MIGRATION
LETTERS

Editorial: Modeling Migration, Insecurity and COVID-19

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Abstract

In this editorial, I adapt a culture of migration approach to the study of migration and COVID-19. I argue that the coronavirus and COVID-19 undermine security and the efforts of movers to make informed decisions concerning their sojourns. The role of insecurity in decision-making, at points of origin and destination, and the ways that movers respond, are developed throughout the articles in this issue of Migration Letters, revealing a growing interest in understanding the complex forces surrounding human mobility.

Keywords: migration; COVID-19; pandemic; migration theory; insecurity.

Introduction

In *Cultures of Migration,* we argue that mobility is founded in household decision-making and driven by insecurities at points of origin and destination (Cohen and Sirkeci, 2011). Insecurity takes many forms; it may be cultural and rooted in idiosyncratic responses to intellectual struggles at home, or it can be physical and in response to crime, discrimination and violence abroad. It is effective to model insecurity as a continuum that tracks time, space and physicality. Time captures the history, present and future and allows us to understand how insecurity is created at the moment, yet builds upon past experiences and future hopes. Insecurity also plays out across geography, and noting the spatial relations that define actions and where those actions take place, whether at home and in private or publically and abroad, affects decision-making including decisions around things like mobility and well-being. Finally, while insecurity is an intellectual response to the fear of loss, dread and anxiety; insecurity is also physical and carries real corporeal costs. Not least of the costs of insecurity are the fears of hunger and death or surplus and success that accompany the risks and opportunities created in decision-making. In fact, Cohen and Zotova argue that there are examples where a migrant's successes create new and complex stresses and tensions as the mover responds to the needs and demands of non-movers and sending communities (2020).

At this moment then, insecurity takes on new meaning and along several axes. This is particularly true for movers and non-movers. History, geography, as well as the physical and intellectual experience of insecurity, affect decision-making and mobility. The situation is particularly difficult for movers and non-movers as the Corona Virus, the lack of preparation for a pandemic, and the unknowns that surround COVID-19 become an existential threat to security. Real

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dangers, dangers of life and dealth, shake the very concept of security as movers and non-movers are forced to make difficult choices between work and life. No less serious and destabilizing are the intellectual challenges that face decision-makers as they balance what they know, what they believe and what they fear.

The decisions around how to respond to the Corona Virus and COVID-19 are particularly complicated for migrants as well as the families they leave behind. What follows is a brief review of the challenges Corona Virus and COVID-19 pose for movers and non-movers. After a brief discussion of security and insecurity (Part I), I explore some of the challenges that movers and non-movers face moving forward (Part II) and in conclusion (Part III) directions for our research moving forward.

Part I: Not all insecurities are alike

Humans exist, and in point of fact, thrive in secure environments. What creates a secure environment is largely an objective exercise that is defined around beliefs, experiences and history and in reaction to keeping insecurity at a distance. Insecurity does not mean past security was somehow more real; rather, insecurity is a way to represent the collapse of security through time and in response to the assumption of security that may (or may not) have existed, but that nevertheless become concrete and real through history.

Threats to security take many forms; not the least of which is expressed in the physical exercise of violence (Madrueño-Aguilar, 2016). Nevertheless, the UN has argued that there are at minimum seven critical concerns that define security (Gomez and Gasper, 2013); and that freedom from violence and crime are only a start. In addition, people have a right to economic and political security, food security, health security, environmental security as well as personal and communal security.

At the moment, the Corona Virus and the threat of COVID-19 are established as new challenges or insecurities that confront decision-makers and undermine assumptions of security, including the security goals that were defined by the UN. Not only has the coronavirus created a new form of insecurity; it has intensified insecurity around economics, food, health and the environment as well as personal and communal safety.

At points of origin and destination, movers and non-movers are confronted by these new insecurities and the reality that they may undermine plans going forward. The threat is not simply one that is focused on immediate needs and dangerous disease; rather, it is a threat that is confounding as individuals, households and communities struggle to manage resources, opportunities and challenges. The challenges facing movers is clear in Otto's article in this issue of *Migration Letters* (Otto, 2020). Otto notes that as unaccompanied minors age, they do not simply lose their vulnerability; rather, she notes how vulnerability (or as described in this essay, insecurity) changes through time and in relation to rules and regulations. In a similar pattern, the lack of clear and effective information on the virus and the health implications of COVID-19 (including the risk of hospitalization and death) renders clear decision-making almost impossible and vulnerable to changing legal systems as well as new health guidelines (see, for example, Sim, et al., 2011). And while a household or community may well be able to respond to a pandemic, without effective information, stress and anxiety can mount, leaving decision-makers metaphorically frozen in place. Such a difficult situation is good for no one and an existential threat, the fear of contracting COVID-

19, essentially becomes a new form of insecurity that affects not only the decision-maker but their family and others at points of origin and destination (Chakraborty and Maity, 2020).

The lack of support and clear information, including information in native languages become critical deficiencies that confront movers at points of destination as they organize themselves to meet the challenges of everyday life (Chakraborty and Maity, 2020; Corburn et al., 2020). Information is perhaps even more important as movers negotiate communities and countries that are new or poorly understood. The challenge is not that the mover may infect people, rather it is that the mover not know how to access resources that are available and meant to protect everyone (Liem et al. 2020).

Insecurity is not only an issue locally. The lack of information that grips most movers at points of origin and destination is also defined by political leaders at the local, state or global level and central to the discussions by Herda and Tewolde in this issue. Herda notes that natives often misrepresent migrant populations and their legal status vis-à-vis the law. The problem is first that the misunderstanding can contribute to unproductive planning on the one hand, or more dangerously as Tewolde notes, a xenophobic response that blocks the ability to organize and engage a new population.

The status, position and engagement of the political leadership in a pandemic can not be more consequential for the security and insecurity of movers (see the editorial Lancet, 2020). Migrants are one group in particular whose insecurity will be amplified given the decisions of leaders, whether at points of origin or destination. The very nature of security, as well as insecurity, will be changed as will the outcomes as movers, non-movers and those thinking about migrating balance new and largely undefinable challenges against losses of security that are quite real and range from the intellectual to the physical.

Movers, and in particular those movers from poorer settings (urban and rural) and minority backgrounds are confronted with stark decisions between life and work that are influenced by state policies and political rhetoric as is clear in Kesici's discussion of Kurds (2020) who have settled in London in this issue. Classified as Turks, these movers, new to London face serious insecurities around language and work, and often isolate themselves in response.

For many movers who do not fit into discrete and well known boxes, there is no effective or simple response to the rhetoric (state and otherwise) that undermines security and takes many different forms (and see Paerregaard, 2019). In response to the xenophobic moves of politicians, a potential mover may elect to stay put and isolate rather than face the challenges of an infectious disease. Yet their decision carries and creates additional insecurities and can place others in harm's way. Having decided to remain in their sending home and not tempt the dangers that linger on the border and beyond, the potential movers risks running out of resources (including money) and being unable to cover the growing burden of needs that are associated with their household. An alternative for the mover is to migrate in the face of the pandemic. This can be as difficult a decision as is staying put and practising self-quarantine. Having decided to relocate, the mover risks potential infection and the possibility that the state will not provide any assistance. The fear isn't that they might carry the virus, but that once infected, there will be no opportunity for medical support—a major concern when coping and planning around the Corona Virus and COVID-19 (Chishti and Bolter, 2020).

The decisions of the rural poor and members of ethnic and indigenous minorities are complicated by a lack of adequate healthcare, long-term patterns of discrimination that limit local opportunities, and structural inequalities that are often characterized by underfunded federal programs. And the challenge is not simply one that faces all rural or minority movers equally. In their analysis of healthcare spending by the rural poor and other backward classes (OBC), scheduled caste (SC) and scheduled tribal (ST) households, Khan and Chinnakkannu describe in this issue the different impacts that remittances can have; sometimes positive, but oftentimes not when the economic status is included. These long-term challenges and structural discrimination leave populations at a disadvantage (or insecurity) in the best of times; during pandemic trouble only mounts (Handley and Sudhinaraset 2017).

Part II: Confronting COVID-19

The insecurities confronting movers and non-movers at points of origin and destination are clear in recent reports by the IMF, UN and World Bank among others. Writing for the Pew Research Center, Philip Connor notes that 9 in 10 people worldwide are limited in their ability to move as nations seal borders in response to COVID-19 (https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/04/01/more-than-nine-in-ten-people-worldwide-live-in-countries-with-travel-restrictions-amid-covid-19/). These closures challenge refugees who seek asylum; economic migrants in search of labour; as well as migrants who are currently living in a new community and facing limits on work, healthcare and aid. More broadly, the challenges facing movers will impact sending households and communities. In a recent KNOMAD review, the World Bank predicts up to a 20 per cent decline in remittance rates globally and lasting well into 2021 (http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/989721587512418006/pdf/COVID-19-Crisis-Through-a-Migration-Lens.pdf).

Writing after the global economic crisis of 2008-09, we found the predicted drop in remittances was much smaller than what was predicted. Small dips in overall movements were followed by the overall global growth of migration and an increase in remittance rates that reached new highs in 2018 (the last year that data are available). The rapid increase in remittance rates was predicted to continue through 2021, reaching nearly $600 billion according to the Dilip Ratha and his team, writing for the World Bank https://blogs.worldbank.org/peoplemove/data-release-remittances-low-and-middle-income-countries-track-reach-551-billion-2019). In fact, it was clear by 2012 that the remittances flowing from movers to their sending homes and communities were critical to survival, including during economic slowdowns when the effect of remittances was often amplified (Sirkeci et al., 2012). The continued value of migration to well-being during a health emergency is clear in Sirkeci and Yucesahin discussion of the human mobility and COVID-19 (2020), and they note that there is a clear correlation between migration and the spread of a pandemic (including COVID-19). And while current estimates of remittances flows are not available; the rapid and pervasive closing of businesses around the globe and the collapse of the oil industry among other businesses due to the Corona Virus as well as the overall rise in xenophobia and laws that limit access to any resources (and see Kraut 2010) make it difficult, if not impossible, for movers to set off on their sojourns.

Part III: Conclusions

We find ourselves as migration scholars in a difficult position. The overwhelming impact of the Corona Virus and COVID-19 cannot be underestimated, and there are few insecurities that, at the moment, will have a greater effect on outcomes for movers and non-movers, whether at points of origin or points of destination. The researchers who are included in this issue establish the

parameters that confront movers and non-movers at points of origin and destination; they describe the vulnerabilities and insecurities that challenge success; and, they note the depths and dangers that come when movers are misunderstood and misrepresented. We hope that our dedicated readers—friends and colleagues who continue to push toward new and more refined models to understand migration—will join us and add their expertise to the discussion of migration and to better understanding the myriad ways that the Corona Virus and COVID-19 will impact mobility. We hope you will use this issue, and the work by the authors included and submit your work on topics that define how insecurity plays out, how it affects well-being, complicates mobility and challenges beliefs and in the process enhance our understanding of migration, the cultures of migration and the ways in which our world is changing.

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