



Highly skilled dependent migrants entering the labour market: Gender and place in skill transfer

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ABSTRACT

Regional development – including in the Arctic – relies heavily on in-migration, skills acquisition and international expertise. This paper is based on a qualitative study (Part of the fieldwork was undertaken with Dr. T. Fosslund, University of Tromsø.) of highly skilled immigrants in Tromsø, Norway, undertaken while migrants attended the Global Future talent mobilisation programme. It builds on migrant narratives and observations, showing both women and men migrate for non-work reasons – often marriage or love. While previous studies focused on women as dependent migrants and described the ‘de-skilling’ of highly skilled migrants during migration, this study addresses the mechanisms which make entering labour markets a problem, prior to the deskilling, for men and women. Acknowledging that love migration is grounded in processes outside the labour market, and that migrants enter a specific local labour market, I employ a contextual perspective focused on gender and place. Theories on the transfer of skills are added to understand the processes of accessing and exclusion from skilled labour markets. The study finds gendered expectations and norms affect both women and men’s participation in labour markets. It shows how both the scale and structure of a local labour market are important in understanding exclusion processes and that going beyond language proficiency, localised knowledge and access to local non-migrant networks seem necessary to make skills relevant. These findings strengthen our understanding of migrants’ exclusion, and the *spatial, social and cultural* embeddedness of skills.

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1. Introduction

Mobility of highly skilled people is characteristic of globalisation and thus can be seen as symbolic of the seamless transfer of qualifications across dispersed communities and labour markets. *The Norwegian Government* (2009) states future development of the Arctic will rely heavily on in-migration of a highly skilled labour force and international co-operation. Highly skilled migration is increasingly perceived as resource allocation: to quote United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon: [we must] “draw the most of the enormous benefits that migration can bring and create a so-called ‘triple win’” (UN, 2008). ‘Triple win’ refers to movements of skills and qualifications for the benefit of the individual, their country of origin, and destination. Highly skilled migration is not simply gaining attention: it is the least controversial form of international re-location and has grown in scale, scope and complexity (Scott, 2006, p. 1106f). Attracting and keeping highly skilled workers are key factors in the policies of many countries (Regets, 2007; Csedö, 2008).

Nevertheless, in Norway (Rogstad and Orupabo, 2007) – like other countries (Boyd, 2000; Piore, 1979; Liebig, 2009; Kofman

et al., 2000; Ho, 2011; Favell, 2008; Pethe, 2007) – statistical and qualitative studies show highly skilled migrants experience problems getting appropriate jobs and promotions. Problems vary according to gender, skill type and profession, country of origin, years of residency and language proficiency. The overall picture is clear: migrants with higher education – even migrants with Norwegian education, long-term residency and language proficiency – experience greater risks of unemployment and over-qualification than the ethnic majority (register studies by Støren (2004) and Brekke (2008). SOPEMI International Migration Outlook (e.g., 2009, p. 4) reports that the discounting of highly skilled migrants’ qualifications is found most often among asylum seekers, refugees, and marriage- and dependent-migrants. This suggests that accessing the labour market, when migrating for reasons other than work, poses some specific challenges.

This paper analyses the experiences of highly skilled ‘love migrants’ (12 women, five men) in order to identify factors and processes shaping labour market exclusion. The study is based on qualitative interviews, observations and informal talks over 1 year with participants attending Global Future, a part-time programme aimed at helping highly skilled migrants utilise their talents in the Tromsø labour market. All migrated for non-work reasons: namely, love.

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2. Background and research question

Family-related migration has been the dominant mode of legal entry into European states for over two decades (Kofman, 2004, p. 243). It constitutes two-thirds of immigration to the US, more than a quarter to Canada and Australia, and a little less in Europe (ibid: 244). Today family migration constitutes a quarter of migration to Norway; it constituted half in 1990. Labour migration has increased since 1990 from 1000 to 26,000 a year, and marriage and family migration from 4500 to 16,200 yearly, in 2011. In total 23% of the migrants arriving from 1990 to 2011 got their residence permit based on family reunification, while 15% arrived to establish a family, which is also part of the family reunification scheme (Statistics Norway, 2011). Russian women constitute a considerable part of this in Norway's Arctic north (Flemmen and Lotherington, 2009). Piper (2003, p. 462) predicts increases in international marriages will further increase family-related migration. Many highly educated professionals thus enter labour markets as family members and 'tied' migrants (Iredale, 2005, p. 156). They often enter labour markets that offer their spouse a job, while employment was not the primary objective of their migration (Liebig, 2009, p. 35). Kofman and Raghuram (2005, p. 151) show highly skilled women are more likely than men to migrate other than as workers, and that many experience difficulties finding appropriate employment (Iredale, 2005, p. 156). Furthermore, Kofman (2000, 2004) and Iredale (2005) claim female skilled migrants are invisible in skilled migration research. Journal special issues (e.g., *Geoforum* No. 36: 2005; *Womens' Studies International Forum*, vol. 27:2 2004), and a growing number of articles have changed this and we may characterise female and gendered skilled migration as an emerging field of study.

Nevertheless, Meares (2010) describes knowledge of the interplay between women, work and skilled migration as 'scant'. Gendered studies of male migrants are even rarer, as are studies highlighting gender and the labour market mechanisms behind de-skilling.

This article's exploration of highly skilled love migrants – and the roles of gender and place-specific cultural understandings in accessing skilled labour markets – makes two traditions within the study of skilled migration particularly relevant: I first discuss theories at the intersection of skilled migration and labour market function focusing on the role of context and place in skill transfer. I then discuss feminist perspectives on gender and family-related highly skilled migration. This locates the study in relevant literature and perspectives. I then introduce the Global Future programme, the methodology applied, and the Tromsø context. The discussion then focuses on how migrants end up in Tromsø, and family migration as a gendered process. The study shows that both men and women in this group entered Norway as family migrants, and that gender affects both men and women. The second part discusses skilled labour market entry and finds that labour markets and skills are culturally and locally embedded in the communities of departure and arrival. It demonstrates the importance of language proficiency, contextuality, skills relativity and the social constitution of labour markets in highly skilled migrant labour market access. Love as an entry route is shown to have distinctive outcomes for migrants.

3. Understanding labour market exclusion of highly¹ skilled migrants

Growing interest in highly skilled migration since the 1980s is connected to increasing recognition of the general diversity of

migration, a new interest in migration policies, and growing numbers of migrants in the corporate sector following globalisation (Koser and Salt, 1997, p. 285; *Geoforum* 33:4 2002). Migration of the highly skilled became a study object within economic globalisation focusing on exchange schemes among corporate managers (Koser and Salt, 1997, p. 289). This meant economic perspectives dominated theory: while the development and critiques of migration theories were generally grounded in socio-cultural perspectives (including feminist studies), these made little impact on skilled migration literature (ibid. 1997: 294). Even today there is little cross-fertilisation between these literatures (Williams, 2007, p. 361).

3.1. The embeddedness of labour markets² and skilled migration in economic literature

Socio-cultural changes and new theoretical perspectives have highlighted new themes – such as migrants' qualitative experiences. (Geo-)political changes in Eastern Europe raised 'brain drain' and brain waste issues once again, as highly skilled Eastern Europeans took on jobs in the West they were over-qualified for (Koser and Salt, 1997, p. 286; Bauder, 2003). These processes resulted in studies such as Friedberg's (2000) on the lack of portability of human capital, and made Jones' (1996) analyses of the social constitution of labour markets and skills most relevant.

Jones (1996) shows that labour market exchanges "take place through sets of distinctive social institutions" (Jones, 1996, p. 109, Ref. Granovetter [1985]): manifold personal, cultural, social and political norms shape how particular markets function. Labour markets are therefore *culturally embedded* rather than driven by economic supply and demand calculations (Jones, 1996, p. 127). Jones also highlights that "[s]kills are inseparable not only from individuals, but also from a complex series of expectations, needs and rights attached to persons" (Jones, 1996, p. 109). This allows Jones to apply labour market processes to class issues relevant to migrants' labour market entry. Nevertheless, he pays little attention to gender, geography or ethnicity, which studies of highly skilled love migrants require.

Meyer (2001, p. 96) argues from a socio-economic network (i.e., actor-based) perspective. His study is an example of how entities, discourses and processes gain meaning and content from the networks they are a part of. Analyses of high-tech/highly skilled diaspora networks in Colombia and South Africa show that "[a] network makes an individual suitable for a job [and] is slowly established with a mutual adaptation of actors and intermediaries" (Meyer, 2001, p. 98). He argues individuals in knowledge-intensive activities are locally deeply rooted professionals who contextualise and localise their skills in social networks based on their own personal history. Skills are tied to the environment of the "holder", while the actor's positions in networks "translate" experience into effective abilities (Meyer, 2001, p. 102). Anthias (2007) highlights what she calls 'mobilisable' social ties and networks, as only these function as social capital. Intermediaries, networks and migration organisations nevertheless channel and make migrants – as found by Aure (2008) in a study of Russian labour migration to northern Norway. Such perspectives highlight the infrastructural conditions that shape, channel and also re-make skilled people into tied de-skilled migrants in Tromsø.

Relative and contextual approaches are also applied in Csedö's (2008) study of Eastern European professional migrants in London. She shows that transferable skills must include labour market information, destination language proficiency, occupational

¹ That is, individuals with a university degree or higher level of education (Iredale, 2001, p. 8).

² I focus on migration-specific literature, literature on women's labour market inclusion is not included. A Norwegian classic is Ellingsæter (1995). Acker (1990) has shown organisational cultures and recruitment processes are gendered.

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