The (Dis)embodied Regimes of Skilled Mobilities

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Abstract

In policy discourse, transnational mobilities are described as being created and affected by the global competition for talent. While it is admitted that the policy discourse certainly influences transnational mobilities, this article concurrently argues that migrants always share the world with other people and things, and aspects of transnational mobilities reflect their engagement in the world. The review of related literature and migration policies in this article points out several ways in which migrants are considered disembodied objects of development and talent policies in the global regime of human capital. Transnationalism problematizes this conceptualization by exploring the influences of multi-faceted processes and conceptualizing transnational mobilities as the reflection of migrants' entwinement with the world across borders.

Introduction

There is an inundation of regular governments and supranational organizations' reports, and government-commissioned studies on patterns and trends of skilled migration in search engines such as Google Scholar. Most of these reports and studies show governments' attempts to attract, govern, and control skilled migration. Although these governments' updates are used for policy management, it is understandable that there are political orientations embedded in these archives. Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the UK, and the US attract potential skilled migrants by publishing "success stories" of their skilled immigration schemes that are normally presented in increasing quantities of migrants. These publications, in some sense, represent an image of an attractive destination and a successful winner in the race for skills. Skilled migrants are then viewed as being attracted and managed as if they were objects of policies for the intense competition for innovations and for skills to meet labour demands in the knowledge economy.

While the usefulness of these materials for research and policy-making processes has been widely acknowledged, the objective of this paper is to highlight the disembodiment of skilled migration implicitly referred to in policy reports and related literature. It is argued that skilled migrants' mobilities are always embodied through the multi-level social processes when they are engaged in the world with others across spatial and temporal domains.

This argument is constituted by an elaboration of several ways in which the policy regime disembodies mobilities and a discussion on employing a transnationalism perspective on exploring the embodied social processes involved in skilled migration.

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The disembodied regimes of mobility in the policy discourse

Skilled migrants as objects of migration policies

Government and supranational reports on skilled migration provide the public with comprehensive knowledge of population changes that are caused by global socio-economic, political, and even environmental changes. These demographic changes, in turn, influence national economies. Reports by supranational organizations such as the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2014) or the International Organization for Migration (IOM, 2022) often compare statistics among receiving countries, as if the numbers of skilled migrants were being used to rank winning nations though it is admitted that cross-country comparisons are useful for policy-making processes.

By describing the current trends of international migration, the OECD's report stated that education immigrants in OECD countries do not always succeed in securing satisfaction with their professional or personal lives (OECD, 2014). Their failures in labour integration partly result from linguistic difficulties which cause them to encounter a higher possibility of unemployment, despite the rate of their educational qualifications of 50% higher than those of native people. The policy-driven conceptualization of skilled migrants as either fuelling or impeding economic drives constructs an aspect of the mobility regime. These documents do not include sufficient explanations on why and how a certain section of the international student population chooses to apply for bridging or permanent residency (PR) visas. They often depict statistical, comparative information on international students and skilled migrants. Statistical information, in this vein, constructs an aspect of the mobility regime.

Many studies on the nexus between international education and skilled migration (e.g., Hawthorne, 2011; Nguyen, 2022) pointed out the influences of skilled migration policies on foreign students' motivation to study in foreign countries and migrate later. These studies consider many students' study sojourns as an initial step to pursuing subsequent migration. They are said to use international education as a useful fare for their subsequent migration. In this sense, student migrants' use of international education as a means to migrate constructs another aspect of the mobility regime. This body of research conceptualizes foreign students' desires to migrate under the influences of the migration policy regime. They do not tend to take into account how students respond to their communal bonds and familial and personal circumstances. The way their migration decisions are shaped is still under-researched

The measurement of skilled migrants' employment outcomes builds another domain of the mobility regime. Some studies explore skilled migrants' employment performances in receiving countries (e.g., Cobb-Clark, Connolly, & Worswick, 2005; Shah & Burke, 2005). These studies view two-step migrants as rationally responding to employment opportunities and wage differentials. Another group of studies (e.g., Hawthorne, 2011; Nguyen, 2006) focus on investigating the labour market outcomes of skilled migrants by using secondary statistics. Other studies (e.g., Hawthorne, 2011; Nguyen, 2021) examine skilled migrants' work performances. They collectively show that some migrants can secure employment that is in line with their previous education, whereas others choose to do menial and manual occupations or stay between jobs because they possess intermittent English language fluency and lack of work experience. Some studies conduct surveys to investigate the impacts of migrants' non-English backgrounds on the outcomes of their employment search and job performance (e.g., McDonald & Worswick, 1999; Shah & Burke, 2005). In this vein, the generalization of skilled migrants as being unsuccessful skilled workers in host societies constructs another aspect of the mobility regime.

The information on skilled immigration is important in providing an overall picture of migratory trends and identifying the national positioning in the race for skills. It also allows us to analyse macroeconomic impacts on national economies and changes in

demography which, in turn, may serve as a stepping stone for further studies on mobilities and international education. However, migrants always live their lives within a web of dynamic social and professional relations. Describing migrants as mere objects of development policies seems to disembody them as flows of people without agency or power.

Skilled migration as flows of skills

While the records of skilled immigrants' arrivals and departures are updated regularly, data on emigration could be hardly found in sending nations. For example, Vietnam has a systematic archive for labour migrants but not for skilled migrants (Nguyen, 2021). The lack of information on skilled emigration in sending countries like Vietnam may show governments' attempt to lessen and hide "failures" in retaining skilled people (in stark contrast to "success stories" in receiving nations). Instead, public media in Vietnam often tell stories about successful returners who are well-known public figures. However, stories about ordinary people such as students-returnees are almost unheard. The Vietnamese Government may use the media to create a rhetorical discourse about nationalism and patriotism to influence those who have left or those who intend to leave the country. This discourse can also be meant as a way to retain the domestic skilled workforce to prevent brain drain. At the same time, it helps erase the image of a communist trouble-making country and can attract diasporic contributions as brain gain. Altogether, the outflows and inflows of the grey matter are manipulated around the rhetorical discourse of nationalism which is embedded in the disembodied regime of mobility in sending countries.

In addition, the development discourse approaches skilled migrants as disembodied economic actors. For example, Chinese students are encouraged to study abroad and are concurrently lured to come back for economic and technological contributions. Financial benefits and honouring rituals are exercised alongside punishment policies for late returns or non-returns (Biao, 2011; Nguyen, 2021). As such, the outflows of skilled people are associated with brain drain being disruptive to development, while their return and contributions, known as brain gain, are profitable to development. Migration is then said to link to development. But at the same time, many researchers (e.g., de Haas, 2010; Nguyen, 2014 & 2021; Papademetriou & Martin, 1991; Piper, 2009; Skeldon, 2008) have argued that development may lead to migration. As beneficial contributors to development through remittances and professional engagement in transnational acts (Piper, 2009), skilled migrants can promote development which, in turn, enables further mobilities (Skeldon, 2008).

However, de Haas (2010) pointed out some mistakes in generalizing the nexus between migration and development, because migrants' contributions in terms of ideas or remittances are usually calculated at micro-levels such as families or communities. Some contributions are constrained because of familial and communal challenges, as well as legal contradictions. Development processes usually involve and require state intervention, while the radical effectiveness of individual migrants' contributions and the impacts of diasporic contributions on the development processes are not usually correctly measured. Further, although migrants' economic contributions can speed up development, governments of both sending and receiving countries pay less attention to the causes leading to migration, especially when these causes are possibly related to the failures in the development policies. This is why the development policy discourse tends to view migrants as "economic actors", but not as engaging socio-political agents (Piper, 2009, p. 94).

When the outflow of educated persons reaches a high level, and it is not offset by remittances, contributions to technological innovations, or business investment, it causes a brain drain that brings harmful effects to development in source developing countries. The opposite is automatically seen as reflective of brain gain. In addition, brain

exchanges in the forms of flows of skills and transferability of knowledge are found beneficial to developing economies. The return of skilled expatriates is said to increase productivity in source countries by filling in the loss of human capital, thus defined as brain circulation. Another flow of highly skilled people is termed brain export when some countries train human capital in certain fields for export (Lowell & Findlay, 2002). Professionals in these fields, in this sense, become global trade products that enable brain globalization as well. These terms contribute to the disembodiment in the mobility regime that sees skilled migrants as either beneficial economic actors or detrimental agents of development.

Migrants' mobilities are associated with brain commodities. These commodities can be used for trading and exchanging. At the macro level, the calculation of skilled migrants as global commodities creates a disembodied aspect of the mobility regime. At the individual level, brain drain is created by migrants' considerations of economic opportunities offered in host countries and unfavourable work conditions posed in home societies (Docquier & Rapoport, 2012), or reactions to political and religious chaos in home societies such as in Afghanistan (Noor, 2006). Skilled migrants are portrayed as being rational in choosing how to move between countries for the betterment and leave home societies to avoid the worst. Rationality in skilled migration is seen as a return on investment for their education (Nguyen, 2017). Motives for skilled migration are conceptualized as disembodied rational choice-making processes that are also shaped by the regime of quotas.

Within the limited corpus of studies on the brain drain issue, skilled migrants from Vietnam are characterized as passive policy objects being moved under the global race for talent. For example, by conducting a cross-nation comparison of the trends and causes of brain drain, Docquier and Rapoport (2012) pointed out that around 26.9% of Vietnamese people who have been trained domestically have left the country. This study suggested that Vietnam is a loser in this global race for skills. At the micro-level and by measuring Vietnamese students' intention to migrate after Australian international education, Nguyen's (2006) study elaborated on several factors such as higher salaries and opportunities for migration that attract Vietnamese students to remain in Australia after graduation, while the lack of public recognition and research facilities as well as poor salary structures are perceived as push forces.

Most current research on skilled migration has followed an economic approach or used a policy framework to investigate the impacts of migration on societies and economies. In this sense, this type of migration is viewed as the consequence of socio-economic transformations. In contrast, the numbers of skilled migrants who have obtained their education in their home country and overseas and have left are not properly recorded. That means we may be mistaken if these two groups are collapsed into one single category. That also means it may be difficult to measure the exact extent of brain drain or the impacts of development policies on skilled migration. By relying on this single categorization, we may find it hard to explore the impacts of transnational ties that these migrants may use for their migration and relocation as well as the contributions these migrants can make to their home society.

Multi-faceted dimensions in the embodiment of transnational mobilities

Among other methodologies such as phenomenology or ethnography, transnationalism approaches can help explore the embodiment of skilled migration. The body of transnationalism research often delves into migrants' engagements in the transnational world that range at various social scales and are filled with materialistic and symbolic connections. Migrants' engagements in this world are affected by and shape the multi-directional social processes that influence the ways migrants experience and make sense of their mobilities. By exploring migrants' negotiations of the meaning of their migration

with others across spaces, transnationalism affects their sense-making of their belonging, aspirations, imagination, and even identity (Tedeschi, Vorobeva, & Jauhiainen, 2022).

Transnationalism is not a new topic, but advances in communication and transportation, as well as migration schemes and diaspora strategies, have made it more intense. Basch, Glick-Schiller, and Blanc-Szanton (1996) defined transnationalism as the dynamic and complex processes in which migrants develop, sustain, and use multi-dimensional relations so that they can make sense of their integration, rejections of socio-political and cultural norms in host societies, and relocation to the countries of settlement but at the same time, get connected to their home societies (Beauchemin & Safi, 2020). Initially, many studies focused on exploring transnational activities among migrants from South America and the Caribbean region to the US (e.g., Basch, Glick-Schiller, & Blanc-Szanton, 1996; Levitt, 2001). Then, transnationalism research flourished with a large body of research being conducted in European contexts (e.g., Faist, 2000; Li, Sadowski-Smith, & Yu, 2018), Asia, and Oceania (e.g., Ballard, 2003; Colic-Peisker & Deng, 2019; Nguyen, 2022).

Conventionally, transnationalism is categorized into two main types. Transnational practices shaped by global capitalism, transnational corporations, and state-directed transnational institutions are often termed "transnationalism from above". Some transnational activities happen in a local context which sees migrants' struggles with conflicts in ethnicity, communal practices, cultural ideologies, and political activities. They are called "transnationalism from below" (Guarnizo & Smith, 1998, p. 3). Transnational activities "from below" are also found to be dependent on the traditional roles of kinship in sharing economic resources and constructing transnational spaces such as community, ethnic, and family networks (e.g., Ballard, 2003; Basch, Glick-Schiller, & Blanc-Szanton, 1996). From the perspective of "transnationalism from below", many studies (e.g., Levitt, 2001; Nguyen, 2022) are concerned with migrants' nationalism, formations of (hybrid) identities, as well as cosmopolitan qualities. Other studies have also found that some transnational practices are developed and sustained through hometown associations for political campaigns to lobby politicians in host societies, transnational political and ethnic groups, and fund-raising projects for economic support in home societies (e.g., Levitt, 2001; Portes, Guarnizo, & Landolt, 1999).

Transnational activities have entailed dynamic processes, rather than the sustainment of familial ties or religious bonds solely (Foner, 1997). They encompass activities that increase the connections to (and perhaps, disconnections from) people, networks, organizations, language groups, and communities across several nations, making the concepts of home and host countries fluid and perhaps become a unified place for their engagements with the transnational world (Bilecen, Gamper, & Lubbers, 2018; Faist, 2000; Forner, 1997; Li, Sadowski-Smith, & Yu, 2018). The corpus of transnationalism research normally associates migration with a continuing process that comprises connections of several contextual settings rather than a linear trajectory from departure to arrival (Gold, 1997). Subsequently, transnationalism research has shifted the focus on migrants' scales of interactions from one locale to transnational social fields, including migrants' mobilization of personal network support for their integration, social network support from their home communities, and social capital for their transnational entrepreneurship ((Bilecen, Gamper, & Lubbers, 2018). Under this social network analysis, migrants are seen as active actors with agency and subjectivity who make sense of their mobilities through their dealings with the policy discourse concerning the constraints and opportunities posed by their encounters with others at interrelated social domains. The way they negotiate their mobilities is also experienced through their encounters with those who stay immobile, and migrants' mobilities may be affected by and affect the immobility discourse. Therefore, migrants' interactions with others across national borders include their sense-making of space in which distances are manifest through the social meanings embedded in migrants' practices of mobilities.

The transnationalism concept provides a new thinking tool to explore diverse trajectories of migration from initiation to relocation. The units of analysis in transnationalism research include migrants' circumstances, their social relations, impacts of communities, cultural and religious norms and practices, as well as policies and political agendas that affect their mobilities. To explore migrants' circumstances, we must look into the history and activities of individual migrants. At the same time, we must also examine the effects of political aspects, transnational enterprises, and organizations on expatriates' contributions (Portes, Guarnizo, & Landolt, 1999). In line with this multifaceted level analysis, migrants' motives for migration can be shaped by other reasons than economic drives. For example, by conducting interview narratives and surveys, Colic-Peisker and Deng (2019) found that Chinese business migrants in Australia are not concerned with success in their businesses in Australia. Instead, securing a PR for their children's education and clean environment is their concern. Academic migrants from Brazil, Russia, China, and India are found to opt for temporary return so that they can be anchored in the US as the host society and conduct transnational practices on professional and personal levels with their home countries (Li, Sadowski-Smith, & Yu, 2018).

This perspective allows us to understand how migrants' experiences of mobilities are shaped, forged, or constrained by multiple factors ranging from state regimes of mobility to development strategies and their situations. It also allows us to unpack the negotiations of power with the mobility regime and others across borders. In this sense, migrants' transnational mobilities can be seen as being embedded in global forces, communal and familial conditions, and negotiations of their relations with the world. They are not flows of brain commodities without affection or agency.

Conclusion

This paper analysed several aspects of the mobility regime that consist of statistical information, political views of skilled migrants as economic drives that can be measured through the labour market outcomes, and international students' uses of their education as a means to migrate. Skilled migrants are also viewed as disembodied global products that are subject to quotas and numbers that can be exported and exchanged. These aspects disembody migrants' sense-making of migration from their actual engagement in the world. In contrast, the transnational perspective conceptualizes migrants' mobilities through the embodiment of their relations to the global, national, communal, and familial worlds. The point of departure of analysis is migrants themselves and then, their relations to others across social aspects. Therefore, it is suggestive that migrants' sense-making and experience of transnational mobilities be studied through their interactions with the mobility governance, communal and familial influences, impacts of the immobility of others, and transnational ties.

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