

Multiple migrations: The Conceptual Framework and Future Research Agenda

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Introduction

This paper examines the complex patterns of population mobility – what I call “multiple migrations.” In the last several decades, the volume of international migration has dramatically grown and the patterns of mobility have become increasingly diverse. A significant number of people live in several countries during their life time for various reasons (e.g. Jasso & Rosenzweig 1982; Beenstock, 1996). This refers not only to temporary migrants but also to permanent migrants. In Canada, 35% of young working age male immigrants left for other countries within 20 years (Aydemir & Robinson 2006). In Australia, a significant proportion of immigrants intend to move on to other countries (Hugo et al. 2001).

While many scholars have already examined the complexities of immigrants’ transnational lives across their countries of origin and destination (e.g. Basch et al. 1994; Levitt 2001), relatively few empirical studies have been conducted to explain why some immigrants move to other countries instead of settling down in their first destination country or returning home. In recent years, more researchers began to pay closer attention to migrants who move around across multiple countries (e.g. Andall 1999; Beaverstock 2005; Oishi 2005; Takenaka 2007). However, these studies are located in various disciplines, using different concepts and analytical approaches.

This paper attempts to synthesize the growing body of diverse research under the common analytical framework of multiple migrations.¹ It will address the basic

¹ While various terms are used to refer to similar migration patterns, this paper adopts a more holistic term “multiple migrations.” In the later section, the differences among these terms will be clarified.

research questions such as: (1) Who are multiple migrants?; (2) Why do they move across multiple countries; and (3) What kind of structural factors are behind this phenomenon? Although this short paper cannot answer each question in detail, it will draw a basic outline of the overall picture of multiple migrations. After providing a brief history of research development, it will examine the economic, social and institutional factors that could induce multiple migrations. It will also compare and contrast various concepts, while clarifying their differences. In the last section, it will present the future research agenda.

1. Multiple migrations: An Overview

Research on multiple migrations had a long history in the field of migration studies, but only in the context of domestic internal migration (Goldstein 1954; DaVanzo & Morrison 1981; Newbold & Bell 2001). Nevertheless, it had not been the case for international migration partly because of the widely-held assumption that immigrants would permanently settle down. In the 1980s, some scholars began to recognise that the emigration of immigrants was actually quite significant. Warren and Marks (1980) found that 31% of immigrants admitted to the U.S. left between 1908 and 1957. Jasso and Rosenzweig (1982) argued that the emigration rate was as high as 50% among some groups. However, most of the studies in the early period did not investigate where these emigrants had gone simply because there was no such data, which has remained the problem to date. Partly due to the lack of data, researchers assumed that these emigrants returned home.

As for the inflows of multiple migrants, Greenwood and Trabka (1991) identified 86,136 individuals in the US whose country of last residence was different from their country of birth. They argued that these inflows increased in the 1980s primarily because of the dislocations of Southeast Asian refugees. Many subsequent studies demonstrated that a significant number of refugees have indeed gone through multiple migrations (Lindley & Van Hear 2007; Kelly 2013).²

In the 2000s, the focus of research shifted to the multiple migrations of skilled workers. While refugees and semi- and unskilled workers continued to make multiple moves, highly skilled migration became more prominent in number as the competition for global talent accelerated. DeVoretz and Ma (2002) presented the model of “triangular human capital flows” drawn from trends that demonstrate a significant number of skilled immigrants to Canada eventually move onto the US. In recent years, the phenomenon of “the emigration of immigrants” has been differentiated between return migration and onward migration (Nekby 2006). This differentiation has important implications. The return of skilled migrants can be considered “brain circulation” that would benefit countries of origin, but if they continue to move on to other destinations, both their countries of origin and first destination will experience “brain drain.” This will affect not only developing countries but also many industrialised countries (e.g. Canada, New Zealand, and Ireland).

In the field of management and human resources development, emerging scholarly attention has been devoted to “self-initiated expatriates (SIEs)” who emigrate as independent professionals instead of company-assigned expatriates (e.g. Doherty et al.

² Although there seem to be some commonalities between refugees and non-refugees in terms of their multiple migrations, this paper does not include refugees due to more differences between forced and voluntary migration.

2011; Haslberger & Vaiman 2013). While not all SIEs are multiple migrants, a significant number of them seem to fall under such category. While these studies are mostly done from management perspectives, the fruits of their research could also be incorporated into sociological research because they examine some common issues such as decision-making processes of multiple migrants or SIEs.

2. Multiple migrations: the Definition and Conceptual Framework

As indicated above, many scholars have examined multiple migrations by using different terms such as “repeat migration” (e.g. Constant & Zimmermann 2011), “re-migration” (e.g. Beenstock 1996), “return migration” (e.g. King & Newbold 2008), “circular migration” (e.g. Vertovec 2013), “secondary migration” (e.g. Takenaka 2007) and “onward migration” (e.g. Kelly 2013). These terminologies have some overlaps, while there are also differences in mobility patterns, directions, or emphasis.

“Remigration” and “repeat migration” are similar concepts referring to the phenomenon where migrants do not settle down in one destination. However, they are widely used for both internal and international migration, and the definitions are not clearly established. “Remigration” can mean migrants’ return home for good (e.g. Mandres 2014), or can signify multiple moves between an origin and destination.³ Or it could even mean a two- or three-step linear pathway (e.g. Takenaka 2007). “Repeat migration,” on the other hand, often assumes multiple moves where the point of departure is a country of origin, while a destination can be the same or different each time. The typical examples include migration between Mexico and the US (Garip 2012).

³ Many scholars use the term “circular migration” to denote such multiple moves (e.g. Hugo 2013).

The terms “onward migration” and “secondary migration” refer to a sequential linear mobility (e.g. Takenaka 2007). If one keeps moving from one place to another without returning to his/her home country, this can also be considered as “repeat migration” or “remigration.” However, “repeat migration” and “remigration” can be both linear and circular, while “onward migration” often (though not exclusively) implies the linearity.

To specifically highlight the migration patterns across *multiple national borders*, and the theoretical implications entailed in them, I would like to present the concept of “multiple migrations” which I define as *extensive geographical movements of individuals across multiple national borders within one generation, which could be circular, linear, or both*. While it encompasses most of the existing terms, it excludes some cases of “remigration,” “return migration” and “circular migration” that involve only one round trip move between one country of origin and one country of destination.

The “multiplicities” of migration are implicated in time (frequencies of movements) and space (countries and regions). The nature of migration could be temporary, permanent, or both. Many semi-skilled⁴ migrants make multiple moves only within the Third World by renewing their temporary work visas. Others migrate only within the First World, while some move from the Third to the First World via newly-industrialising economies or “entrepot countries” (DeVoretz & Ma 2002). By putting forward the concept of “multiple migration,” I do not claim that I found a

⁴ It is my belief that all jobs require some kind of “skills,” and thus no job is “unskilled.” However, most governments in the world differentiate unskilled, semi-skilled and (highly) skilled migration according to education levels and occupations. For the convenience of argument, I follow these terminologies.

completely new phenomenon. Rather, I intend to present this specific heuristic tool to analyse the migration across multiple countries in a clearer and more cohesive manner.

3. Who Are Multiple Migrants?

Due to the dearth of statistical data, it is difficult to estimate the number of multiple migrants and their profiles. Nevertheless, existing research indicates that they tend to be better qualified than settlers. Greenwood and Young (1997) found that 16% of immigrants in Canada arrived from countries other than their countries of birth, and had higher educational qualifications, more skills, and higher language ability than regular migrants. Multiple migrants in Israel (Beenstock 1996), the US (King & Newbold 2007) and Denmark (Rezaei & Goli 2011) also had similar socio-economic characteristics. Immigrants who left Sweden for other countries had higher education and income level than those who returned home. Those who settled down in Sweden were the least qualified (Nekby 2006). These results do not necessarily mean that multiple migrations are a phenomenon limited to the highly skilled. A large number of unskilled and semi-skilled workers also engage in multiple migrations, but they tend to be “invisible” since they are not recorded as “immigrants” but as “temporary foreign workers” who are often not covered by the census data because of their “live-in” settings or other collective accommodation settings.

In terms of the gender profile of multiple migrants, the results have been rather mixed; some reported that more multiple migrants tended to be female (King & Newbold 2007) whereas others found otherwise (Aydemir & Robinson 2006). There has been no consensus as to whether multiple migrants tend to be young or old.

4. Why Multiple migrations?

Why is it that a growing number of people have been engaging in multiple migrations? Existing case studies identified several factors that led to multiple migrations. It is important, however, to note that each factor often explains only one of the entire multiple migration segments. An individual migrant can have several pathways caused by different factors. The factors can change overtime throughout his/her life stages.

(1) Employment/Career Factors

Employment/career factors are crucial for multiple migrations, particularly those of semi-skilled and unskilled workers. Most destination countries have strict immigration policies for these workers, often denying their permanent settlement. Therefore, a large number of them move back and forth between their homes and destination countries for temporary work, which often takes the form of either circular migration (Hugo 2013) or multiple migrations.

Multiple migrations are growing partly because the global labour market increasingly prefers migrants with experiences in other countries. For instance, having work experience as a caregiver in Hong Kong or Singapore would help a migrant obtain a job as a “live-in caregiver” in Canada where s/he could eventually obtain permanent resident status and citizenship. Many semi-skilled and unskilled workers in the Philippines strategically accumulate work experiences elsewhere before applying for live-in caregiver positions in Canada where they eventually settle down and get reunited with their families (Oishi 2008).

Of course, not all migrants are so strategic: some are forced into multiple migrations.

Many female domestic workers in Asia are often “trapped” into multiple migrations due to unpaid wages and maltreatment including sexual abuse. They have to return home without completing their contracts and look for new employers in different countries since they must repay their debt incurred for their first trip. In other cases, migrant women have to emigrate again because their remittances were misused by family members (Oishi 2005).

Even highly skilled migrants do not necessarily settle down in one place: they emigrate elsewhere if career opportunities are limited in their first destination country (Nekby 2006). Having said that, highly skilled multiple migrants are not necessarily money-driven. My own research indicated that many of them earned high income no matter what they do, and thus their priority was not necessarily money. They are equally or sometimes even more driven by the career development opportunity that could excite them and enable them to grow as professionals (Oishi 2013).

(2) Social Factors

Various social factors also play major roles. Children’s education is particularly important for highly skilled migrants. Many Indian professionals give up their high wages and comfortable lifestyles in the Middle East and re-migrate to Canada for better education for their children (Gupta 2006). Many highly skilled migrants in Japan also left or intended to leave for other countries that offer more affordable quality education in English. The desire to reproduce the next generation of global talent is particularly strong among professional migrants (Oishi 2012).

Social integration is another factor behind multiple migrations. Migrants re-migrate when they fail to integrate into the destination society. The lack of language skills and

inability to establish social ties in the host country push migrants to other countries. In Israel, the remigration of immigrants to another country was not necessarily due to unemployment but rather to social integration factors such as language and housing (Beenstock 1996).

Social networks also function as a facilitator of multiple migrations just as they do for many other types of migrations. Multiple migrants, whether skilled or unskilled, tend to move to countries where their family members and/or friends are already settled. The presence of an ethnic community was one of the crucial determinants for Somalis' remigration from the Netherlands to the UK (Van Liempt 2011). In other cases, migrants keep migrating until they could stay in the country where they could be permanently reunited with their family members. Access to permanent residency and citizenship seem to be one of the key determinants for multiple migrations. The majority of Filipina and Indian nurses in Ireland intended to leave for Canada, the US and Australia because it would take too long for them to secure permanent residency in Ireland (Humphries et al. 2009).

Most professionals from industrialised countries are allowed to bring their family members from the beginning. Having said that, many of them have some social ties and networks in their next destinations since the information of employment opportunities are often communicated through these ties and networks (Jokinen et al. 2008).

(3) Institutional Factors

Multiple migrations occur based on the decisions made by individual migrants. However, their decisions can be significantly influenced by various institutional structures in their countries of origin and their subsequent destinations. Migrants make

decisions on their next moves by carefully weighing the costs and benefits of particular institutional requirements or incentives.

First, tax systems affect individuals' decision-making in choosing their next destinations. For instance, some corporate executives decided to leave Tokyo for Hong Kong when they found out that the Japanese government would impose a tax on their overseas assets once they stayed for 5 years. Hong Kong and Singapore are attractive destinations in this regard since their income tax is much lower than that of Japan (Oishi 2012).

Social security systems are also an important factor that migrants take into account in making their long-term migration plans (Poot & Sanderson 2007). It is well known that migrants move to countries with lower living costs and affordable quality elderly care (e.g. Oliver 2008). However, even younger migrants do not ignore these factors since the amount of money that they contribute to the social security systems in their destination countries are quite significant. While social security agreements between countries can ensure the portability of social security rights, not all countries are concluding such agreements. Some professionals left Japan for Hong Kong after they learned that they would lose most of their social security contributions if they leave Japan before reaching their retirement age (Oishi 2012).

The institutional factors do not directly prompt multiple migrations from the beginning since most migrants are often not aware of these systems at the time of their initial move. Nevertheless, they gradually recognise the long-term financial implications of these systems, which could eventually lead to a further move to a new destination.

7. Conclusion: The Future Research Agenda

Multiple migrations take various forms and patterns. To fully understand this phenomenon, it would be necessary to collect more empirical data on multiple migrants and analyse them thoroughly by focusing on several dimensions.

First, multiple migrations need to be analysed by occupations and/or skill levels because of the differences in immigration restrictions and the intrinsic requirements specific to occupations. The patterns of multiple migrations can be different between highly skilled migrants and semi-skilled migrants, but even among the highly skilled, the patterns can be diverse. For instance, IT professionals might have more susceptibility to multiple migrations than lawyers and medical doctors because of the universality of professional languages (source codes), product-based certificates, and lower hurdles set by gatekeepers (e.g. professional associations).

Second, the life course perspective needs to be integrated into the analyses. Researchers can carefully examine what factors become important in which life stages of migrants, and why. As migrants proceed with different life stages, how do their life priorities change and how do various institutional factors affect their decisions to settle down, return home, or move onward? Why is it that some of them decide to return home first but then re-migrate again to another country?

Lastly, the complexities presented by multiple migrations can elevate transnationalism to a new level – which I call “hyper-transnationalism” (Oishi 2007). Multiple migrants seem to have a weaker sense of belonging to a country and to be detached from ethnic communities than migrants who are in traditional transnationalism, shuttling back and forth between two countries. Some of them are willing to keep moving even after they obtain permanent residency or citizenship in one country. The

more countries they go through, the easier it gets for them to proceed to the next move as each path gradually changes their identity and perceptions about citizenship and belonging. What are the policy implications for integration and citizenship? How are their “social networks” structured? There are many questions to be answered.

The research on multiple migrations is still at an incipient stage. We will need to further accumulate more empirical studies to examine both macro-institutional and micro-individual factors behind this phenomenon. It is a challenging but exciting task since it will open up numerous analytical possibilities to explore and will also help us unravel the complexity of global population mobility.

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