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‘Migrating and forming identities in nineteenth-century England and Wales’

This paper however demonstrates that in general, the census is a powerful tool for the analysis of migration by firstly showing that by estimating the mean age at which individuals exited the parental home, individuals that probably migrated around the time of the census can be identified. This means that the process of migration and individuals’ choice of destination can be causally connected to the socio-economic context as identified in the census. Secondly, it demonstrates that the move made by migrants upon leaving home – with the notable exception of males that entered farm service – was the most significant move which individuals made during their lifetime. Using both cross-sectional evidence and a pseudo-longitudinal analysis, constructed by linking mothers’ migration paths through the birthplace of their children, it can be shown that migrants made their longest and most significant move upon leaving home and beyond this, tended to remain in the same place, with some making short-distance moves in the local area.

This has two implications. Firstly, it disproves Ravenstein’s theory of ‘step-migration’; by which migrants moved from the countryside to the cities in ‘waves’, migrating up the urban hierarchy with each wave and secondly, that the census – despite only having information about individuals’ place of birth and residence – can be used to analyse migration effectively if that migration represents a single move that took place approximately at census time.

Beyond this, this paper will briefly compare and contrast the migration pathways taken to different towns and cities across England and Wales and demonstrate that although each town and city had clear migration fields – with clear limits – the volume of migration to them – and the type of migrants themselves – fluctuated in response to the socio-economic context of the place migrants both exited and entered. This paper therefore demonstrates the insights that the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century census can offer on both the direction of migration and its determinants when both the nature of the source and the nature of human movement in the past is acknowledged and accounted for in its analysis and interpretation.