THE COMPLEXITY OF GLOBAL MIGRATIONS

ARTICLE

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Global migrations are an overwhelmingly complex phenomenon, involving millions of unique individuals and multifaceted social, economic, political and technological infrastructures. Faced with such complexity, we are forced to simplify in order to understand. A popular quote about science, attributed to Albert Einstein, says that "everything should be made as simple as possible, but not simpler." As social scientists working on migration, we should use this observation to reflect upon the work we do but shift the focus from *degrees of simplicity to ways of simplifying.* The choices that we make along the way reflect our views about what is essential and what is not; these choices are subjective and contextual, perhaps political, and open to challenge. It therefore takes courage and insight to simplify in meaningful ways. An equally difficult task is to pinpoint *why* particular simplifications are unhelpful and specify *how* they should be reworked. A much easier option, which social scientists too often resort to, is to merely claim that things that are "more complex" call for "greater nuance" (Healy, 2017).

As a starting point for exploring meaningful simplifications of global migration, I pose a simple and familiar question: why do people migrate? It is a question more associated with introductory courses on migration than the research frontier but it can be leveraged for insights into how we might answer an impossibly complex question. I could start by providing tentative answers. What I will do instead is to examine seven *types of answers* that might be possible and meaningful.

1. People migrate for the reasons for which they are admitted as immigrants. In practice, this is how we implicitly describe why people migrate. Most high-income destination countries have no generic legal provisions for immigration but rather combine a general prohibition with specific exceptions. Immigrants are therefore admitted *as* labour migrants, as family migrants, as international students and as refugees, for instance, under particular conditions. These conditions are (except for refugees) not linked explicitly to motivations but assumed motivations make up the logic that differentiates them. This way of thinking about the reasons why people migrate has spread far beyond the regulatory system itself.

2. People migrate because they have the aspiration and the ability to do so. The regulatory barriers to migration ensure that not every person who wants to migrate will be able to do so. We can therefore distinguish between two components in the explanation of migration:

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individuals must have the aspiration to migrate, combined with the *ability* to do so (Carling, 2002). This simple distinction has great explanatory potential, bringing us much closer to understanding why some people stay while others migrate, or why migration flows grow or shrink over time. The factors that affect migration aspirations can be completely separate from those that determine migration ability; the migration we observe is the combined outcome of these factors. Several recent studies have been founded on a logic that resembles the original aspiration/ability model. Taken together, they can be described as two-step approaches to explaining migration (Carling & Schewel, 2018).

3. People migrate because an opportunity presents itself. In some cases, actual or expected changes in the ability to migrate can be the overriding explanation for migration. This has been termed "now-or-never migration" in the literature (e.g. Czaika & de Haas, 2017). The now-or-never mechanism is illustrated by several historical examples in which a (perceived) impending restriction of opportunities to migrate has spurred a wave of departures. To some extent, this mechanism only explains the timing of migration, or what de Haas (2011) has referred to as inter-temporal substitution. But it also suggests the potency of opportunity as a motivation in its own right. In a large-scale survey of young adults in Senegal, we found that, among the people who said they would prefer to remain in Senegal rather than emigrate, more than one third said they would seize the opportunity and go if they were given the necessary documents (Carling et al., 2013).

4. People migrate either because they chose to or because they are forced to. The simple distinction between forced and voluntary migration is remarkably resistant. To some extent, it is a particular case of policy-driven categorisations seeping into general thinking on migration: refugees on one side; all other migrants on the other. The legal regime for refugees is categorically different and justifies such a distinction. However, research over several decades has demonstrated that in the actual dynamics of migration, force and choice interact (Erdal & Oeppen, 2018). The categorical distinction between forced and voluntary migration has recently been revived in international policy-making, despite the research base. The dominant argument in favour of the separation is a peculiar form of imposing policy concerns onto analytical conclusions. Because the legal provisions for refugees are under pressure, it is argued, we must maintain that they are categorically different from other migrants; or, rather, that they are not migrants at all and do not "migrate" but engage in "refugee movements". The analytical justification is the alleged absence of choice. But choice is not the same as privilege. Many refugees face and make dreadful choices: between risking life on a dangerous journey or risking life in a place; between escaping or staying to fight; between travelling as a family or sending one person ahead. Very rarely are refugees moved across borders against their own will. Meanwhile, others are truly forced. The obvious examples are deportees, who, from Europe alone, number in the hundreds of thousands every year. Moreover, many individuals (especially women and children) migrate as a result of decisions made by family members and have no real choice in their own migration. However, these groups of migrants are not considered "forced migrants". In short, the force-choice dichotomy is a simplification that obscures more than it clarifies, and which is retained for reasons other than its analytical potential.

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5. People migrate because the sum of push and pull factors is in favour of migration. The notion of "push factors" and "pull factors" has been a part of migration theory at least since the 1930s (Heberle, 1938). Much later, the concepts were incorporated into Everett Lee's (1966) theory of migration, which remains one of the most succinct attempts to render migration dynamics simple, but not too simple. Unfortunately, the vague and incomplete notion of "push-pull" theory seems to be the most prominent surviving element. And when it is summoned, it is often to serve as a "simplistic" contrast to an allegedly more sophisticated argument (cf. Van Hear et al., 2018). "Push factors" and "pull factors" remain potentially powerful ingredients in explanations of migration, but only if they are properly integrated in an analytical framework. For instance, these factors often contribute to understanding why people may *want to* migrate but without taking feasibility and obstacles into account.

6. People migrate because they see migration as either instrumentally or intrinsically valuable. If people are able to overcome the obstacles to migration, their motivations for migrating can be split in two. First, migration could function as a means to an end, enabling people to secure a livelihood or escape persecution, for instance. Such motivations imply that the value of migration is *instrumental;* it is a strategy for fulfilling an objective that could also be fulfilled in other ways. In other words, if the broader goals of one's migration could be met at home, migration would not be necessary. A very different kind of motivation lies in seeing migration as desirable in its own right; when that is the case, the value of migration is *intrinsic.* When migration is motivated by a desire to see the world, or experience a different culture, for instance, there is no obvious substitute for achieving the same in situ. The distinction between the instrumental and intrinsic value of migration can be elusive, and might not be helpful for categorising individuals, but it provides simple conceptual anchors for reflecting on why people migrate.

7. *People migrate for reasons that are socially legitimate and legally feasible.* If we are interested in *motivations* for migration, there is no substitute for collecting data directly from individuals. But when people talk about their desire for migration, or describe their past migration, a clear and coherent motivation might not be cognitively available. Instead, they may reach for socially established motivations for migration. Moreover, some types of motivation may be perceived as more legitimate than others. And for someone who has already migrated, the legal provision for their migration might affect how they rationalise it. In short, statements about motivations for migration should not be mistaken for direct reflections of a "real" motivation, nor should such a "real" motivation be presumed to always exist.

Having tackled the question "why do people migrate?" in seven different ways, we can also reflect upon the value of the question itself. What limitations are embedded in it? One clear implication of asking the question in this way is that agency is prioritised over structure. Several of the types of answers I suggested introduced structural perspectives. But the need to do so suggests that a reframing of the question might be useful. We can take inspiration from Xiang and Lindquist's (2014) recent work on the notion of "migration infrastructure". They suggest that "it is not migrants who migrate, but rather constellations consisting of migrants and non-migrants, of human and non-human actors" (Xiang & Lindquist, 2014: S124). A step forward

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from the familiar question "why do people migrate?" towards a more sensitive relationship with the complexity of global migration might therefore be to pose a slightly different question: "how does migration arise?" (Carling, 2017).

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