Geoforum 62 (2015) 38–46

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Geoforum

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/geoforum

# 'There's no future here': The time and place of children's migration aspirations in Peru

Gina Crivello

*Department of International Development, University of Oxford, United Kingdom*

ARTICLE INFO

*Article history:*
Received 21 June 2014
Received in revised form 23 March 2015
Available online 10 April 2015

*Keywords:*
Migration
Aspirations
Poverty
Generation
Children
Latin America

ABSTRACT

This article examines young Peruvians' aspirations and the role of migration in their imagined futures, from a generational perspective. The data come from *Young Lives*, a long-term study of childhood poverty combining survey and qualitative approaches with children and their parents. The paper uses a biographical approach that sees migration as part of individual biographies as well as social structures and life course processes. The aim is to deepen understanding of the social contexts in which aspirations for and by children are generated, paying close attention to family migration histories, dynamic household contexts, and children's migration networks. The analysis focuses on the time-spaces of migration aspirations, showing the way past, present and future are interconnected. It also emplaces aspirations by focusing on the way aspirations by and for children are constituted in and through particular places. The conclusion reflects on the role of poverty and argues that 'aspirations' are about much more than abstract 'futures'; they orient actions in the present and say a great deal about young people's current realities and relationships.



> 'Reality without imagination is only half reality.'
>
> [Luis Buñuel]

## Introduction

For impoverished and marginalized young people whose daily lives unfold on fragile ground, aspirations are generated within a context of uncertainty, the weighing out of the risks between pursuing what is known and what is imagined as expected, probable and possible. This article is interested in young Peruvians' aspirations, the role of migration in their projected futures, and generational relations between parents and children.

The late Peruvian anthropologist, Degregori (2007), examined changing aspirations among Andean peasants in Peru, in light of wider historic and social transformations beginning in the 20th century. He used the metaphor of the shift from the 'Myth of Inkarri' (an indigenous myth of reconquest) to the 'Myth of Progress' to describe the devaluing of indigenous knowledge and identity in favour of the promises of modernity.[1] Defined by schooling, Spanish language, and literacy, the 'Myth of Progress' promises Andean peasants 'freedom' from ignorance through education (p. 4–5). 'Progress' implies modernization, urbanization, growth and construction (Lobo, 1982:64). Fundamental to the shift from 'Inkarri' to 'Progress' was a *temporal* reorientation, wherein Andean populations 'stopped looking to the past':

> They're no longer waiting for the Inka... The indigenous peasantry launched forward with an unsuspecting vitality towards the conquest of the future and of 'progress'. The school, commerce, and... salaried work, these are the principle instruments for this conquest, and migration to the cities – increasingly planned – opens up new horizons.
>
> [Degregori, 2007:6, translation mine]

Peru remains ripe ground to explore the relationship between social change, migration and young people's orientations towards the future. In recent years, the country has reported impressive levels of national economic growth accompanied by substantial investment in rural infrastructure and increased public social expenditure (Cueto et al., 2011:17). But inequality persists, and poverty remains concentrated among the country's rural and indigenous populations; wealth and the best quality health and educational services cluster in the coastal region where Lima (the country's capital) is located. Disparities within the urban landscape are evidenced by the highly visible informal settlements built up over the decades by rural migrants on the hillsides surrounding

*E-mail address:* gina.crivello@qeh.ox.ac.uk

[1] The legend of Inkarri describes the demise of Atahualpa, the last Inka ruler, at the hands of Spanish conquerors who buried his body parts in several locations across the kingdom. Legend has it that one day Atahualpa will rise to reclaim his kingdom.

http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2015.03.016
0016-7185/

Lima (Anderson, 2007:221). Although Lima represents only 10 per cent of the country's geographic space, it claims at least one third of its population, including twenty-seven per cent of the country's adolescents (MINSA, 2005). Other towns and cities also attract young people wishing to leave behind rural livelihoods characterised by scarcity, stagnation, harsh climate, and arduous working of the land.

The Myth of Progress and the promises of schooling remain powerful narratives shaping aspirations in Peru. It is more than a localized, exotic 'myth'; the valorization of school education underpins an increasingly globalized view of modern childhood and the research and policy agendas that fuel its circulation. Enrolment in primary education is near universal, and secondary school enrolment is increasing, although repetition and over-age (being older than the expected age for the school year) are problems (Cueto et al., 2011:20). This reflects part of a global trend wherein educational attainment has come to be an expectation of childhood, a sign of child wellbeing, and an indication of moral fortitude among youth (Johnson-Hanks, 2006).

This study is part of a larger research program, 'Young Lives', exploring children's changing experiences of poverty in four countries, including Peru.[2] This paper is interested in how children and their parents narrate experiences and aspirations of migration, drawing on interview and survey data. The analysis is presented in a series of inter-related theoretical themes that speak to the time-spaces of aspirations, of which the paper's title ('There's no future here') is indicative (quoting a rural mother's explanation for why her daughter would one day leave the village). In the next section, I draw connections in the literature between childhood, aspirations and migration. Then, I describe the research design and country context, before presenting the empirical data in two main sections, drawing on multi-generational perspectives. The first section starts to build a picture of the social contexts in which aspirations are generated, focusing on the role of mobility in family lives and childhoods. The second section takes a closer look at young people's networks and relationships. It draws attention to the ways in which space and place are agentic in how young people structure and achieve their aspirations. The conclusion reflects on the role of poverty and argues that 'aspirations' are about much more than abstract 'futures'; they orient actions in the present and say a great deal about young people's current realities and relationships.

## Bringing children and aspirations into migration's view

There are several potential literatures to exploit that address migration, aspirations and children/childhood, and a constellation of ideas – from geography, anthropology and cultural sociology – have inspired my approach. I follow other researchers who advocate a biographical approach to studying youth migration (Ní Laoire, 2000) and those calling for a greater focus on temporality (Cole and Durham, 2008) and on time-spaces 'to move beyond the individual, to see young people in relation to their wider contexts and in particular their relationship with others, as these shape outcomes' (Ansell et al., 2011:541).

The biographical approach to migration advocated by Halfacree and Boyle (1993) is useful for exploring the role of human agency vis-a-vis the socio-economic structures that shape migration decision-making. They encouraged researchers to attend to three undervalued facets of migration, namely that: (a) migration is a process in time rather than a simple one-off event; (b) migration decision-making is complex, such that from migrants' perspectives any one move may have multiple intertwined motivations; and (c) migration is a cultural construct and related to societal norms. Building on this, Ní Laoire (2000) studied the way Irish rural youth formed their life-paths in light of the choices and constraints presented by their everyday contexts. Similarly, Findlay and Li's (1997) study of Hong Kong emigrants in Canada and the UK situated individuals' migration decisions within the life course and not just in the moment when the decision is made. Biographical studies see migration as part of individual biographies as well as social structures defined by shifting inequalities and power structures (Ní Laoire, 2000:229).

Such biographical approaches developed in light of wider efforts by researchers to increase attention to the 'non-economic' reasons that inform much migration behaviour (Halfacree, 2004). Earlier dominant explanatory models emphasized rational choice and were premised on the assumption that, when faced with the decision to migrate, potential migrants make cost-benefit calculations aimed to maximize their individual net benefits, and much focus was on economic factors and wage-differentials (Todaro, 1969:139). There remains a tendency to explain migration choices by the logic of labour markets, as opposed to 'the exploration of everyday life situations wherein individuals and groups attempt to resolve their livelihood problems' (Long, 2008:38). Economic explanations take precedence over 'compelling personal concerns' that also matter (Wikan, 1990). Unsurprisingly, approaches concerned primarily with 'economic migration' tend to neglect children's perspectives and actions within migration processes, since children are not considered economic actors. Dominant figurations of childhood continue to consider children as economic dependents (Levison, 2000; Zelizer, 1994), viewed as passive recipients of adult decision-making, and, metaphorically, 'the luggage' in their family migration projects (Orellana et al., 2001:578). In policy terms, children who migrate on their own are considered 'out of place' and in need of adult protection and a localized family rooting; children's rightful place is within the nuclear family, in households that are fixed in bounded spaces (Boyden and Howard, 2013; Ní Laoire et al., 2010). Independent child migration from this perspective represents a threat to family cohesion. However, the study of transnational migration has gone some way towards greater inclusion of children's experiences, of 'children left behind', and the challenges of managing care, family relations and identities across borders (Bryceson and Vuorela, 2002).

A growing body of child-centered scholarship, including in low-income countries, recasts young people in migration processes; mobility is a resource to negotiate social exclusion (Azaola, 2012), transition experiences (Punch, 2007), gender networks (Heissler, 2013) and household poverty (Crivello, 2011; Leinaweaver, 2008). Other work considers the way different discourses compete to define and govern the appropriate time-spaces of childhood (Bastia, 2005; Boyden and Howard, 2013; Stryker, 2013). The metaphor of 'circulation' addresses the complexities of children's agency within the context of their 're-location' (Leinaweaver, 2007a), problematizing the notion of childhood as fixed in particular times and locations (Stryker and Yngvesson, 2013). These studies point to the importance of situating children within the context of power relations, and in this respect, Massey's (1991:24) notion of the 'power geometry' of time-space compression offers a useful analytic lens. She asks: *What is it that determines our degrees of mobility, that influences the sense we have of space and place?*

> For different social groups, and different individuals, are placed in very distinct ways in relation to these flows and interconnections... not merely the issue of who moves and who doesn't...

[2] Young Lives tracks the life trajectories of 12,000 children in Ethiopia, India (Andhra Pradesh and Telangana states), Peru and Vietnam over 15 years. www.younglives.org.uk. It is core-funded from 2001 to 2017 by UK aid from the UK Department for International Development (DFID) and co-funded by Irish Aid from 2014 to 2015. The views expressed are those of the author. They are not necessarily those of, or endorsed by, Young Lives, the University of Oxford, DFID or other funders.