# Mental mapping and multinational migrations: a geographical imaginations approach

Researching migration decision-making raises certain methodological issues due to complexity of these practices and the diversity of possibilities that exist for aspiring migrants. Migrants are increasingly engaging in multiple migrations, moving between various locations in three or more international destinations. Particularly within Asia, where short-term temporary contracts are increasingly the norm for labour migrants, it becomes counter-productive to analyse migration decision-making as a movement from one place to another. Based on research undertaken in Metro Manila, the Philippines, with 48 Filipino nurses, this paper addresses the question of how to research the multinational migration pathways that structure migration goals and aspirations through demonstrating the benefits and practicalities of mental mapping, a participatory visual method. By exploring the geographical imaginations of migrants and aspiring migrants, multinational pathways are shown to be planned for at the earliest stage of migration. Overall, it proposes that we consider multiple migrations in more multi-directional and messy terms.

Migration; Migration decision-making; geographical imaginations; mental maps; multinational migration; the Philippines

# Introduction

Researching migration decision-making raises certain methodological issues due to the complexity of these practices and the diversity of possibilities that exist for potential and aspiring migrants. Migrants decide to move for a whole host of complex, competing, and at times contradictory reasons, and have some agency in deciding and desiring where to migrate, for how long, and in what capacity. Furthermore, as the other papers in this issue demonstrate, migrants are increasingly engaging in multinational migrations, moving between various locations in two or more international destinations. Particularly within Asia, where short-term temporary contracts are the norm for labour migrants (Battistella, 2014), it becomes counter-productive to analyse migration decision-making as a movement from just one place to another. This paper, based on research undertaken in Metro Manila, the Philippines with 48 nurse students and graduates, addresses the question of how to research the multinational migration pathways that structure migration goals and aspirations through examining geographical imaginations of aspiring migrants by using mental mapping. I demonstrate the benefits and practicalities of mental mapping in examining multinational migration decision-making and show how the mental maps reveal the multiple, messy and multi-directional nature of migration.

Mental mapping is a participatory visual method that allows participants to represent places creatively and visually (Madaleno 2010) and is therefore well suited to examining geographical imaginations of multiple places and migrations. The geographical imaginations approach is part of the turn to examine the aspirations of migrants to better understand migration decision-making practices (see Collins and Carling, 2018; Thompson, 2017). By examining how people view, understand, and interpret the world, insight into desires *to* migrate and of *where* to migrate is gained. Many other migration decision-making approaches are preoccupied with the decision *to* migrate and the question of *where* becomes secondary. An approach centred on examining imaginations of place, however, affords both questions equal prominence. This is central when researching multinational migrations in which multiple destinations are in play, and existing research suggests migrants engage in practices of categorising and creating hierarchies of potential destinations (see Paul, 2017). Conceptually, then, through developing the use of mental mapping, this paper contributes to emerging work that examines migrants’ aspirations by highlighting the importance of multinational migration in the earliest stages of desiring migration.

I begin with the research context of nurse migration in the Philippines to situate the paper’s findings. I follow with a review of literature that a) draws attention to limitations in existing work concerning multinational or stepping-stone migration; b) demonstrates how the geographical imaginations approach is well suited to understanding multinational migrations, and; c) discusses the methodological underpinnings of mental mapping that draws attention to their applicability in exploring the complexities of migration decision-making when multiple destinations are involved. I then explain the methodological approach and attend to the practicalities of using mental mapping. The discussion of the key findings concerning multinational migrations drawing on the mental maps follows. Here, I examine the dominant themes incorporated into participants’ maps, consider the inclusions and omissions of places, the centrality of mobility, and finally reflect on how the maps bring light to the multiple, messy, and multidirectional nature of multinational migrations.

# Nurse migration from the Philippines

The Philippines has an extensive history of labour exportation, which has been a central development strategy since the 1970s, and nursing and carework migration are vital elements of the strategy (Cai, 2011). Filipino nurses can be found in at least 50 countries worldwide with roughly 20,000 leave each year on nursing contracts (POEA, 2015). Unsurprisingly, due to the feminised nature of nursing and carework, many of these migrants are women, leading Tigno to reflect that ‘the face of the Filipino migrant is now that of a young women’ (2014: 20). In recent years, however, as nurse migration has shown itself to be a particularly lucrative form of labour migration for the Philippines, there have been increasing numbers of men entering the field. While limited national data exists, it appears that around 25% of employed nurses in the Philippines are men (NDHRHIS, 2017), in the UK, for example, this figure is just 11% (Williams 2017).

The migration of Filipino nurses and careworkers more broadly has received significant attention from feminist and postcolonial scholars interested in the ways that ethnic and gendered inequalities in the Philippines (Guevarra 2006; Tyner 2004) and receiving countries (Choi and Lyons 2012; Espiritu 2005) produce and control the mobilities and experiences of migrants. This connects to wider literature within migration studies in which discussions of the feminisation of international migration has necessitated a shift away from purely economic explanations of movement to incorporate cultural and social factors, as well as an engagement with theories of globalisation and neo-liberalism to explain the rise in demand for increasingly flexible feminised labour forces (Kofman, 2014, Nawyn, 2010). In this paper, however, I turn to the ways that Filipino nurses plan and make decisions within these wider structural constraints and pressures.

Limited data on the migratory trajectories of Filipino nurses means there is uncertainty as to their exact geographies, but it is evident that they are diverse. Filipino nurse graduates often leave on careworker and student visas (Walton-Roberts and Hennerbry 2012), and therefore actual numbers leaving each year are likely to be several times higher than the 20,000 who leave with a position in nursing secured. Furthermore, Filipino nurses have been found to move between destinations, using temporary destinations as ‘stepping stones’ to other preferred destinations, often in the global north (Matsuno, 2009). While minimal data exists on the ‘stepping-stone’ or multinational migrations of Filipinos, anecdotal evidence suggests this is relatively commonplace (see Ball 2004), with nurses in particular tending to move temporarily to destinations in the Gulf Cooperation Countries (GCC) and Southeast Asia before settling down in North America, Western Europe or Australasia (NAWEA).

# Understanding multinational migration decision-making

Multinational migration pathways have been recognised as relatively common for Filipino nurse migrants (Ball, 2004). However, despite repeated calls by scholars focused on Asian migration to turn to multiple, temporary, and non-linear forms of migration (Battistella, 2014; Ghosh, 2013; Xiang, 2014; Yeoh, 2014), there has been little attempt to provide a conceptual route by which to understand these movements. Here I refer to existing work that considers this phenomenon – stepping-stone migration. I then turn to the geographical imaginations approach as an emerging conceptual tool to better understand the decision-making processes of migrants, focusing on its ability to account for multiple destinations and multiple directions of travel. Finally, I discuss mental mapping as a methodological tool to elucidate these geographical imaginations.

## Stepping-stone migrations

Stepping-stone or stepwise migration are the most common terms for multinational migrations[[1]](#footnote-2). Stepping-stone migration, refers to multinational migration involving at least three destinations in which a migrant moves intentionally or otherwise from one place to gain something to facilitate their onwards movement to another preferred or final destination (Tuckett, 2016; Brown, 1998). Stepping stone migration has historical precedence, as Morris (2016) argues that during the 1860-70s Irish migrants engaged in step migration to Wales to accrue the financial capital to reach the US. Today it is similarly applied to migrants who move from the colonized to the colonizing world.

Stepping-stone migration refers cases where migrants whether intentionally or otherwise use temporary stays in certain destinations to accrue various forms of capital to reach a preferred or final destination (Tuckett, 2016; Brown, 1998), often in the west (Paul, 2011). Temporary migration can allow migrants to acquire additional qualifications, skills, and experience required for employment in higher income countries, provide the required finances to meet visa costs, and/or introduce the migrant to wider social networks to facilitate subsequent migration. The concept is applicable to certain common pathways of multinational migrations. For example research with Filipino healthcare workers has found they often first move to destinations in Southeast Asia or the GCC before finding employment in NAWEA and ‘settling down’ (Ball, 2004; Matsuno, 2009; Ghosh, 2013; Paul, 2011). In this sense, destinations such as Saudi Arabia and Singapore are represented as liminal ‘stepping-stones’ for workers to gain additional experience and financial capital before reaching a final destination.

There is clear understanding as to how certain migratory destinations are formed as stepping-stones through political means. For destinations in Asia, the temporariness is associated with wider ASEAN migration policy that prioritises temporary migration (Bal & Gerard, 2018). Gulf monarchies have similarly ‘cultivated a model of migration management anchored in the paradigm of ‘temporary labour import’’ through various policy interventions (Thiollet, 2016, p.4). However, while some is known about how migrants and aspiring migrants understand and experience the temporariness of destinations (see Parreñas 2010), little is known about how they plan and make decisions to engage in and navigate multinational futures. This paper contributes to the latter point.

Furthermore, discussions of stepping-stone migration imply a highly linear pattern of international mobility in which migrants move from A to B to C. However, evidence suggests often this is not the case, and instead returns home are often disrupt more linear migratory trajectories. However, concepts that are more attuned to the messy and multidirectional nature, conversely, tend not to examine multiple destinations. Circular or repeat migration examines repeat movement between just two locations, such as for seasonal or guestworker migration (see for example Constant & Zimmermann, 2011) or for entertainers (Parreñas, 2010). Discussions on circular migration, are useful as they bring attention to the ways in which sending states such as the Philippines (Privarova & Privara, 2016) promote forms of circular migration, or repeated returns home in order to ensure migrants remain loyal and send significant remittances to their home country.

Stepping-stone migration then presents a highly linear form of migration and creates a hierarchy of destinations in which invariably places in the global north are understood as final destinations while places in the global south are represented as waiting posts (see Paul 2017). Although it has recently been acknowledged that stepping-stone migration can be an active strategy undertaken by migrants to reach destinations ‘onwards and upwards’ (Paul 2017, 37), understandings of the pathways migrants take and the destinations they prefer are relatively underdeveloped. Furthermore, this body of work is oriented towards migrants who are (almost) finished their multinational migratory journey and pays little attention to how multinational migrations are planned before migration occurs. As I show in the following section, adopting a geographical imaginations approach that focuses on *where* migrants desire to migrate, and is open to multiple destinations and multiple journeys and directions of travel is key in furthering this understanding, and recognizing where movements may be ‘downwards or sidewards’.

## The geographical imaginations approach

When examining migration decision-making, it is increasingly recognised that there is a need to go beyond economically-determined narratives of migration decision-making that have ‘long held an almost sacred place in the theories of migration’ (Carling and Collins, 2018, 913). Aspiring migrants make decisions that are not always rational, rarely based on the evaluation of sufficient and accurate information, and almost always influenced by their social networks. Furthermore, many movements of migrants are structured by macro and meso level political-economic demands and barriers, such as labour shortages, restrictions in mobility, and neo-colonial networks of power (Bach 2015). However, within the parameters of these structural realities, would-be migrants generally retain the capacity to make decisions about *whether to migrate* and *where to migrate to* (Thompson, 2017; Paul, 2017). There has therefore been a turn within examining migration decision-making to exploring the ‘aspirations’ of migrants (Carling and Collins, 2018). The geographical imaginations approach is situated within this aspirational turn.

Geographical imaginations are the images and perceptions that we all have about places and spaces in the world and encompass ‘the diversity of perspectives, positions, and subjectivities embodied in human understandings of place, space, landscape and the people who inhabit physical settings’ (Riaño and Baghdadi, 2007, p. 7). The information people receive and use to make decisions comes ‘from multiple sources, not just one […,] in fits and starts, not all of it is retained, and it can often be inaccurate or incomplete’ (Paul 2017, 155). Personal experiences such as travel, or knowing someone living in another place greatly influence geographical imaginations (Gould and White, 1974) and are understood as the most important source of information about places (Paul 2017). Education is another crucial factor as it exposes children to dominant national imaginations of different places in the world, while media also impacts and creates geographical imaginations (Quiminal & Blum le Coat, 2011). The internet has not yet been fully examined as a key contributor of geographical imaginations despite the access it gives to vast information. Nonetheless, in this study, despite high internet usage in Manila, few reported actively using the internet to search for information. Instead, personal contacts, recruitment agencies, media, and popular culture drive imaginations and resulting decisions. Despite this, the internet clearly facilitates a passive acquisition of geographical understanding from access to media, popular culture, and social media. Consequently, the imaginations of those who have never travelled overseas are far more detailed than previous narratives of Filipino migration would suggest (see for example Paul, 2017).

As I have argued elsewhere (ANONYMOUS), the geographical imaginations approach has four key elements that are useful for migration decision-making. Firstly, it is sensitive to the influence of individual agency within the confines of structural realities. Secondly, it helps us understand why migrants do not necessarily move towards the best economic, social, or political opportunities and incorporates cultural and geographical qualities of multiple places into analysis. Thirdly, it demands a detailed examination of images of home and multiple potential migratory destinations, of how life is now, and how it may be different elsewhere (Marcus 2010) - it is acutely interested in *where* people desire and plan to move and why. Finally, it accounts for those with no aspirations to migrate (De Clerck et al., 2012). The second and third elements, the sensitivity to multiple images of home and potential destinations, are most useful for examining multinational migrations.

Employing the geographical imaginations approach to explore migration decision-making involves examining the images and perceptions people have of different places and of their desires or otherwise to visit or migrate there. Rather than migration being the central focus, discussions are concerned with how places and the planned and desired movements from, to, and between places are imagined and influence actions. This allows participants to express their priorities, perceptions of places, and understanding of the barriers that inhibit movement and the connections that facilitate it. The geographical imaginations approach allows discussion of multiple places, and therefore multiple movements. It allows participants to discuss their plans of migration in multiple, messy, and multi-directional terms and is well suited to examining the complexities of multinational migrations.

## Mental mapping

Despite the benefits of the geographical imaginations approach, it can be difficult to verbalise complex future plans involving multiple destinations within an interview setting (Alpes, 2014). Mental mapping, a visual participatory method, whose methodological underpinnings are concerned with perceptions and understandings of the world, is well placed to examine geographical imaginations and migration decision-making. Indeed, mental mapping was initially employed in the 1970s within behavioural geography to examine migration decision-making (Gould and White, 1974). It is currently enjoying a renaissance within migration research more broadly, although is generally used as a tool to examine understandings between a migratory destination and home for those who have migrated (see for example Jung, 2014). Here I demonstrate how contemporary mental mapping has renewed applicability for migration decision-making.

Mental maps, also known as cognitive maps, were first used in migration research in the 1960s. Although arguably all maps are ‘mental’ in that their ‘design rests on the decisions of mapmakers’ (Götz & Holmén, 2018, p.157; see also Bjørn & Michael, 1987), mental maps refer not to fixed cartographic representations, but to the imaginative ways individuals and groups understand spatial meaning in the world. Mental maps were initially employed in behavioural geography during the quantitative revolution, most commonly in urban planning and travel studies (Hannes et al., 2012). This tradition stands, but they have since been adopted by scholars of international relations to analyse foreign policy (see Vinha, 2012), cultural and political geographers to examine perceptions of the world (Reuchamps et al., 2014; Holmén, 2018; Didelon-Loiseau et al., 2018), and by migration researchers (Jung 2014, Madaleno 2010). Recent applications tend to examine the qualitative dimensions of maps, instead of or alongside a quantitative approach.

The use of mental maps in migration research resulted from a dissatisfaction with the supposed rationality inherent within neoclassical economics (Golledge, 1980), much as their re-emergence does today (Boschmann and Cubbon, 2014). It was suggested that everyone carries around imperfect mental images of place that are integral in influencing human behaviours. When needed, an individual recalls these images and uses their ‘spatial information’ to make considered, but not necessarily rational, decisions (Fuller & Chapman, 1974; Gould & White, 1974; Golledge, 1980). Participants were usually given an outline map and asked to highlight places they would and would not move to, and/or to rank places according to desirability. Generally, participants’ maps are amalgamated into a single map to statistically display the group imaginations allowing for similarities and trends to emerge (Fuller and Chapman, 1974, Gould and White, 1974). While useful to demonstrate trends, the behaviourist and positivist approach quantifies human behaviour and desires, masking differences and outliers. It does not allow an exploration of peoples’ perceptions, nor does it interrogate how perceptions are formed.

Mental mapping of recent years is far more complex and diversified, and is generally employed as a qualitative participatory visual method alongside conversational research methods (Jung, 2014; Campos-Delgado, 2017). In contemporary examples of mental mapping, participants are rarely given an outline map to fill out, nor provided with a list of places to rank. Gökten and Südaş (2014, 91) clearly demonstrate the advantages of ‘freely drawn mental maps’ compared with outline maps in their study which asked Turkish migrants in Australia to produce two maps of their new home. They found that ‘imaginary [mental] maps may lead us to understand the place-related experiences of people and how they perceive a region better than the formal representations and boundaries which are reflected more in the outline maps.’ In this sense, contemporary examples of mental mapping examine the qualities ascribed to places rather than quantifying preferences.

In mental mapping, participants are generally given a blank sheet of paper and asked to draw something. This can be a map of places with the characteristics they know (Gökten and Südaş, 2014), or a world map demonstrating their understandings of places, and of relationships between places (Madaleno, 2010). In Jung (2014)’s study, participants were asked to sketch their neighbourhood in their country of origin and in their migratory destination, while in this research, participants were asked to sketch their understanding of the world. The ‘flexibility and openness’ of mental mapping (Reuchamps et al., 2014) is what makes it so suitable to exploring and analysing desires of migration. Rather than presupposing migratory patterns through a base map, mental maps allow for non-linear movements (Campos-Delgado 2017). Participants are free to choose what is and is not included and how to frame their maps, and therefore mental mapping becomes a tool to elucidate understandings, perceptions, aspirations, and experiences of future, present, and past journeys.

Removing a base map also removes the expectation for prior geographical knowledge, allowing mapping to be an accessible cross-cultural and cross-linguistic methodological tool through giving participants the opportunity to re-present their worlds and narratives in a medium that does not rely on secondary languages (Jung, 2014; Campos-Delgado, 2017). Furthermore, with regard to other visual participatory methods such as photo elicitation, mental mapping is much less intrusive, does not endanger the anonymity of the participant, and is publishable (Dowling et al., 2016). Finally, it is key to note that although mental maps offer richer data than other forms of mapping methods; this comes at the price of consistency. As the examples of maps included below demonstrate, participants addressed the task in vastly different ways.

# Research approach

The wider research explored the migration decision-making practices of Filipino nurses living in the Philippines with a keen focus on understanding *where* nurses desire to migrate, rather than focusing only on their desire *to* migrate. Through this, it became apparent that many would-be migrants are acutely aware of the increasing need for multinational migration. Multinational migrations are built into migration decision-making practices from the earliest stage.

To gather the maps, I spoke with 48 nurse students and graduates, in 46 interactions (in two cases, participants were interviewed in pairs as per their request), and 39 of these participants produced mental maps. Interviews were conducted between July and November 2015 throughout Metro Manila, primarily in cafés and restaurants. I recruited participants via snowballing through existing contacts, connections with a nursing college in Manila, and mainly via social media through the creation of a Page on Facebook. All participants have chosen or been allocated a pseudonym.

14 of the participants were men, reflecting the Philippines’ relatively diverse nursing cohort, and all but two under 40, and all Christian, although some did not practice their faith. Participants worked in a diverse range of occupations but had all studied or were still studying (13) a nursing degree in the Philippines. I spoke to nurses who worked in call centres, owned businesses, retrained as fire fighters, became estate agents, and who were unemployed. I also spoke to nurses engaging in exploitative ‘volunteerism’ practices in hospitals, in humanitarian work for NGOs, in a variety of professional and semi-professional nursing roles, and in postgraduate study. Three nurses had already engaged in overseas labour migration, Sofia who returned from Singapore and has since moved to Australia, Tisha who had studied in Singapore and engaging in circular migration to the US, and Erin who disliked her experiences in Saudi Arabia and left the nursing profession to start her own business in Manila. 14 were actively seeking migration opportunities, and a further 12 desired migration in the near future but were not yet undertaking active plans. 17 preferred not to migrate, and five were undecided. In this paper, while I focus on the 27 participants with experience of or plans and desires to migrate, but I also draw on data from the wider group.

I employed mental maps alongside semi-structured interviews as a complementary method and recorded the entire interaction on a Dictaphone. Towards the end of the interview, participants were provided with a blank sheet of paper, approximately 20 coloured pencils from a standard pack, and four coloured biros for the mental mapping activity. There are extensive discussions of the practicalities, benefits and drawbacks of conducting and analysing semi-structured interview (see for example Baxter & Eyles, 1997). I therefore dedicate the following sections to reflecting on my experiences of employing mental mapping to understand how participants navigate and represent multinational migrations.

## Practicalities of mental mapping

Despite the accessibility of mental mapping, I encountered two major barriers when employing it as a method – practicalities of mapping in awkward spaces and some interviewees’ discomfort in engaging in a creative activity (see also Campos-Delgado 2017). These barriers meant ten participants elected not to draw, while one dictated their imaginations for me to draw. Four participants were uncertain of their drawing skills and asked if they could write information on paper instead. This generally was done as a list, see Figure 1, and due to the flexible and open-ended nature of mental mapping can be included in analysis. To mitigate the apprehension of some to engaging in spontaneous creativity, I employed three tactics. First, I introduced the exercise towards the end of the conversation when a good deal of rapport had been built. Second, I brought maps drawn by myself of a low standard to demonstrate artistic skill is not required. I showed these maps very quickly to reduce the risk of participants copying the style, and due to the diverse range of images produced, and the fact that those who undertook the activity in pairs opted for completely different representations this appears to have worked. Third, I introduced the task in non-threatening terms, stressing their open nature in which nothing is right or wrong. I typically introduced the task as follows:

Ok, so that’s most of my questions, the next part if you don’t want to do it you don’t have to. But basically, because I’m a geography student, I’m trying to get people to draw how they see the world. So I’ve got some examples. There’s no way you can do this wrong, everyone does it in a different way and it’s all great! So I’ve been asking people to draw the world […]

This became the only real scripted part of the conversations, and it is notable that the first few participants I spoke with declined to draw a map. It took several attempts to find the right way to approach it - avoiding the term ‘map’ and focusing instead on how people ‘see the world’, is preferable. Furthermore, in relation to my position as a geographer, I stressed that geographical accuracy was not desired. Although most were happy to draw their understandings of the world without external information, two participants referred to maps on their phones. Notably, most participants found the activity enjoyable and therapeutic, a far cry from their day-to-day work. Nicole noted how during her busy exam revision period, it was ‘cute’ as ‘somehow I feel like a kid’.

**[Insert Figure 1 here]**

As advocated by Jung (2014) following her experiences of mental mapping with Asian migrant women living in South Korea, I always observed the mapping exercise, and asked participants to explain their map as they drew. Jung (2014) had initially been unable to interview her participants as they created their maps, and on a subsequent return to the field found she had misinterpreted them. I therefore questioned participants on their use of colours, symbols, and words, as well as the overall message of each map. This allows for the triangulation of results and provides ‘the research subjects with better chances to express themselves more accurately’ (*ibid.* 987). During this period, conversations tended to stray as participants got distracted with their drawings, and colouring pencils evoked memories of youthfulness. Indeed, on reflection, employing the activity towards the beginning of the interview, after building some rapport may be preferable. Many of the conversations had direct relevance for the research, while the drawing produces many opportunities for follow-up questions.

Finally, a key practicality regards the materials used to produce the maps and the ease of digitalising maps for inclusion in the presentation of findings. I selected colouring pencils for their cheapness and effectiveness in tropical monsoon weather in comparison to pens. However, I did not account for the fact that they are particularly difficult to digitalise, and whether through photographing or scanning the maps, significant quality is lost. Therefore, one I have had to reproduce one of the maps included below. The maps are too low quality for all to be reproduced in miniature, and I have therefore selected maps for inclusion that are illustrative of common trends. While this has not hindered my analysis it clearly influences the presentation of data. As a benefit of mental mapping is the ability to present the drawings in findings, it is key to ensure maps can be visible when digitalised – colouring pencils should be avoided!

# Analysing mental maps

Before introducing the analysis of the mental maps, it is worth noting that meaning can be more easily misconstrued with solely visual data (Crang, 2003). Therefore, the analysis presented is also based on the conversation that proceeded and accompanied the drawing of the map to provide a deeper understanding of participants’ complex narratives (Keats, 2009). This analysis is organised into four key sections. I begin by providing an overview to the general trends in the maps, before focusing on two central and interconnecting motifs that run through most of the maps – the inclusions and omissions of certain places and representations of multi-directional movements. In the final section I draw on these findings to demonstrate how the maps aid understanding of multinational migrations. While taking care not to reduce individual representations to generalised categories, these findings demonstrate two key points; a) the migration decision-making practices of Filipino nurses are largely limited to and reflect the structural realities they face, and b) that complex forms of stepping-stone or multinational migration are planned and imagined from the earliest stage and are more complex than existing accounts suggest. This research with Filipino nurses brings attention to the fact that multinational migrations are messy, and multidirectional. Mental maps, through giving participants the opportunity to ‘draw the world’, allow these nuances to arise and aid understanding of multinational migrations.

## General trends

As noted, participants interpreted the task in vastly different ways, producing a multitude of images and representations, and using a combination of visual images, symbols and text. 29 of the 39 maps incorporate text, and two of these have no images, and are lists of preferred migratory destinations as shown in Figure 1. 30 include representations of the Philippines or their locality – home – and inclusion of home was common regardless of migratory desire[[2]](#footnote-3). All but one of the maps include representations of elsewhere, either referring to specific places (23) or representing the world, usually as a globe (15). In the latter cases, participants tended to note that their globes were not geographically accurate. Figure 2 shows an example of a globe-based mental map drawn by Alyssa, a final year student with a determination to migrate. Of those who were actively seeking migration, only one did not refer to specific places in their mental map[[3]](#footnote-4).

**[Insert Figure 2 here]**

Specific places beyond the Philippines were predominantly represented by combinations of text of place names (18), national flags (8), cultural symbols such as landmarks (9), and socio-economic signifiers in the form of currency and representation of lifestyle (10). Previous research shows participants often prioritise depictions of landscape, climate, environment, relative location/distance, language, and cultural norms over socio-economic and political imaginations such as images of education, healthcare, democracy, and economic power, although the latter may be referred to (Fuller & Chapman, 1974; Gökten & Südaş, 2014; Haynes, 1980; Jung, 2014; Madaleno, 2010; Rédei et al., 2011). Notably, in this study those without desires to migrate, followed this trend by incorporating cultural symbols and representations such as landscapes and landmarks and omitting socio-economic signifiers of places. Those with desires to migrate, however, included a variety of symbols to represent other places, and often did not hide the economic element of the decision to migrate. Additionally, reflecting the professional background of participants, 19 maps include representations of healthcare (19). Figure 3 below, Victoria’s map, was chosen as this map incorporates all of these elements and is illustrative of the types of symbols participants used. Here, Victoria has incorporated a variety of symbols to represent the places she is actively searching for migratory opportunities.

**[Insert Figure 3 here]**

## Inclusions and omissions of places

Moving beyond the initial insights and trends, I turn to the first key overarching theme, the inclusions and omissions of places in mental maps, or the geographies represented in the maps. Through paying attention to the more ‘technical’ representative qualities including colour choice, sizes, (mis)locations, and inclusions and exclusions of places (Campos-Delgados 2017), mental maps offer additional data to traditional conversational methods. For instance, it is fruitful to consider how participants’ representations challenge and reflect dominant geographical imaginations, as mental maps do not always reflect geopolitical maps and many include intended mislocations and exaggerations of places (Ben-Ze’ev, 2015). Madaleno (2010), for example found around half of his participants drew the southern hemisphere at the top of the map, challenging dominant western cartographic imaginations. While my participants all drew the north at the top (where relevant), some chose not to depict the world as a whole and included only places they planned to migrate to.

Certain regions were nearly always depicted on maps - locations in NAWEA[[4]](#footnote-5), the ‘Middle East’ (locations within the GCC), and Southeast Asia were over-represented - whilst locations in Africa and Latin America were almost always absent. This is clear in Figures 1 and 3. Australia and New Zealand, as relatively new destinations receiving large numbers of Filipino nurse migrants, feature only in the imaginations of those with active plans to migrate. Eva, for example, was not aware about the potential of migration to Australasia until mentioned by ‘the people in the review centre [for language exams]’. In this sense, the maps reflect the common migratory destinations for Filipino nurses and healthcare migrants (POEA, 2010). While the maps might challenge traditional cartographic representations of space, they do not disrupt or challenge the maps of migratory possibilities for Filipino-trained nurses, indeed, they very keenly represent them.

Furthermore, reflecting findings in existing research on multinational migrations, many of the maps demonstrate a clear categorising of places into distinctive hierarchies. Rose’s map in Figure 1 is perhaps the best example of this as she clearly categorises and separates global destinations as suitable for living, working, or vacationing. This is also evident in Alyssa’s depiction of the world (Figure 2) in which only places marked with hospital symbols are deemed suitable migratory destinations. However, the ranking and ordering of destinations is in no way uniform, and preferences to live in as opposed to just visiting destinations are highly variable. Rose for example prioritises the UK as her preferred destination, while Alyssa has no desire to live anywhere in Europe, and Victoria prefers Australia. In this sense, the mental mapping approach allows structural realities – the political realities of visas, structural racism, financial costs of entry and so on – to be made visible on maps, but crucially provides space to understand how participants respond to these structural realities and how they shape their geographical imaginations and migration decision-making practices in multiple ways[[5]](#footnote-6).

## Multi-directional movements

The second common theme within the mental maps is that of mobility. In Jung’s (2014) study, her participants’ images were relatively static and focused on localised scales displaying the assumed immobility of her participants. In this study, only one participant, Sarah, who had long decided against pursing overseas opportunities, represented her world in static and localised ways, drawing her home, herself, and her daughter. Other participants without desires to migrate used their maps to demonstrate their interconnections and relations with elsewhere, incorporating symbols of places they desire to travel to for leisure purposes, or using their maps to highlight how global and local injustices contribute to their decision not to migrate. For example, Camille (Figure 4) created an abstract representation of the threat of global pollution with a clear focus on the Philippines as being vulnerable. For Camille, her ability to provide care to their fellow citizens drives them to remain in the Philippines, and she has no desires to migrate. Two other participants produced similarly abstract maps highlighting global issues.

**[Insert Figure 4 here]**

Most participants, however, infused their maps with symbols and imagery connoting multiple and varied forms of international mobility. The maps include an appreciation of the interconnectedness of the world and are visual representations of home and elsewhere, and of planned movements between places. In six maps, this movement was represented by airplanes, usually accompanied by a globe, while a further 20 used lines and arrows to connate movement, again, usually accompanied by a globe. Figures 2 and 3 are typical examples of this mobility infused mental mapping approach.

To add further complexity, Eva, for example, who had long desired to migrate, allocated each of her family members a colour to demonstrate the different possibilities and requirements of migratory destinations for family members, while Sofia, who had already engaged in short-term migration to Singapore, drew two halves to her map, her immediate future and her goals for a ‘perfect life’. This demonstrates that ‘mental mapping allows a non-linear narrative in *time* and space’ (Campos-Delgado 2017, 187, my emphasis), and that its openness provides space for participants to include representations of multiple multinational pasts, presents, and futures.

These maps show participants rarely presented migration in simple linear terms, as often arrows connoting directions of movement are double-ended, indicating desires for short and long term returns home. Discussions indicated that there is a willingness, and often an active desire to engage in multiple forms and directions of movement, but that rarely is this to reach an overall preferred destination at the top of the hierarchy. In most cases, participants are not just planning to engage in multinational migrations, but in multiple directions, with planned returns home.

## Multinational migrations

As the previous two sections have shown, the mental maps include a multitude of destinations and directions of travel, demonstrating significant complexity in the migration plans and desires of participants. Here I consider what this means for discussions on multinational migrations by considering participants’ plans to engage in both typical and novel forms of multinational or stepping-stone migration.

Six maps appear to demonstrate desires and plans to engage in typical forms of stepping-stone migration common for Filipino migrants, i.e. represent planned short-term migration to destinations in the GCC, Hong Kong, and Singapore and longer term migration to a destination in NAWEA (see also Matsuno, 2009). No participant who considered working in the GCC of Southeast Asian destinations planned to stay beyond five years. Even Rose (Figure 1), who migrated to Riyadh as a young child, stayed until she was 17 and has favourable memories of her time spent there, imagines the Middle East as a ‘training ground’. Rose will return, but only for a few years to gain the required amount of work experience needed to access preferable destinations – “the UK, or the US, or maybe Canada” – that are more difficult, timely, and expensive to reach. Rose’s mental map clearly demonstrates her hierarchy of destinations (see Paul 2017) that shows certain places as only suitable for temporary work.

Similarly, Nikki’s (Figure 5) and Jason’s maps below (Figure 6) demonstrate standard stepping-stone pathways. Notably, Nikki was the only participant who declined to have her interview recorded due to shyness about speaking in English, and found the mapping exercise useful. Nikki’s map demonstrates how she plans for migration to the UAE to be temporary, with her family remaining in Manila. In her early 20s, she did not yet have children, but was sure she would in the near future. She does not feel the UAE is a suitable place to raise children due to the restrictive conditions imposed on migrants and women, explaining that the depiction of herself in traditional UAE dress, covering her hair, represents the personal sacrifices she will make in moving there[[6]](#footnote-7). Instead, Nikki will wait until she reaches the USA to include her family in her migration plans. Jason’s pathway is more open, as after moving to Singapore to reunite with his girlfriend, he is less certain of the next stage in his journey. Jason represents the migrations he is certain about in red, showing beyond Singapore, return to the Philippines is the only other certainty built into his plans.

**[Insert Figure 5 here]**

**[Insert Figure 6 here]**

The hierarchy of places appears less apparent in Jason’s representation, as he refers to preferred places but also includes question marks and the term ‘anywhere’. This openness to move to ‘any’ destination, however, does not suggest that the *where* is irrelevant. When questioned, just three participants stated that ‘anywhere’ meant anywhere, and all of these had desires to engage in humanitarian work. For most, ‘anywhere’ meant anywhere within NAWEA, Jason included. What this does demonstrate is that while multiple destinations are planned for, participants are also acutely aware that structural realities – demand for nurses, national immigration policy, etc. – can and do change, and build in flexibility into their plans. This speaks to discussions concerning the ways in which Filipino nurse and careworker migrants are ‘produced’ (Oritga 2014), ‘made’ (Tyner, 2004), or ‘manufactured’ (Guevarra 2010) to be a pliable migrant workforce.

As noted, Rose’s map includes multiple potential destinations and while she expresses an openness to multiple directions of travel, her preferred movement is Riyadh to the UK. Nikki’s planned trajectory is more linear and includes just two overseas destinations, while Jason’s has some certainties and some flexibility. Crucially, though in all maps, migration does not end in the preferred destination at the top of a hierarchy of overseas places. Instead, the Philippines is both the place of departure and return, the top and bottom of the ‘hierarchy’. The end goal for engaging in traditional stepping-stone patterns of migration is, in all but two cases, to be able to return home to the Philippines. Planning to engage in stepping-stone or multinational migration is necessary not just to gain capital to move to new destinations, but to gain capital to access opportunities or live comfortably in the country of origin, the Philippines.

Planned return to the Philippines, however, is not just the end point for multinational futures. Instead, as demonstrated in Ryugazaki’s map (Figure 7), for some participants, a form of circular multinational migration is planned and desired. Ryugazaki was a final year nursing student at the time of interview. She was particularly invested in using nursing to help the neediest and was planning to apply for overseas volunteering missions in Africa (was one of just three participants to include ‘Africa’ in her mental map). She discussed Africa as more ‘third world’ than the Philippines, demonstrating a planned downward migration (Alyssa similarly spoke of this). Ryugazaki also desired to further her work in community nursing in rural areas of the Philippines, as well as engage in migration for economic purposes on a longer-term basis, to a destination within NAWEA. Japan is included for leisure purposes.

**[Insert Figure 7 here]**

Ryugazaki’s map clearly shows plans for circular and multiple forms of migration and return to the Philippines, and in her interview she confirmed that repeat returns to the Philippines were an essential component of her plans. Peñafiel (2015) suggests the Philippine state actively encourages circular forms of migration to ensure citizens remain loyal and invest in the state, in this case through healthcare provision. Again, this demonstrates that maps and imaginations reflect structural pressures exerted on the participants. Indeed, Tisha, in her late 20s, who I met on her annual return to the Philippines exemplifies this multinational circular migrant.

Tisha moved to Singapore to study a postgraduate degree in nursing and then gained work experience before finding a role in a care home in California, USA. She also accepted part-time laboratory work. Despite working two jobs in the USA, Tisha managed to, through agreeing to additional overtime, negotiate a guaranteed month-long period of leave each year. She uses this leave to return to the Philippines to volunteer in the most deprived regions, and uses her savings to donate medical supplies throughout the year. She also plans to return to the Philippines for retirement and is open to further NAWEA destinations in her future, as she opposes the USAs military strategy in relation to China. Such a move would represent a ‘sidewards’ migration. Her mental map (Figure 8), does not demonstrate the multiplicity of her past and present movements, but is instead intended to capture the migratory possibilities of Filipino nurses. Tisha included places on her map that ‘have lots of Filipinos here, if you go to Japan there are lots of Filipinos there, a lot of Filipinos in the Middle East, it’s like 80% of the population is made up of Filipinos!’[[7]](#footnote-8) Here, it is further evident that Tisha’s understanding of the world and the world of her fellow Filipino nurses is limited by the structural realities they face.

**[Insert Figure 8 here]**

In this section, the examples of Ryugazaki and Tisha bring light to the multiple trips involved in multinational migrations, demonstrating the need to pay attention to more circular forms of movement. The maps of Nikki, Rose, and Ryugazaki, additionally, demonstrate the centrality of return migration in multinational plans. For Ryugazaki, a student who has not yet engaged in serious preparations for migration, such as registering with a recruitment agency, this is particularly illuminating, as it demonstrates that multinational migrations are planned and desired from the earliest stage of migration decision-making.

# Conclusions

Through using mental mapping to elucidate the geographical imaginations of aspiring migrants, it is possible to gain a deeper understanding of the complexity involved in multinational migrations. While participants produce hierarchies of places, these hierarchies are more fluid and dynamic than other accounts of stepping-stone migration would suggest, as the desire to return to the Philippines disrupts the idea that the final destination is a place at the top of a hierarchy. Forms of circular or repeat migration are represented as desirable, while plans for multinational migration more broadly are common amongst participants. Through identifying the non-linearity and multiplicity of multinational migrations, it is clear that not all multinational migrations are taken for the purpose of moving ‘upwards and onwards’ (Paul, 2017), and migrations ‘downwards’ and ‘sidewards’ are also represented as desirable migratory trajectories.

Mental maps and the geographical imaginations approach have proven key to elucidate, interrogate, and analyse these multinational migrations. Their inherent flexibility provides participants with scope to represent their past, current and planned/desired migrations in a visual form, bringing attention to the complex and messy nature of multinational migrations. They disrupt the often linear presentation of migration that characterises much contemporary research, in which common migration pathways are researched rather than the multiplicity of available pathways. Adopting an approach sensitive to the geographical imaginations of migrants and aspiring migrants ensures that the agency and desires of individuals, as well as their perceptions, imaginations and understandings of the world, remain central in analysis, whilst drawing attention to the ways in which these desires are structured by external forces. The geographical imaginations approach adopted is vital in bringing attention to how those facing similar structural pressures differently interpret and react to the influences exerted on their lives and futures, but it is only though employing mental mapping to elucidate these geographical imaginations, that the full complexity of multinational migrations becomes visible.

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1. Note, the ‘step’ terminology is also used to refer to migrants’ improvement within a destination, such as ‘stepping-up’ a career ladder or a social status, or stepping from a student visa to a working one known as two-step migration (see for example Hawthorne 2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. The focus on home is entirely expected and is common in all applications of mental mapping – we orient ourselves from the place we know best. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. This was Isabel, who has since migrated to the UK. Her ‘map’ was based on the 2013 film *Gravity* she had seen a few days previously. Accompanying text noted that she viewed people as being ‘scattered all over the globe like stars in the sky’. Nonetheless, her map included movement and reference to other places, albeit in an abstract form. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Few participants used terms such as ‘western world’ or ‘global north’, so I have avoided these terms [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. Elsewhere, I examine the qualities of place that prompt participants to desire migration (ANONYMOUS). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. Throughout interviews, ideas concerning the gendered expectations and performances of Filipino nurses and Filipino nurse migrants were raised, but except for Nikki, were not made visible on mental maps. There is insufficient data to discuss the impact of gender on migration decision-making, but with very few exceptions, gender dynamics of overseas destinations did not factor into participants’ migratory plans and desires. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. Her inclusion of the Caribbean is because ‘most Filipinos in the US like to go to the Caribbean, not only most Filipinos, but most Filipino nurses.’ I am unable to check the veracity of this claim. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)