



Highly skilled migrants entering the labour market: Experiences and strategies in the contested field of overqualification and skills mismatch

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ABSTRACT

The mobility of highly skilled individuals between EU/EFTA countries is often discussed as either about choice and professional careers or about overqualification and power relations that lead to deskilling. To highlight these issues' entanglements, this paper draws on in-depth interviews with tertiary-educated Spaniards who migrated to Switzerland for work. Using Bourdieu's capital approach, we unpack the generic definition of "qualification and skills mismatch", which is a key issue in young highly skilled migrants' labour market experiences. In so doing, we reveal the very individual and nuanced meanings of qualification and skills mismatch, including often subtle constraints in the labour market and personal limits imposed by accepting mismatching work arrangements. We thus contribute to the understanding of migration, work experiences, and aspirations in the course of middling transnationalism. Our respondents see mobility both as a phase of freedom with the opportunity to gain experience abroad and one of critical periods and uncertainty in relation to work opportunities. The respondents also perceive themselves as still in transition from higher education to work, and in some cases they see global work experience as a form of capital that can improve their work opportunities in Spain as much as in other countries. We argue that these perceptions help them to cope with periods of uncertainty in the context of work.

1. Introduction

The mobility of individuals between EU/EFTA countries is characterised by a large group called "middling transnationals" (Parutis, 2014a; Müller, 2012). This term emphasises the degree to which transnational mobility includes many more people than privileged transnational elites and exploited precarious workers (Conradson and Latham, 2005; Favell et al., 2006; Müller, 2012; Parutis, 2014a). Focusing on young, well-educated intra-European migrants, Favell et al. (2007: 16) highlight the differentiated realities of middling transnationals and call for more in-depth research of their migration experiences (Favell et al., 2007: 16). The increasing inner EU/EFTA migration of young highly skilled people (meaning those with a tertiary education²) from the European South serves as a good example here. Research shows a North-South axis of mobility exists, caused by different growth rates between countries, austerity policies, and high unemployment rates (Animento, 2016; Triandafyllidou and Isaakyn, 2016; Bygnes, 2017). Spain is one such country. After a period of

intensive economic growth, Spain was strongly affected by the recession, and many, especially young people, left Spain for better opportunities abroad (Grasso and Ottaviani, 2015; Domínguez-Mujica et al., 2016).

In this paper, we look at young highly skilled Spaniards (below 30 years old) who migrated to Switzerland during the economic crisis and shortly after completing their higher education degree. We reveal the very individual and nuanced meanings of qualification and skills mismatch, including often subtle constraints in the labour market and personal limits imposed by accepting mismatching work arrangements, and thus contribute to the understanding of migration, work experiences, and aspiration in middling transnationalism.

In Spain, young adults have been hardest hit by unemployment, which increased from 17% in 2007 to 53% in 2013 among those aged 16–24, nearly three times the OECD average (Dolado et al., 2013: 7–8). The unemployment rate among young adults aged 25–34, 28%, is lower but still dramatic (Dolado et al., 2013). Therefore, outmigration has become a popular strategy among youth in Spain (Grasso and Ottaviani,

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² The definition and operationalisation of highly skilled migrants is not an easy task, as highly skilled is seen as an interplay between education, income, and professional qualifications (eg. Gonzalez Enriquez and Triandafyllidou 2016; King et al. 2016). However, in both policy papers and academic literature, highly skilled is often defined as having a tertiary education degree (King et al. 2016).

2015; Domínguez-Mujica et al., 2016). Studies indicate that the share of Spanish migrants with tertiary education is very high (IOM, 2010; Gonzalez Enriquez and Triandafyllidou, 2016; Kaczmarczyk and Stanek, 2016). In Switzerland too, where this study was conducted, the number of Spanish immigrants has increased since the economic crisis (BFS, 2016a).³

European policy debates view mobility as one strategy among youth in Spain and other European countries to cope with high unemployment (European Commission, 2010; European Social Fund, 2016; Gropas and Bartolini, 2016). Current policy designs in Europe tend to assume that highly skilled migrants have relatively few problems entering foreign labour markets (Gonzalez Enriquez and Triandafyllidou, 2016: 46; Kofman, 2013) but acknowledge that a number of migrants from southern Europe are overqualified for their current jobs (OECD and European Commission, 2014: 9). Very little has been written on how Spaniards, especially highly qualified young Spaniards, were coping with the crisis, perhaps migrated abroad, and how they managed to integrate in foreign labour markets. The few exceptions remark that migration from Southern Europe was not only motivated by unemployment but also by a general lack of prospects, deep dissatisfaction in Spanish society with the political strategies adopted during the crisis, a desire to improve academic and professional training, and an eagerness for new experiences through migration (Gonzalez Enriquez and Romera, 2014; Domínguez-Mujica et al., 2016; Gonzalez Enriquez and Triandafyllidou, 2016; Gropas and Bartolini, 2016; Bygnes, 2017). IT professionals from Spain, Greece, and Portugal found better employment conditions than they had in their country of origin before migration (Gropas and Bartolini, 2016: 186). However, looking at the labour market more generally, Gonzalez Enriquez and Triandafyllidou (2016) found local languages to be a major barrier to finding appropriate employment for young professionals from Southern Europe in general and Spain in particular. These findings on southern Europe are in line with broader intra-European migration research (e.g. Favell, 2008; Aure, 2013; Parutis, 2014b; King et al., 2016). Despite their qualifications and extensive professional skills, middling transnationals have mixed experiences in finding suitable jobs in the EU labour market, where some encounter deskilling and overqualification. To unpack meanings of deskilling and overqualification, we address two research questions: How do young Spaniards who migrated to Switzerland during the economic crisis perceive and negotiate qualification and skills matches? How do they justify accepting or not accepting jobs which do not reflect their own qualifications and skills? For both these questions, we ask whether and to what extent the economic crisis in Spain provides a frame of reference when interviewees accept qualification and skill mismatches. Our research showed that the jobs they found in many cases did not match their formal qualifications very well, and that the migrants could be seen as, in the terminology of the OECD, “overqualified”. In this terminology, an individual is considered to be overqualified for a job if he/she possesses higher qualifications than those required by the job. Further, a person is seen as “overskilled” if he/she reports having “the skills to cope with more demanding duties at work” (OECD, 2011: 194). The OECD definitions are highly valuable and often used, for example, as indicators with which to measure migrants’ integration. Statistics show that highly skilled people who migrated internationally experience overqualification more often than people who did not migrate (OECD, 2011), and this is the case in Switzerland too (BFS, 2016b). In addition, the proportion of 14-to-25-year olds who are overqualified is significantly higher than in the rest of the total working population in Switzerland (BFS, 2016c).⁴

³ These recent intra-European mobilities are embedded in a longstanding South-North migration that has institutionalised the recruitment of mainly low-skilled “guest workers” (*Gastarbeiter*) from southern Europe, particularly Italy, Spain, and Portugal, since 1948 (e.g. D’Amato, 2001; Piguet, 2006; Soom Amman, 2011).

⁴ Statistics in Switzerland indicate that the number of young highly skilled people with migration status who are overqualified is higher than the number of young highly skilled

However, we argue that such general indicators are incapable of capturing and measuring either more complex situations and reasons for accepting skills mismatches or, conversely, the limits beyond which individuals do not accept skills mismatches and unsatisfactory working conditions. One major reason for this is that migrants gain many different forms of capital (such as language, networks, migration experiences, and formalised certificates) through working in Switzerland, and they accept some limitations in return. Thus, this paper contributes to research on the labour market experiences of young highly skilled European south-north migrants, taking into account their own perspectives and roles in negotiating the value of their qualifications. We suggest that Bourdieu’s notions of capital can enhance our understanding of such negotiations among middling transnationals. In addition, our findings have broader implications for debates on young people’s life courses and the role of migration in their transition from higher education to work. We also contribute to debates on the role and recognition of migrant’s qualifications and skills in the labour market.

We have structured the paper in the following way. After providing an introduction to the conceptual debates and to the methodology, we present research results addressing three themes: why young professionals accept unsatisfactory working conditions and mismatching jobs, the limits of acceptance, and the more subtle and hidden constraints in matching job positions. We conclude that the categories of qualification match and mismatch and skills match and mismatch are blurred; that the conversion of capital is highly contextual and spatial; and that a life-course perspective reveals that respondents still perceive themselves as very much in transition from higher education to work. This perception and their perception of global work experience as a capital that can support their labour market entry and/or position are perceptions that seem to help them to cope with periods of uncertainty.

2. Middling transnationalism and the life course: understanding interrelations of work experiences and self-development in the context of labour migration

A large proportion of migrants are not necessarily either elite, corporate expatriates or poor precarious living labour migrants. There is an under-researched phenomenon of migrants who have a “middling status position” and occupy a middle-class position in their country of origin (Nagel, 2005; Favell et al., 2007; Ryan and Mulholland, 2013; Parutis, 2014a).

Conradson and Latham (2005) offer the term middling transnationals to indicate that the motivation to migrate for such “ordinary” transnationals (Smith and Guarnizo, 1998) is not purely economic (Conradson and Latham, 2005; Parutis, 2014a). Particularly for young mobile Europeans, moving abroad seems to be not only related to work but also to lifestyle choices, experiencing adventure, new cultures, learning new language(s), and general personal development (Burrell, 2011; Krings et al., 2013; Ryan and Mulholland, 2013; Frändberg, 2014). Being abroad as part of self-development has also been discussed in debates about global work (Shaffer et al., 2012: 1283). Global work experiences, and experience abroad more generally, are seen as necessary for individual work biographies. These experiences can lead into hardships as well as opportunities (Jones, 2008; Cranston, 2016). For instance, highly skilled migrants such as scientists, engineers, and financial experts tend to be seen as wanted and welcome migrants thanks to their contributions to development and economic growth (Beaverstock and Hall, 2012; Gropas and Bartolini, 2016). In this vein, “terms such as ‘brain drain’, ‘brain circulation’ and ‘brain exchange’

(footnote continued)

people without migration status who are overqualified. However, we cannot count on these numbers, as they are statistically only of limited reliability (noted by the Swiss ministry for statistics). Further, the categories used in the official Swiss statistics (people with/without migration background) are not congruent with the category of migrants used in this paper (people who migrated internationally). BFS (2016c).

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