



## Openness, extraversion and the intention to emigrate

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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Available online 27 February 2013

#### Keywords:

Openness to experience

Extraversion

Emigration

### ABSTRACT

Economic, demographic and sociological factors influence the intention to emigrate, but variation in personality also may be consequential. In this report, data on intention to emigrate are drawn via nationally-representative samples from 22 countries in the Americas. Multivariate analyses permit attention to the key factors identified in past empirical research, but also enable examination of the effects of openness to experience and extraversion. Openness and extraversion both are shown to exert modest positive influence on the intention to emigrate. Additionally, heterogeneity in these effects is observed in that the influence of both traits is found to be conditional on a respondent's level of education.

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### 1. Introduction

Economic, demographic and sociological factors hold dominant positions in most accounts of the intention to emigrate. People choose to migrate largely due to economic opportunity. Under U.S. immigration law, for instance, prospective immigrants are granted preferred status if they possess extraordinary abilities in areas such as the sciences, business, education, and even athletics. Life circumstances, the centerpieces of demographic research, also matter. As one example, migration typically will be more feasible for unmarried individuals in their 20s than for heads of households in their 30s or 40s. As to sociological considerations, potential networks of support in new contexts can be pivotal in whether to move. People find it easier to emigrate if they have friends or family in the new country, individuals who can help them to navigate the logistical hurdles inherent in moving to another nation.

The factors noted here demonstrably do affect migration. Nonetheless, any account of the intention to emigrate may be incomplete if it fails to incorporate psychological dispositions. Migration is a major decision, one replete with risk and uncertainty. Regardless of support networks or prospects for economic gain, people can be expected to vary in their psychological comfort with such an extreme change. Hence, in addition to the other forces noted here, individuals' personality traits also likely influence the intention to emigrate.

Prior research has devoted only sporadic attention to the influence of personality on migration. We expand upon that past work in two key manners. First, we employ indicators of two trait dimensions commonly studied in contemporary personality

research, openness to experience and extraversion. Second, rather than focus on a single nation, we consider the intention to emigrate among over 30,000 survey respondents who answered representative national surveys in 22 countries in the Americas. In the remainder of this report, we first briefly recount what past research has demonstrated with respect to the antecedents of migration, and we elaborate on why personality traits are expected to be consequential. Following discussion of data and measures, results of our analyses are reported.

### 2. Factors influencing the intention to emigrate

#### 2.1. Economic and demographic considerations

Research on the antecedents of migration traces back over a century (e.g., Fairchild, 1936; Ravenstein, 1885; Tait, 1927). Much of this research focuses on economic and demographic factors. From this perspective, people move to another nation in pursuit of economic gain. If economic prospects in one's nation of origin are poor, emigration will be more likely, especially if the person possesses marketable skills and an absence of demographic obstacles to migration. At the individual level, the basic profile of a person likely to emigrate is one who is relatively young, male and well-educated (e.g., Graves & Linneman, 1979; Van Dalen, Groenewold, & Fokkema, 2005).

Sociological factors also have been found to affect migration. First, the likelihood of emigration increases if the person has a close contact, usually a relative, living overseas (e.g., Heering, van der Erf, & Van Wissen, 2004). This circumstance prompts "chain migration" (e.g., MacDonald & MacDonald, 1964). Second, if a household receives financial payments—remittances—from overseas, there is a

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heightened likelihood that yet another individual will seek to move abroad (e.g., van Dalen et al., 2005).

The focus of the present study is personality, but it is essential that we account for other key predictors of the intention to emigrate. Drawing on the prior research described briefly here, all models will include controls for the respondent's age, sex and education level, whether the respondent has a close contact living overseas, whether the respondent's household receives remittances, GDP per capita and baseline differences across this study's 22 nations.

## 2.2. Personality and migration

We focus on the possible impact of openness to experience and extraversion on the intention to emigrate. Moving to a new nation seemingly constitutes precisely the sort of new experience that defines openness as a trait dimension. Similarly, because migration is an inherently bold move, and one that necessitates social interactions with strangers, we see extraversion as of self-evident pertinence to migration. Past research has generated relevant findings, such as that individuals scoring high in openness and extraversion make successful adjustments to international work assignments (Huang, Chi, & Lawler, 2005). Also, Bloeser, McCurley, and Mondak (2012) show that extraversion helps migrants overcome cultural barriers to civic engagement.

Several past works have explored the broader relevance of psychology for migration. Indeed, there has been a renewal of attention to psychology and migration in recent years (e.g., Carr, 2010; Crossroads, 2012; Groenewold, de Bruijn, & Bilsborrow, 2012). Work in this area, labeled "migration psychology" (e.g., Fawcett, 1985–1986), examines numerous matters, including the possible psychological underpinnings of the decision to emigrate (e.g., Frieze & Li, 2010).

Past empirical research regarding personality influences on international migration has consistently found personality to be consequential. This research bolsters our claim that personality in general, and possibly openness and extraversion, may influence migration. Winch and Carment (1988) matched data from 102 Indian males who had applied for Canadian immigrant visas with data from 114 males in India who had expressed no intention to emigrate. In addition to limiting the analyses to males, subjects were matched on age, education and occupational status. The authors conducted a two-part discriminant analysis, focused largely on personality. Results revealed strong effects for variables such as sensation seeking and preference for new people. Silventoinen et al. (2008) also considered migration between two nations, in this case movement from Finland to Sweden. Extraversion was found to be associated with the likelihood of migration.

Cotton and Majchrzak (1990) also considered the effects of personality on migration, albeit in a highly specialized circumstance. The study focuses on 286 production workers at an AT&T plant in Indianapolis, Indiana, employees with at least 15 years of seniority. When the plant was shut down, employees were offered the opportunity to remain with the company by relocating outside of Indianapolis. Just under half of the sample opted to relocate. Personality effects may be muted in this case because the status quo—continuing to work at the Indianapolis plant—was not an option, and thus all workers were forced to make a potentially life-changing decision. The authors explored the effects of having a Type A personality and a psychological disposition toward flexibility on the decision to relocate. The latter overlaps with openness, as the authors' scale incorporated items such as "I like to try new things." Flexibility emerged as a significant predictor of relocation in the discriminant analyses, providing further confidence that openness will influence the decision to emigrate.

The Cotton and Majchrzak (1990) study examined migration within a single nation. Jokela and his colleagues have followed up on that inquiry with research regarding the influence of

personality on migration within Finland (Jokela, Elovainio, Kivimäki, & Keltikangas-Jarvinen, 2008) and the United States (Jokela, 2009). The latter is especially relevant for present purposes in that the effects of Big Five variables were explored. In tests consonant with those outlined below, migration within the American states was found to be influenced by extraversion, and migration both within and between states was affected by openness to experience.

In addition to consideration of possible direct effects of openness and extraversion on the decision to emigrate, a conditional effect also will be examined in the current study. In his overview of migration psychology, Fawcett (1985–1986) emphasizes that psychological research on migration must be situated with respect to economic and demographic factors if it is to make an interdisciplinary contribution to our understanding of migration. Toward that end, we will consider possible interactions between personality variables and education. Possessing a higher level of education affords greater opportunities for migration, but whether people act on these opportunities may hinge on personality. At least two patterns are plausible. First, if education is necessary, but not sufficient, to prompt migration, then personality may be especially consequential among the highly educated. In other words, the highest likelihood of migration might be observed among individuals who have high levels of both education and either openness or extraversion; in such an instance, personality would play a *complementing* role. Alternately, education might be sufficient, but not necessary, to motivate migration. In this scenario, personality effects would be muted among the educated, but sharper among prospective emigrants with lower education levels. This pattern would resemble that found by Bloeser et al. (2012) in a study of response to jury summonses. There, individuals who did not face cultural barriers to civic engagement were likely to appear for jury duty irrespective of variation in personality. Conversely, among respondents who did face cultural barriers—typically immigrants—the likelihood of summons compliance increased markedly as a function of extraversion. In this scenario, personality plays a *compensating* role.

## 3. Data and method

Data are from the 2010 AmericasBarometer surveys. These surveys were fielded in 26 nations in the Americas as part of Vanderbilt University's Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP). The present analyses are limited to the 22 nations in which the survey included items measuring both intention to emigrate and personality.<sup>1</sup> Data were gathered in face-to-face interviews of representative national samples. A target number of cases of 1500 was employed in most of the countries, but larger samples, averaging 2616, were drawn in Bolivia, Brazil, Chile and Ecuador. In our models, data are weighted so that each nation contributes 1500 cases.

The dependent variable, *intention to emigrate*, is measured with data from an item on which respondents were asked "Do you have any intention of going to live or work in another country in the next three years?" Responses are coded 1 = yes, 0 = No. Overall, just under 20% of respondents answered in the affirmative; this rate ranges from 9.7% in Chile to 44.6% in Guyana.<sup>2</sup> Because the dependent variable is dichotomous, models will be estimated using a

<sup>1</sup> The included nations are Argentina, Belize, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Guyana, Jamaica, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Suriname, Trinidad and Tobago, Uruguay and Venezuela. Excluded nations are Canada, Haiti, Honduras and the United States; in these nations, all items needed for the present analyses are not available.

<sup>2</sup> We measure intended behavior, not actual behavior (i.e., whether a person emigrated), and thus it is possible that respondents' intentions do not mesh with their actions. This has been examined by Van Dalen & Henkens, 2008, who found, first, that intention to emigrate strongly predicts subsequent emigration, and second, that the determinants of intention to emigrate and actual emigration match very closely.

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