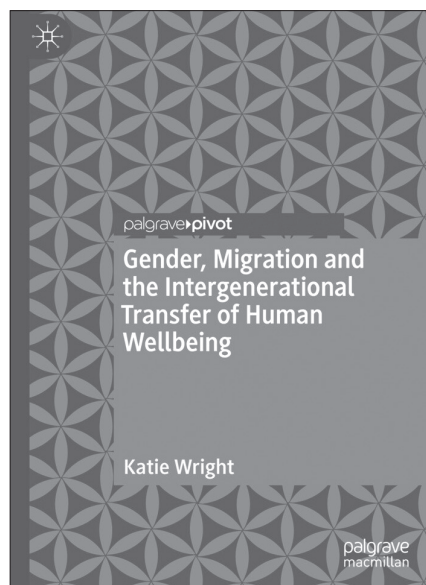
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Katie Wright: Gender, migration and the intergenerational transfer of human wellbeing

Reviewed by Judith Kausch-Zongo

In her book *Gender, Migration and the Intergenerational Transfer of Human Wellbeing* Katie Wright touches on one of the most important factors for achieving sustainable societies: how can the most vulnerable members of society who are affected by multiple discriminations overcome their vulnerability and thereafter participate in social mobility? More precisely, this study examines the processes of psychosocial transfers from mothers to daughters who migrated from Latin America to London by looking at how these transfers can be converted into human wellbeing outcomes (via educational and occupational advancement). In so doing, the research looks at a social group often left behind and with little political voice.

Until recently, research on migrants from Latin America has mostly focused on their situation in the US and Spain. However, research on Latin American migration to the UK



and public policy.

By looking into the functioning of transfer processes, Wright's main

is growing. Katie Wright's investigation contributes goes beyond migration research (33): the book also broadens the concept of IGT (intergenerational transmission) by examining not only the transfer of material goods but also what she refers to as psychosocial transfers, thereby integrating the concept of human wellbeing into a holistic approach. Consequently, the book is just as persuasive and enriching for researchers (social sciences, psychology) as it is for practitioners (public sector, social workers) interested in questions of gender and migration with a special focus on Latin America, intersectionality and social mobility, intergenerational transmission of human wellbeing, and resilience. Presenting important results of narrative interviews, Wright's study offers implications for both theory

objective is to understand how psychosocial intergenerational transfers impact social mobility and how these transfers are marked by

- intersectionality – in this case including gender, race, migrant status, age
- relationality – mainly intergenerational between mother and daughter, but also the greater family constellations) and
- temporality – transfers impact differently in special life periods (18, 19)

As mentioned, IGT literature to date has mainly focused on material transfer and less on psychosocial transfer. To gain a more holistic view, Wright proposes a theory of Human Wellbeing that integrates both of these features. The concept of Human Wellbeing considers relatedness as an elementary psychological need for 'living well' and encompasses intergenerationality. This perspective might broaden the work of Portes et al. (2016) and Brannen (2015) through a "consideration of how transfers may be negotiated, mediated or resisted" (43), including how transfer processes are shaped by racial, ethnic, age, class, life-course periods, as well as gender differences (23).

Gendered inequalities can restrict possibilities of occupational advancement and human wellbeing outcomes. Human wellbeing transfers can vary over the span of a lifetime. The empirical findings in the investigation show that the transfer process is heavily influenced by gender role attitudes. For example, in some cases, mothers transfer to their daughters the gendered role in which women are responsible for keeping "marriage intact (no matter the personal cost)" (84). Contrary to studies that focus on the intergenerational transmission of material deprivation, Wright shows that on the psychosocial side, mothers tend to transfer their daughters to focus on education in order to leave behind low-paid work (such as cleaning) and to achieve independence from men, and to reduce their vulnerability. "[D]aughters were encouraged to better withstand or to exit relationships typified by machismo" (133).

Furthermore, the study analyses how the IGT of psychosocial assets is constructed by intersubjectivity. More specifically, it asks how the interaction between individuals as well as their relations affect intergenerational transfer from mothers to daughters. Interrelationality between the first generation of migrants (mothers) and the second generation (daughters) are conceptualised based on the work of Portes et al. (2016). The latter pioneered a longitudinal study on immigrants' children in the United States and developed a theoretical approach to identify factors – both material and psychosocial – affecting upward (and downward) mobility amongst second-generation migrants.

Identification with the host society becomes an important factor for the second generation to succeed in education systems. However, discrimination based on gender and race can decelerate psychosocial adaption. Referring to Kasinitz et al. (2008), Wright notes that material transfers such as legal documents allow the second generation to gain host country nationality.

A crucial kind of psychosocial transfer is represented by the attachment to a cohesive community based on ethnic affiliation. To identify salient psychosocial transfers by means of narrative interviews, Wright grounds her argumentation in Brannen (2015) and suggests that discourses that shaped a whole generation in a particular historical context, for example attitudes linked to patriarchy and dictatorship in Latin America, need to be identified in the narratives and to be dissociated from respondents' own narratives of how individuals perceive what was passed on to them as material and non-material transfers and what they wish to transmit to their

children. Only then, she suggests, can subtle transfer processes in intergenerational life courses be appropriately analysed.

Interestingly, the empirical insights show that values, especially prioritising education, were often not transferred successfully. One of the main findings of the book is that daughters' ability to adopt these psychosocial transfers depended partially on the bonding between the mothers and daughters. The maternal relationship often suffered during the life course as a lot of interviewed mothers migrated first to Europe before their daughters could join them. These periods of separation influenced the success with which values could be passed on to the next generation. In some cases, it became very difficult to re-bond with the mothers in the host country. Furthermore, due to multiple and onward migration, mothers and daughters lived in complex household structures in which the women, especially the mothers, often found themselves in series of relationships including dissolutions and repartnering. This also affects the relationship between mothers and daughters and, by the same token, psychosocial transfer processes as well as human wellbeing outcomes.

In contrast to concepts of chronic poverty, the concepts of human wellbeing and IGT allow for more temporal complexity. The life course is marked by different life events or transitions. During these periods, poverty might well increase. For women in particular, events such as divorce or the birth of a child can have strong effects on material situations; IGT theories mostly assume that "material deficits resulting in childhood poverty have negative impacts that extend throughout the life course" (16). Nevertheless, the level of negative IGT can differ over the life course and poverty reversals are possible.

The empirical insights presented in Wright's study are based on 50 narrative interviews, 25 mother-daughter couples. Mothers (Cohort A) have single nationalities (Colombian, Ecuadorian, Peruvian, and Dominican), and "[r]espondents were predominantly middle-aged and well educated. As regards marital status, the majority were not in relationships at the time of interview" (59). In cohort B, "[o]f the 25 daughters, the majority were aged 11–20 and had dual nationality (11 had both Spanish and Latin American nationality whilst 5 had dual Latin American and British nationality)." The majority of daughters (20) were single and six of them had children of their own. In terms of education, two had been to university, even though none had graduated – in one case migration from Spain to the UK had prevented this (65).

Deterministic research studies of poverty cycles and the intergenerational reproduction of material deprivation do not take the complexity of psychosocial assets and their impact on social mobility during life courses into account. Nor can they map approaches to overcome inequalities. Wright's book stands against this deterministic perspective and shows us how an optimistic perspective can be adopted when studying the IGT of inequalities. Even if not explicitly mentioned, I would like to suggest that Wright's underlying starting point is that mechanisms exist which can lead to exit "inherited" poverty despite intersectional discrimination and social mobility barriers (34). Therefore, the temporal aspect is very important: "refocusing attention on social constructions of age might encourage a move away from more linear and deterministic ways of thinking about how poverty and inequality is 'transmitted' to broader understandings of how it may be 'mediated' or resisted and how poverty reversals can occur" (20).

By studying very different cases of mothers and daughters, Wright examines IGT mechanisms on which policy interventions might

be based. In my view, this underlying starting-point is crucial and needs to be especially highlighted, seeing that research on how to interrupt poverty reproduction – by psychosocial assets – is a far more complex matter than merely concentrating on the IGT of material goods. The complexity is embraced not only by integrating the concept of human wellbeing to the IGT of psychosocial assets, but also by differentiating very precisely important intervening social aspects (gender, migration), relational aspects (mother-daughter bonding), and temporal aspects (life events that cause financial penalties). By considering the complexity of the analysis and this nuanced approach, Katie Wright is doing justice to the holistic view that she has made use of. Nevertheless, while reading the study, I couldn't help the impression that satisfying the very high standard the author has set for herself is particularly challenging. I shall illustrate this with two points.

In contrast to the two examples presented at the very beginning of the book, empirical insights gathered from the interviewed mother-daughter couples show that only a minority of the presented daughters can overcome their mothers' precarity during the interviews themselves. In my view, this leads to an important shift in the study when comparing the theoretical argumentation at the beginning with the conclusions drawn from its empirical insights: Whereas the theoretical approach stresses issues of temporality, reversals of poverty and upward mobility, the empirical conclusion no longer focuses on psychosocial aspects that might interrupt the intergenerational transfer of poverty. Empirical findings show, for example, that mothers whose daughters were separated from them for several years due to migration have more difficulties passing values on to their offspring. Of course, identifying (psychosocial) obstacles to exiting poverty is an important result. Nonetheless, it could have been interesting to add mother-daughter cases in which psychosocial factors of social upward mobility can be studied as resilient attitudes. This could also lead to contributions to resilience theory which is closely linked to the concept of human wellbeing. Empirical answers show that changing family constellations, new partners, new stepfathers, new social environments or membership in cohesive communities play an important role in transfer processes. The impact can be negative or positive, but it would be interesting to know how families' closer social networks affect the IGT and human wellbeing of the second-generation of female migrants.

The second important aspect of Gender, Migration and the Intergenerational Transfer of Human Wellbeing that I wish to highlight here is the distinction between psychosocial and material assets. “[Dolores and Miriam] had become homeless in London when

Dolores separated from her partner, and though she later secured council housing she was still unable to supply her daughter with regular access to the internet which prevented Miriam from securing good grades” (88). “Marta suggested that she (as her mother) had children early, later repartnering in Spain due to gendered vulnerabilities linked to her migrant status” (115). The majority of the interviewed women are engaged in cleaning; nine of the daughters did not have a European nationality. All these examples suggest a strong link between material and non-material goods. The book does ask (25) about the intersection of material and non-material transfers. But it concentrates much more on the offset of material deprivation by non-material transfers and leaves the impact of material deprivation on psychosocial transfers in the background. Furthermore, with regard to material deprivation, the study mostly focuses on educational and occupational advancement including language knowledge and, in my opinion, does not give enough attention to legal status and income (including access to social benefits).

Reading the empirical part, I asked myself the following questions and was left without answers: What legal status did the interviewed persons have and how does it determine IGT processes? Are some of the persons forced to work in informal (cleaning) jobs due to their legal status and have no exit option? How does this affect psychosocial assets? How did material status (for example not having access to the internet) affect psychosocial aspects such as motivation and self-esteem?

The theorisation of the future of second-generation migrants is an interesting starting point (40). At the end of the book, Wright suggests a number of implications for public policy. It is important to factor in the existential formal barriers to social mobility with a direct impact on material process (legal status reducing access to legal help and social benefits) and psychosocial assets (informal administrative barriers including humiliating chicanery) in order to get the whole picture. These aspects may have an important effect on the construction of IGT processes as they might hinder social mobility despite positive and resilient attitudes and thereby lower self-esteem and motivation.

In sum, Katie Wright's study is undoubtedly important, but its empirical findings, in my view, are even more interesting and richer than the conclusions drawn from them in the book.

Wright, Katie (2018): Gender, Migration and the Intergenerational Transfer of Human Wellbeing. Cham: Palgrave Pivot. 150 pages. ISBN 978-3-030-02525-0 (hardback), ISBN 978-3030025267 (e-book). Price: €57.19.