Life courses of highly skilled Indian migrants in the Netherlands and the United Kingdom

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Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publication date:
2016

Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database

Citation for published version (APA):

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Chapter 1

Introduction
1.1 High-skilled migration

International labour migration from developing to the developed countries continues to be both a major cause and a consequence of today’s globalisation trends. A large majority of destination countries particularly welcome highly skilled migrants, and restrict the entry of low skilled migrants (Castles, 2013). Given the population ageing and the shortage of skilled labour, competition for foreign talent is not a new phenomenon in the developed countries (King, 2002; Koser and Salt, 1997). In 2000 the European Parliament put forth the Lisbon agenda, in which it announced its intention to make the European Union (EU) ‘the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world by 2010’ (European Parliament, 2000). However, research indicates that the EU economies lack flexible highly skilled workers (Zimmermann, 2005). Because of economic and technological changes, the need in the EU for a high-skilled workforce has been growing even faster over the past decade (CEDEFOP, 2010).

Attracting ‘the brightest and the best’ from abroad benefits the host economies, as highly skilled migrants contribute to productivity performance, innovation capacities, welfare systems, and the international dissemination of knowledge (Commander, Kangasniemi, and Winters, 2003; George et al., 2012; Kapur and McHale, 2005; Salt, 2006). For example, Saxenian’s (2002) research on migrant entrepreneurship in Silicon Valley concluded that the contributions of Chinese and Indian engineers accounted for most of the growth in technology businesses.

India has one of the largest pools of highly skilled labour in the world (Sasikumar and Hussian, 2008), and an estimated 25 million Indians have settled overseas (Government of India, 2011). More than four per cent of the tertiary-educated leave India to work in other countries (Bhargava, Docquier, and Moullan, 2011), mainly engineers, IT specialists, and health professionals (Khadria, 2004). In the OECD countries, India is among the top 10 countries of origin of immigrant doctors and nurses (Dumont and Zurn, 2007).

Several EU member states have implemented immigration rules to attract highly skilled migrants from third countries. This dissertation focuses on the Netherlands and the United Kingdom (UK). The highly skilled visa schemes in those two countries differ in terms of their origins, requirements, and benefits for the migrants. The UK is a popular destination among many migrants across the globe for linguistic and historic reasons (Hopkins and Levy, 2012), whereas the Netherlands is a relatively new destination country for the highly skilled. We have chosen to study these two countries to observe their potential dissimilarities stemming from their institutional contexts.

In the Netherlands, the knowledge migrant (kennismigrant) visa scheme was launched in 2004, and nearly 60,000 applications were received up to 2014 (IND, 2012, 2014; INDIAC, 2009). Throughout the years, roughly every third applicant has been an Indian, making Indians the largest group among the knowledge migrants (IND, 2012, 2014).
These migrants are mainly employed in the IT and other business sectors (INDIAC, 2009). The knowledge migrants are defined as ‘labour migrants with nationally or internationally scarce expertise; generally highly educated and earn an above average wage; employed in sectors of great economic or social importance’ (ACVZ, 2004, 144, translation). However, the only application criterion is the prospective minimum salary, which is indexed yearly. In 2013, the Modern Migration Policy was implemented, which explicitly focuses on ‘migrants in economic demand,’ and restricts the entry of other migrants. Under this policy, the prospective employer has greater responsibility for proving that a migrant is indeed in demand (IND, 2013). In parallel, highly skilled migrants can enter through the European Blue Card route, which offers more flexibility within the EU, but sets higher salary requirements.

The UK government put forward the Highly Skilled Migrant Programme in 2002, which was changed into the Tier 1 visa scheme in 2008. In this points-based system, the application criteria include qualifications, English skills, available maintenance funds, prospective earnings, UK work experience, and level of demand. In 2011, another set of major reforms were announced, such as removing the link between temporary and permanent migration, and setting an annual cap of 20,700 third-country nationals to work as skilled professionals (Home Office, 2011). The labour migration system in the UK is demand-driven, leaving the responsibility of selecting the migrants and complying with legal requirements to the employers. Non-EEA (European Economic Area) nationals are predominantly concentrated in the high-skilled employment sectors due to the focus on attracting skilled migrants to fill the gaps in the UK labour market (Green and Owen, 2013). In 2015, there were nearly 60,000 sponsored visa applications for skilled work, and 78 per cent of these were for Indian nationals (Home Office, 2015a). A similar pattern has been observed throughout the years. Of all Indian nationals to whom skilled work visas were issued in 2008, 19 per cent had been granted settlement in 2013 (Home Office, 2015b). As in the Netherlands, most of the highly skilled migrants in the UK work in IT and communication fields, scientific and technical sectors, or the financial and insurance industries (ONS, 2015).

Although in both countries dependant visas are included in the highly skilled migrant visa schemes, there is a lack of recognition in these regulations that migration is a social process. This further reflects the quantifiable concepts that the literature on high-skilled migration dominantly focuses on: brain drain, brain gain, remittances, investments, and returns of human capital. As Castles (2013, 133) states: ‘All too often both government policies and public perceptions are based on the idea of migrants as economic beings, whose motivations are determined by narrow cost-benefit considerations. They ignore the social relationships of migrants as members of families and communities, as well as the way personal characteristics and goals change over the human life cycle’.

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The complexity in migration patterns has been increasing throughout the recent decades, as a variety of migration motives other than financial gains has emerged, and as migration has become less likely to be a one-off event (Poot, Waldorf, and Van Wissen, 2008). The increasing diversity of migration motives and processes creates new forms of migration and mobility. Among these, transnational migration has come forth perhaps the most dominantly, and many highly skilled migrants could be regarded as transnationals. Migrants engaged in transnationalism ‘live their lives across international borders’ (Glick Schiller and Fouron, 1999, 344), and they are likely to be involved in various domains—such as economic, social, and cultural domains—both in the home and host country (Portes, 1997). One of the main reasons for migrants to sustain relationships in the country of origin is to have contacts and support available in case returning back (Levitt and Jaworsky, 2007). However, not all migrants are transnationals, and there is a large variety of the extent of involvement in transnational practices among those who are (Levitt, DeWind, and Vertovec, 2003; Portes, 2003). Although the transnationalism literature emphasises the geographical and cultural dimension of being a member of different countries and cultures, in this literature the notion of sequencing of migration episodes, including return migration and onward migration stages in the lives of migrants remains rather implicit. This dissertation adopts an approach that emphasises these sequences, through the lens of the life course. Likewise, the perspective of migration trajectories as multiple movements rather than a one-off migration event (Schapendonk, 2011) underlines the aspects of variability and flexibility in the life course approach. The trajectory perspective on migration emphasises the need to embed migration experiences in the contexts of personal events and policy developments (Ho, 2011), overlapping with the central themes of the life course approach put forward by Elder (1975, 1994).

Migrants are thus not just economic but social agents who are also embedded in social, cultural, and historical contexts. In order to acknowledge these contexts and dynamics in the migration processes, we aim in this dissertation to study high-skilled migration from the life course perspective. The life course approach allows us to look at migration as a coherent component within a constellation of other life domains, such as education, employment, and family. By going beyond the boundaries of economic reasoning, we are able to examine and explain the patterns of the life course that both constitute and are determined by high-skilled migration. While acknowledging that highly skilled migrants are also striving to improve their financial situation, we are not arguing that economic theories of (high-skilled) migration should be ignored. Instead, we aim to provide another perspective on this issue—namely, the perspective of the migrants. Therefore, the main objective of this research is to help us gain a deeper micro-level understanding of how the interdependencies of education, employment, and household trajectories shape the migration trajectories in particular, and the life courses in general of highly skilled migrants and their significant others.
1.2 Life course approach

The life course approach is a cohesive instrument for studying life trajectories and life events or transitions of individuals over time and in social processes (see Elder, 1985, 1994; Kulu and Milewski, 2007; Wingens et al., 2011). The transitions concern status passages or roles that account for particular changes in the life of an individual (Elder, 1985; Dykstra and Van Wissen, 1999), such as entering the labour market or becoming a parent, which alter employment and family status, respectively. From the perspective of migration, the central elements of the life course are the age-differentiated social roles and the transitions between these roles (Clark, Glick, and Bures, 2009). The variability of the timing and the sequence of transitions across different trajectories underline the diversity and unpredictability of life paths (Clark and Davies Withers, 2007; Elder, 1975; Geist and McManus, 2008).

The various dimensions of the life course approach are summarised in a framework proposed by Elder (1975, 1994), which consists of four central themes. The first component, ‘lives in time and space’, refers to the historical and geographical context that influences the life paths of individuals, or the ‘cohort effect’. The second component, ‘timing of lives’, looks at the life course in terms of the occurrence, the duration, and the sequence of transitions. The concept of ‘linked lives’ emphasises individuals’ embeddedness in social relationships, and recognises the roles of the lives of other people in forming the life paths of individuals. The last element, ‘human agency’, which connects the other elements, assumes that human beings are consciously and deliberately making choices in order to construct their own life paths.

Rossi’s (1955) pioneering work on linking the family life cycle and residential mobility was one of the early attempts to incorporate those four elements of the life course approach. However, the life cycle approach assumes a predetermined set of events in a predetermined sequence that all individuals undergo. The main transitions of a family life cycle—leaving the parental home, marriage, raising children, retirement, and widowhood—are major triggers for relocations. In addition to these transitions, the life course approach recognises transitions such as singlehood, cohabitation, separation, and remarriage; and thus allows for diversity in life paths.

The diversity in the sequence, timing, and number of transitions in the life course is also exemplified in the considerable fluidity between education and employment trajectories. Being both major migration motives for the highly skilled, and closely linked to residential and financial independence, the contexts for these transitions can differ. Whereas enrolment in tertiary education often marks the step of leaving the parental home—and is related to the timing and cultural norms that pertain to it—, entry into the labour market is more likely to be paired with or shortly followed by union formation. However, rather than a linear transition from full-time education to full-time employment, there is a multitude of intermediate statuses and overlaps between those
two (Raffe, 2003). In the case of migrants, the distinction between student migrants and other skilled migrants has become less clear partly due to their potential additional identities as workers (Raghuram, 2013). The changes in education and work towards flexible employment, life-long learning, and internationalisation of labour markets have promoted the partial merging of education and employment trajectories (Teichler, 1999). In this dissertation, the thin boundaries between education and employment trajectories are further exemplified in the case of participants pursuing a PhD degree. Whereas in the UK, they are regarded as students of higher education, in the Netherlands PhD candidates are predominantly considered as research employees. We recruited research participants aged between 25 and 40 years in order to study migrants in certain stages of the life course where many important transitions are expected to occur. People have most likely completed (the first stage of) tertiary education by the age of 25 and have entered or are about to enter the labour market. Also union and family formation processes by and large take place in the 25–40 age group.

The life course inherently takes into account significant others and their life trajectories. In most of the migration literature, these significant others are a migrant’s partner and children, and, to a lesser extent, his or her parents. While a large share of the existing research that links the life course and (high-skilled) migration focuses on Western countries, our study is one of the few that explores non-Western migrants. Given the cultural context of India, the country of origin in this dissertation, we also include extended families. However, extended families play a part in the migration process in Western societies as well, when, for instance, grandparents relocate in order to take care of their grandchildren (Hank and Buber, 2009). Family members can also keep individuals from migrating: couples are found to be less likely to relocate when their parents are living nearby (Mulder and Malmberg, 2014).

Although not an explicit focus in the current study, we acknowledge the importance of social networks as a source of significant others of the migrants, and also acknowledge that studying social networks adds to understanding migration as a social product (Boyd, 1989). According to social network theory, individuals invest in social relationships in order to gain access to resources embedded in the social structures that increase expected returns of instrumental actions (social, economic, and political returns) or expressive actions (physical and/or mental health, and life satisfaction) (Lin, 1999). Harvey (2008) summarises that social networks are crucial for highly skilled migrants to find jobs. Social networks both provide and limit opportunities for an individual (Lin, 1999). Strong ties generate bonding social capital (or exclusive social networks) that connects a homogeneous group, whereas weak ties often deliver bridging social capital (or inclusive social networks) that creates linkages between heterogeneous groups, and thus is likely to provide access to large variety of resources (Putnam, 2000; 2004). However, regarding migrant social networks, Raghuram, Henry, and Bornat (2010) have pointed out the
shortcoming in migration research in taking into account the role of non-migrants’ networks in the labour market outcomes of migrants.

Another focal point of this dissertation is dual-earner couples. Mincer (1978) refers to ‘tied movers’ as migrants who move for the career benefits of their partner, while at the same time often sacrificing their own professional ambitions. The existing literature has established that tied movers are mainly women, as they tend to experience downward job mobility after migration (Boyle et al., 2008; Cooke, 2008a; Smits, Mulder, and Hooimeijer, 2003). Gender is thus an important topic within the study of high-skilled migration, because it is ‘at the nexus of governmental regulations, the social lives of individuals and community values that intersect in migration’ (Mooney, 2006, 399).

1.3 Research questions, data and thesis outline

The above discussion illustrates how research on high-skilled migration can benefit from the life course approach. Whereas quantitative frameworks tend to overemphasise the economic-related outcomes of migration, our qualitative research provides a window into the ‘underlying social and cultural migration decision-making processes’ (Smith, 2004, 265). We use semi-structured biographic in-depth interviews as research instruments, drawing from the biographic-narrative interview method (Wengraf, 2001). The biographical approach directly relates to the life course by emphasising social embeddedness and its impact on an individual’s decision-making processes (Findlay and Li, 1997; Halfacree and Boyle, 1993; Ní Laoire, 2008). Examining migrant biographies provides us with insights into how individuals construct their life courses in terms of both geographical and social mobility (King and Ruiz-Gelices, 2003). Using a biographical approach to study highly skilled migrants adds to our understanding of the relationship between the different stages of the migration process, and highlights the significance of social and institutional factors, as well as the traditional economic factors.

A total of 47 semi-structured biographic interviews were conducted: 22 in the Netherlands and 25 in the UK; 36 with men and 11 with women. Table 1.1 gives an overview of the ages, the marital and family status, and the occupations of the participants. The participants were recruited based on the following criteria: holder of a highly skilled migrant visa (or dependant of a visa holder), aged 25–40, and an actual or an intended residential duration of at least one year. The data were collected between June 2010 and August 2011 in the Netherlands, and between May and August 2011 in the UK. Participant recruitment turned out to be quite a challenging task, as attempts to recruit participants through cultural associations, multi-national companies, and social media were unsuccessful. The vast majority of participants were thus recruited by means of snowball sampling through personal and professional contacts. To minimise the risk of including only participants with similar characteristics, we sought to create as many entry points to snowball sampling as possible. The timing of the fieldwork in
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the UK coincided with the announcement and/or implementation of several changes in high-skilled migration policies (see Table 3.1), a topic that emerged in almost all of the interviews, and that directly influenced the migration experiences and plans of the participants.

Table 1.1 Profile of participants (N=47)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Number of participants</th>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Number of participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age <strong>a</strong></td>
<td>25-29 24</td>
<td>Occupation <strong>b</strong></td>
<td>Research 15 <strong>c</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>30-34 10</td>
<td>Engineering 9</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>35-40 6</td>
<td>IT 9</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Finance 4</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Marital status</td>
<td>Single 12</td>
<td>Medicine 4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Relationship 6</td>
<td>Other 5</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Engaged 5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Married 23</td>
<td>Has a child or children 14</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Divorced 1</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**a** Two participants were 24 years old and five were over age 40.

**b** One participant was on parental leave.

**c** 10 participants were PhD researchers and five were employed in as junior or senior researchers in the academia.

Based on the interview, a visualisation of the life course of each participant was depicted for an overview of his or her parallel careers and life course events (see Figures 2.1 and 4.1). These visualisations provide illustrations of path interdependencies, timing of events, and linked lives.

This dissertation focuses on the migration motivations, decisions, and experiences of individuals who migrate; and on the internal and external influences on these motivations. The main research question is:

*How are the migration motivations, decisions, and experiences of highly skilled Indians in the Netherlands and the United Kingdom shaped by life course interdependencies, significant others, and cultural and institutional contexts?*

The dissertation consists of four chapters in which we examine the life course of highly skilled migrants from different viewpoints. Chapter 2 proposes the theoretical and empirical grounds for applying the life course approach to high-skilled migration. Building on this foundation, each of the following chapters deals with a specific aspect within this approach: the migration process (Chapter 3), linked lives (Chapter 4), and gender (Chapter 5). Throughout these chapters, we discuss various elements of the migration experiences of the participants, including their migration motivations, decision-making, and plans; their interpersonal and intergenerational relationships; and their respective cultural norms and institutional settings.
Chapter 2 presents a framework that links high-skilled migration to the life course approach. We extend the focus from economic outcomes of high-skilled migration to the biographies of the migrants, as well as to social and cultural aspects in the migration process. We seek to answer the following question:

1. How do highly skilled Indian migrants construct their life courses with regard to education, employment, household, and migration trajectories?

The empirical part of this chapter is based on Dutch data only. We demonstrate how a culture of migration among the highly skilled in India promotes studying and/or working abroad as a norm.

In Chapter 3, we examine migration as situated in the life course. The central argument here is to view migration as a process that includes the events and contexts that shape the migration experiences before, during, and after the move.

2.1 What resources do highly skilled Indian migrants use for migration?

2.2 How is migration decision-making embedded in the life course context?

2.3 How does the institutional setting modify migration expectations and experiences in different stages of the migration process?

Self-actualisation, rather than economic motives, proves to be the major driver for migration and the formation of migrant capital. We also illustrate how restrictive migration policies limit migrants' agency and determine their further settlement or migration plans.

Chapter 4 focuses on linked lives: the life courses of migrants and their families.

3. How do significant others shape the life courses of highly skilled Indian migrants in general and migration trajectories in particular?

We go beyond the nuclear family and include the parents and the extended family, thereby taking into account the Indian cultural context, in which close family ties are produced and maintained largely through the extended or joint family system. This chapter highlights the participants' life course choices, which are linked to their significant others, and which often shape their migration decisions.

Chapter 5 is guided by the following question:

4. In what ways do gender norms shape the migration experiences of highly skilled Indian women?

This chapter explores the interplay between gender norms and cultural context in the migration experiences of female highly skilled migrants, providing a picture in which women are viewed as being more than just tied movers. We show how women navigate between cultural norms and personal aspirations, and conclude that migration can, to a certain extent, be seen as a means of escaping from patriarchal norms.
Chapter 6 summarises the main findings and highlights the contributions of this dissertation to the research on high-skilled migration and the life course. We also provide policy implications and recommendations for further research, and reflect on the limitations of this study.