



Emotions on the move: Mapping the emergent field of emotion and migration



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ABSTRACT

Migrant life experiences and the migration process offer a rich, complex and under-examined field for social research on emotion. This article introduces this Special Issue collection of papers, all authored by migration scholars, by providing an overview of migration and emotions studies, hopefully inspiring further scholarly work and orienting newcomers to the field. We examine research to date on topics such as the development of emotional life “on the move” over time and space; the interface between emotion in proximity and from a distance; the influence of mobility on emotional cultures and on their changing social and ethnic boundaries; the mixed ways in which emotions are dis-embodied and re-embodied – out of place and re-emplaced – in response to migrant life trajectories. In all of these domains, available research points to the migrant emotional condition as a complex and multifaceted one. Far from being the opposite of the instrumental (i.e. economically-driven) dimension of migrant life, the emotional dimension is its inescapable complement, in which ambivalence is more common than straightforward “either (home-)/or (host-oriented)” emotional states. The relevance of emotion to the debate on immigrant integration, identity and belonging, and the political significance of emotion both for top-down politics and day-to-day ethnic relations, is also analysed. A case is made for further comparative, multi-method and interdisciplinary research on migration and emotion given the important intersections of these fields.

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1. Introduction

Emotions are part and parcel of everyday life, in all its aspects; as such, emotions have been increasingly debated across the social sciences. This holds true also for migration studies: mixed and contrasting emotions and feelings such as hope and nostalgia, guilt and ambition, affection and disaffection – to name but a few – are an integral part of the life experiences of migrants. The everyday relevance of emotions can be easily appreciated in migrant family and group relationships, as well as in their ethnic relations with majority societies and in their cross-border interactions with homelands, communities of origin and left-behind kin. Despite the plethora of qualitative analyses on the topic, however, the emotional side of the migrant condition seems still relatively understudied. This is partly to be explained by the dominance of economic and political analyses of migration, which tend to

downplay emotional factors or overlook them altogether, as we will argue below.

This ESS Special Issue focuses on migration studies, and its intersections with studies of emotion, in an interdisciplinary perspective, building on sociological, anthropological, geographical and psychological accounts.¹ The contributions represent a multi-vocal set of reflections on the continuities and discontinuities emerging in migrants' emotional experience, as well as on the ways in which their emotions are socially and culturally (re)constructed. A major theme involves the emotional bases underpinning migrants' cross-border ties and practices – i.e. their changing dedications, obligations and wishes, and the social factors accounting for them. A central question to be addressed, at least in a

¹ Several of the pieces included in this Special Issue were originally presented at the Second ISA Forum of Sociology in Buenos Aires (2012), within the Research Committee on Sociology of Migration (RC31). The session, convened by the two Guest Editors, was entitled *Out of place emotion? Managing affection from afar in transnational migration*.

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preliminary way, is what the study of emotion adds to our understanding of ‘migrant experience’; and how transnational migration studies, in turn, contributes to the social science debate on emotions.

In this introductory and conceptual article, we aim to provide a concise overview of existing work in the field of emotions and migration, not only as a suitable context for the papers that follow, but also to chart the key issues and future directions of this emerging field. We hope that this initiative will help to consolidate emotion as an important topic for migration research, while also highlighting the significance of migration and mobility processes for the social study of emotion. Importantly, this does not entail only a focus on the emotions of individual migrants. The emotional dynamics associated with migration at a social and political level must also be appreciated, as they affect the life experience both of migrants and of their “sedentary” counterparts (i.e. non-migrants in home communities, and native residents in host societies).

Given our background in migration studies, we begin by examining the key implications of the social theory of emotion for the study of the processes of migration. These include a focus on the emotional lives of migrants at the individual, household and community levels, as well as considerations of the national and transnational social ‘fields’ (Levitt and Glick Schiller, 2004) and ‘scapes’ (Appadurai, 1996) of lived experience. With the revolution in new communication technologies, emotional lives are no longer conducted solely in proximity, but are increasingly performed, practiced and displayed in a variety of situated and simultaneous interactions, including across distance and space and over time. At all of its ‘stages’, the migration process is characterized by important transformations along the migrants’ life course involving the transmission, reproduction and evolution of emotions in relation to belonging, identity and ‘home’. Indeed, the notion of ‘the migrant condition’ is a reference to the characteristic ambiguities and tensions around emotional connections to ‘here’ and ‘there’.

Furthermore, some of the most emotive issues of our times concern not so much the migrant condition as the politics of the migrant phenomenon: the fraught plight of asylum seekers and refugees test the limits of trust and compassion; the fear of home-grown terrorism sits uneasily against the promise of future generations; the capacity for societies to integrate multiethnic and multifaith denominations in the face of extremism and acts of terror have put multicultural social policy on trial. All of these issues are both deeply emotive and deeply political. Indeed, the politics of fear and a rise in xenophobia has come to dominate most contemporary political campaigns whether at the level of small towns, nations or globally. From historically divided continents like Europe to newer multicultural nations like Australia, clashes between pro- and anti-nationalistic sentiments are becoming commonplace.

2. Migration and emotion: taking stock and looking ahead

As has been common throughout the social sciences, there has been a tendency to overlook emotions in migration studies generally (Mai and King, 2009: 297), although there is a growing body of research (including this Special Issue) that responds to this long-established neglect (e.g. Svasek, 2012; Ho, 2014). There exists something of a gap in mutual knowledge and recognition between the fields of migration studies and emotion studies. This Introduction and the contributions to this Special Issue attempt to bridge this gap, drawing on a variety of theoretical approaches in migration studies to reflect on key issues in studies of emotion. Some of the articles that follow are oriented by theories of assimilation and local integration (Raffaetà; Kivisto and LaVecchia); others follow the optics of transnationalism and cross-border care

circulation (Baldassar, Vermot, Gallo, Baak); still others belong to the theoretical fields of interethnic relations (Tazreiter) and of acculturation – as well as the lack thereof (Kokanovic and Bozic-Vrbancic).

The case studies in this SI illustrate that the nexus between emotion and migration makes for an important research field, for several reasons. First, the migration process offers a poignant window from which to view emotions, in the light of their ever-changing cultural bases. The process of migration may result in transformation of emotional life through hybrid and contrapuntal cultures of emotion or emotional trajectories brought about by emotions on the move and out of place. Secondly, an analysis of emotions provides an important corrective and critique of the predominant ‘economic rationalist’ approaches to migration of the past. For example, ties to homeland have always been a central focus of migration studies. Regardless of the way such ties are framed – as a negative impediment to settlement and integration and/or a positive opportunity for diaspora relations and international development – the point is that emotions are key to these links, as well as to the politics and policies of migration. In fact, as already noted, the issues of belonging and identity, and the associated politics of fear, are central to migration and both are quintessentially affective and emotional notions.

Transnational migration, and mobile lives more generally, offer a privileged lens through which to observe lives emotions. The migration process is a powerful catalyser of change in emotional life – one that may make it physically and symbolically “out of place”. As people move away from home—or indeed, *between* ‘homes’ – emotions themselves are on the move. They evolve and are negotiated across novel settings, life circumstances and points of reference. Migration can be appreciated as an important research field on “the spatiality and the temporality of emotions” (Bondi et al., 2007: 3). A distinctive focus on migrants’ dynamic emotional life is a source of meaningful insights into their subjectivities, their interactions with old and new reference groups as well as the faceted interdependence between emotion, space and place.

Not surprisingly, as the reviews of the literature on migration and emotion show, the meaning of such a seemingly intangible concept as emotion is not self-evident (cf. Svasek and Skrbis, 2007; Skrbis, 2008; Svasek, 2008, 2010). There is continuing debate across the social sciences about the extent to which emotions are best understood as social and inter-subjective, or as physiological and biologically-driven phenomena. Generally speaking, the migration and emotion literature tends to encompass both these approaches. In terms of the papers in this collection, Barbalet’s (2002: 1) definition of emotion is apposite: “an experience of involvement” that “registers in [one’s] physical and dispositional being” but, importantly, “is *in* the social relationship”. Sociologically speaking, emotions belong both to an intra-personal (psychic and corporeal) domain and, simultaneously, to an interpersonal (social and inter-corporeal) one. They are “not simply ‘within’ or ‘without’, but that they define the contours of the multiple worlds that are inhabited by different subjects” (Ahmed, 2004: 25). Indeed, they act like a bridge over “the liminal space between the individual and the social” (Zembylas, 2012: 167), or as “a crucial link between micro and macro levels of social reality” (Turner and Stets, 2005: 1); between agency and structure (Barbalet, 2002); private and public (Zembylas, 2012); or, “bodies and places” (Bondi et al., 2007). As a simultaneously “cognitive, motivational and physiological” experience, emotions are mutually constitutive of social reality – they “are not only shaped by, but also shape, the relationship in which they occur” (Boiger and Mesquita, 2012: 221–2).

How this mutual constitution occurs against a background of extended mobility, which strongly affects social relationships in proximity and over distance, is the key issue to be addressed from

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