Greek Return Migration

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A survey was conducted on a sample of persons residing in Athens to investigate whether labor migration is related to acquisition of job skills and to changes in attitudes toward key elements of Greek culture. The sample consisted of 100 men and 100 women (no married pairs) who had been labor migrants in West Germany, as the study group, and 100 men and 100 women (no married pairs) who had never been out of Greece, as the controls. The respondents were selected randomly from a cluster sample of migrants and nonmigrants who had children in Athenian grade schools in 1976-77; this conveniently controlled age differences of respondents. The questionnaire was constructed after a year's work on life history material (see Bernard and Voyoukalos 1976).

Practically all the migrants had spent at least five years in West Germany. They had achieved permanent-resident status and their return to Greece may be considered voluntary. Two-thirds of the sample had come back to Greece more than five years prior to our study. Their responses may therefore be considered thoughtful and not the immediate result of "return shock."

The two groups differ greatly in education: nonmigrants are much better educated than migrants. Limited education and lack of economic opportunity are the reasons most often given for migration. Most of the migrants (80%) said that they had had no marketable skills when they left Greece, and even more (85%) reported that they had failed to acquire such skills in Germany. Of the 30 respondents who had acquired skills, 13 had been able to find employment utilizing them. During the 1960s, one of the major benefits of labor migration to industrialized zones of Europe was expected to be the formation of a returning cadre of skilled workers to help develop Greece. From our data, this appears not to have occurred. Migrants are more than twice as likely to be unskilled laborers as nonmigrants and nearly three times as likely to be unskilled workers. Nonmigrants are seven times more likely than migrants to be white-collar employees or civil servants.

Another result of migration predicted during the 1960s was a change in values and attitudes among those who migrated. Depending on point of view, this was seen in the popular press of Greece as either a blessing ("modernization") or a curse ("loss of Greekness"). The data show that (a) nonmigrants are overwhelmingly more positive about Greece than migrants; (b) migrants are much more positive about migration than nonmigrants; (c) there is no significant difference between migrants and nonmigrants on 29 of the 32 items; we used to test how modern or conservative people are; (d) men are much more positive than women about Greece; (e) women are more positive than men about migration; and (f) men are generally more modern on social issues than women.

While neither sex of respondent nor the experience of migration per se has any discernible effect on modernism, education clearly affects how people feel about socially important issues. Fully 23 of the 32 items in this domain are significantly distributed by level of education of the respondent.

There appears to be a kind of "middle-class conservatism" as measured by education. Those with a high-school education are most positive about Greece compared to West Germany, most negative towards migration, and most conservative in their attitudes towards divorce, dowry, and other sex role issues. The lower and upper middle classes (as measured by primary schooling vs. postsecondary education—we couldn't get accurate information on income) seem to agree on many things. They seem to be more modern than those with a high school education in their attitudes towards dowry, sex roles, child rearing, and divorce and more negative overall in their beliefs about how Greek social institutions (medical care, recreation, employment) measure up against those of an industrialized society like West Germany.

After we tested the standard demographic variables for their interaction with attitudinal data, we created a variable called "daughters." T-tests show that those with daughters only and those with both sons and daughters are significantly more in favor of abolishing the dowry than those with sons only. Further, if a respondent has any daughters and has been a migrant, he or she is likely to be in favor of abolishing the dowry. This is not nearly so likely among nonmigrants. On the issue of personal freedom, nonmigrants with daughters only are almost four times more negative than those with sons only; among migrants the ratio is two to one. Returned migrants with daughters only are the most inclined not to be pleased with Greece; 46% of persons in this category say they would migrate again if they had the chance vs. only 13% of the migrants with sons only. Among nonmigrants only 10% of those with sons only, and 5% of those with daughters only, would migrate.

Among the migrants, the issue of medical care looms very large. On the item "To what extent does the difference in medical care between Greece and West Germany create difficulties for you in your life?" 41% of nonmigrants with sons only and 37% with daughters only are negative, while 57% of migrants with sons only and 84% with daughters only are negative. On most of the items assessing the quality of life in Greece vs. West Germany, those with sons only are more positive than those with daughters. Returned migrants with daughters are the most negative of all.

We tested whether education, combined with the presence of daughters, was related to responses. Of respondents (migrants and nonmigrants) with only a primary education, 17% of those with sons only said they would migrate, or migrate again. Twice as many respondents with limited education and daughters said they would migrate, and the difference is very significant. The pattern is repeated for many variables.

From all this, we know that returned migrants and nonmigrants have very different attitudes on major social issues in Greece. A stepwise discriminant analysis on the two groups confirms this observation: only five variables in such analysis are required to predict better than 70% of the time who is a returned migrant and who isn't.

We are left with a problem, however: we do not have any idea of cause and effect. Did migrants migrate in the first place because they were disenchanted with Greece, or did they get that way because of their experience abroad and their return? To approach this problem, we must ask why they came back when they did not have to. Answers to this question await the next phase of our research.

References Cited


1 The data from this study are available, for the cost of copying, in tabular form. Interested readers may contact either of the authors. The data were collected under Contract No. 271-76-3303 from the National Institute on Drug Abuse, awarded to the Research Institute for the Study of Man, Lambros Comitas, Principal Investigator.