



'Movement is a constant feature in my life': Contextualising migration processes of highly skilled Indians



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ABSTRACT

Migration can be seen as a process rather than an event. In this paper, we argue for a focus on the whole migration process within the contexts that shape the events before, during and after the move. In order to gain insights into the complexities of migration behaviour and to link experiences throughout the migration process, we adopt a biographic approach that embeds the specific migration decisions in the life course contexts of the migrants. Based on 47 biographic in-depth interviews with highly skilled Indians in the Netherlands and the United Kingdom, our findings show that international geographical mobility has become a normative part of professional careers of highly skilled Indians and it is employed as a strategy for enhancing competitiveness on both domestic and international labour markets. Self-actualisation, rather than economic motives, appears to be the major driver for migration. Migration experiences add to the different forms of migrant capital. By drawing from this capital, the joining spouses are no longer passive movers but active agents in the migration process. Migrant capital is, however, conditioned by the policies which govern migration at the state level and which can determine future migration decisions. Furthermore, migration plans largely depend of the life course stages of migrants and their linked movers. Taking a holistic migration process approach provides the lens for understanding the migration paths of the highly skilled and for contextualising migration decisions within the life courses of individuals and their significant others.

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1. Introduction

Migration is a process, rather than an isolated event. To gain a complete understanding of this process we need to look beyond intentions and decisions to explore the contexts and life course trajectories that shape the migration paths of individuals. There is a large body of literature (e.g., Duncan and Newman, 1976; Landale and Guest, 1985; Gardner et al., 1986; De Jong, 2000; Heering et al., 2004; Van Dalen and Henkens, 2007) focusing on migration intentions and links to eventual migration behaviour. However, in this paper we make the case for a more detailed view of migration. We argue for a focus on the whole migration process with due attention to the contexts that shape the events before, during and after the move. We explore and contextualise the migration processes of highly skilled migrants as their skill set is in demand and can result in repeated mobility.

Highly skilled migrants are generally considered to be those with tertiary education or equivalent work experience (Iredale, 2001) and skilled migration is therefore often studied in the economic context, where human capital is one of the most important

resources for preparing the highly skilled for migration. However, Baláž and Williams (2004) advocate for 'total human capital' approach, which goes beyond formal education and qualifications to include a broader set of competences and to emphasise individual biographies in particular contexts. Based on in-depth empirical study, this paper aims to examine which resources highly skilled Indians in the Netherlands and the United Kingdom use for migration and how they shape their migration paths. In a further step, we contextualise the migration path within the life courses of highly skilled migrants to account for previous and future life course events and stages upon which migration decisions depend. The migrant life course highlights cultural, social, economic and institutional processes in multiple geographical settings (Kobayashi and Preston, 2007).

We investigate the ways in which migrants shape their migration paths, and the different factors that play a role in forming those paths. In the next sections, we examine the literature on different elements that constitute the migration process. Thereafter, we provide a background on the migration of high-skilled Indians to the Netherlands and the UK, explain the biographical approach and our data collection procedures, and finally discuss the results as situated in the literature. We argue that the culture of migration plays a central role for highly skilled Indians, for instance, by means of enforcing a migration norm or enabling access to

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professional networks abroad. Migration experiences add to the different forms of migrant capital, which are necessary resources for self-actualisation as one of the major migration motives, increasingly so for co-migrating spouses. However, particularly in times of economic crisis, institutional settings can pose a restriction to the advancement of migrant capital and, in combination with life course events, determine future migration paths. Taking a holistic migration process approach provides a lens for understanding the migration paths of the highly skilled and for contextualising migration decisions within the life courses of individuals and their significant others.

2. Migration process: background

In this paper we operationalise migration process to include migration decisions, migration histories, human and cultural capital, access to social and professional networks, the policies that govern migration and the manner in which life course and gender shape the migration path.

Migration decision-making is a transition, which is formed over time and during other processes, such as development of a professional career or family formation. Various migration theories have focused only on the migration decision itself, however, our aim is to examine the whole migration process between two migration decisions. Among the many models and theories that examine migration decision-making, [Kley and Mulder \(2010\)](#) provide a framework to reflect the migration decision-making process, consisting of phases of considering, planning and realising migration. On the other hand, [De Jong's \(2000\)](#) general model of migration decision-making centrally assumes that the migration path is structured by previous migration decisions, which in turn shape the subsequent migration decisions through the experiences gained during migration. Other studies on both internal and international migration ([Massey and Espinosa, 1997](#); [Boyle et al., 1998](#); [Kley, 2011](#); [Mavroudi and Warren, 2013](#)) confirm that previous migration experience increases the likelihood of subsequent migration. In this study, we illustrate how previous migration experiences of the highly skilled not only lead to new migration accounts but also to career advancement. [King and Skeldon \(2010\)](#) emphasise that both internal and international migration form an integrated system, where the neglect of one leads to a partial interpretation of the total picture. Internal migration is often a conditioning factor for subsequent international migration ([Çaro et al., 2013](#)). In this study the biographies also capture this conditioning factor as part of the migrant capital.

Throughout the migration process individuals and families strategise to gather different types of capital and access different networks. 'Skilling' or accumulating human capital could be seen as a strategy towards migration. Studies have consistently shown that the higher education one has, the more likely they are to migrate (e.g., [Boyle et al., 1998](#); [Massey et al., 1998](#); [Van Dalen and Henkens, 2007](#)). In addition to the directly measurable human capital, migrants can draw from an indirect set of characteristics, or cultural capital ([Bourdieu, 1986](#)), which consists of transferable skills, such as command of English language, and of shared practices, such as common history. [Nohl et al. \(2006\)](#) show how highly skilled migrants in Germany utilise the cultural capital in different stages of migration, especially in terms of (non-)recognition of certain skills. In addition to the cultural capital migrants bring with them from the home country, they actively create new forms of cultural capital in the country of residence ([Erel, 2010](#)). Migration is also facilitated by social capital, or the actual or potential resources stemming from belonging to a social network ([Bourdieu, 1986](#)). For migrants, social networks enhance migration through knowledge of and contacts in the destination, as well as through

providing practical help in the new country, particularly in finding jobs ([Vertovec, 2002](#); [Harvey, 2011](#)). It follows that social networks can be of crucial value to migrants for the improvement of their position, at least in the early stages of migration process, i.e., when making the decision to migrate, and settling in the new society. Both cultural and social capital are intrinsic to the development of the individual as they provide the tools for self-actualisation, one of the central themes in this paper. Furthermore, we will use the interconnections between different types of capital to illustrate how they together constellate migrant capital.

These different forms of capital can only be utilised for migration if favourable immigration policies are in place in the destination countries. Immigration policies act as either facilitating or restricting agents through the mechanisms of admission criteria, accreditation of qualifications, residence issues or spouse migration ([Iredale, 2005](#)). Not all individuals, however, receive the same opportunities in the migration process. Gender certainly plays a role in the differentiation of the migration process. The sectors that international migrant women typically occupy are highly regulated by state ([Raghuram, 2004](#); [Iredale, 2005](#)) and female migrants particularly are found to encounter post-migration deskilling challenges ([Kofman, 2012](#)). Furthermore, the 'trailing wife' effect persists irrespective of the skill level of the female partner ([Ackers, 2004](#)). Comparison with non-migrant professionals has led to the same conclusions: wives by and large scale back on their career, particularly when starting parenting ([Becker and Moen, 1999](#)). As migration decisions are often made within a household, positive migration outcomes – particularly for female partners – rely on both professional career and family life ([Willis and Yeoh, 2000](#)), but also on prevailing social values and supportive institutions ([Gonzales Ramos and Verges Bosch, 2013](#)). This is especially salient for the professions where 'mobility is an expectation and a strategy' ([Kofman, 2012, p. 80](#)), such as academic jobs. Thus different capitals, social and professional networks and institutional regimes form the context in which various migration processes are carried out to co-create different cultures of migration.

The migration process, including decision-making, is dependent on the life courses and events of both the primary mover and his or her linked movers ([Mulder and Wagner, 1993](#); [Mulder and Hooimeijer, 1999](#)). The life course serves as a broad basis for situating migration decisions and behaviour, and it embeds individual lives into social structures ([Mayer, 2004](#)). For example, [Ley and Kobayashi \(2005\)](#) documented how immigrants from Hong Kong in Canada strategically migrate during various life stages: they generally return to Hong Kong early or mid-career for economic reasons and retire in Canada due to higher levels of quality of life. However, [Ley and Kobayashi \(2005\)](#) use the term 'life cycle', which assumes a predetermined set of events in a predetermined sequence which all individuals undergo. We base our research on 'life course' concept, which allows for diversity in the pattern of events and sequences, leaving space for personalised migration paths. Any analysis of the migration process should therefore also focus on other life course events, such as graduation from tertiary education, changes in labour market status, union formation or dissolution, childbirth. In order to gain a better understanding of the complexities of migration behaviour and to link experiences throughout the migration process, we adopt a biographic approach that embeds the specific migration decisions in the life course contexts of the migrants.

3. Migration of high-skilled Indians to the Netherlands and the UK

Although there is a large body of literature documenting the gains brought by high-skilled migrants to the host country,

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