Migration decision-making: a geographical imaginations approach

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Within the past two decades, scholars of migration are beginning to understand the importance of incorporating cultural dimensions into research concerning migration decision-making practices. While it is recognised that economic, social and political factors are central in the formation of the desire to migrate, these factors alone are unable to explain the migratory decisions of many. However, although cultures of migration has emerged as the dominant approach for incorporating cultural facets of migration decision-making, I suggest this approach does not offer a holistic exploration into the impacts of 'culture' due to its reluctance to fully engage with the importance of place. This paper outlines a geographical imaginations approach that is able to account for the complexities of culture and place on migration decision-making, based on insights developed from interviews undertaken with Filipino nurses in the UK and in the Philippines. The approach is able to account for the impacts of culture and place on migration decision-making in four main, interlinking ways. It is sensitive to the influence of geographical scales, to ideas of culture and place, to understandings of both home and away, and is able to account for non-migration.

Key words: Philippines, geographical imaginations, cultural geography, migration decision-making, cultures of migration, place

Introduction

The last two decades has witnessed an assertion that studies of migration decision-making require a reorientation to account for culture (Bal and Willems 2014; Teo 2003a 2003b). Dominant examinations of migration are preoccupied with the economic rationale that produces movement, with systems of social networks that facilitate it and with political systems that regulate it. While the importance of economic, social and political factors in shaping the migratory possibilities and realities of the world cannot be denied, alone they are unable to explain how aspirations to migrate are formed. This is not to say that cultural factors have never received consideration; it has long been recognised that a move to a place with the same language and/or religion is preferable (Massey *et al.* 1993). But culture is a fluid and dynamic concept, involving also customs, traditions, cuisine, dress, music, arts and moral values (McEwan 2001).

I contend that to fully comprehend migration decision-making it is necessary to take note of the impacts of culture and place and to understand not only *why* people aspire to move, but *where* they aspire to move to. Imaginations of culture, imaginations of places (landscape, climate and distance) and imaginations of social, political and economic possibilities all impact the propensity to migrate. To account for these factors it is deemed necessary to explore migration decision-making within a geographical imaginations approach.

I begin by briefly charting the weaknesses of mainstream migration theories see King (2012) for a detailed critique and Massey *et al.* (1993) for the emergence of cultural approaches. Following this, the concept of geographical imaginations, which has been used in several studies examining migration decision-making processes, is introduced (Marcus 2009; Riaño and Baghdadi 2007; Teo 2003a 2003b). By drawing on fieldwork in the Philippines with nurses, I then outline the starting point for the field of application

of a 'geographical imaginations approach'. This approach is able to account for the impacts of culture and place on migration decision-making in four interlinked ways. It is sensitive to the influence of geographical scales, to ideas of culture and place, to understandings of both home and away, and is able to account for non-migration.[1] The approach is flexible and wide-reaching in nature, and does not overlook the importance of economic, social and political influences.

Migration decision-making: towards a cultural approach

The most renowned migration theory, the neo-classical model, sought to explain why people are compelled to migrate from a primarily economic perspective (Lee 1996). People are understood to be pushed by poverty and unemployment and pulled towards better wages and employment opportunities. However, as Bal and Willems remind us, 'not each poor country is an emigration country and certainly not all poor people migrate' (2014, 251). Neo-classical theories are unable to account for those within emigration countries who choose to remain, nor can they account for differences in migration patterns between regions of similar economic standing (King 2012).

As not all migrants move towards favourable economic opportunities, it was later acknowledged that some paths of migration are self-perpetuating, and migration decisions should be understood as being structured by a system or network (Arango 2004). When migrants are established in a destination, their local knowledge and social capital facilitates the movement of others, reducing the potential costs of migration. As aspects of migration become institutionalised, movement becomes independent of those economic forces that initially caused it (Massey *et al.* 2003). While this reasoning undermines the prevalence of a purely economic approach, it is unable to explain why only certain people migrate, or why certain regions initially experience higher levels of emigration.

New Economics of Labour Migration was perhaps the first theory concerned with understanding why not everyone moves. This posits that the cost/benefit analysis undertaken before migration is a household rather than individual decision (Massey 1990). It can thus explain why one member of a household migrates (often a young, single woman from the developing world), but contributes little in understanding why many families send nobody, and cannot account for developed world migration.

Massey *et al.* argued that, as factors influencing migration decision-making are so diverse and multiple, a cumulative causation approach is best, contending that while most migration streams begin due to economic concerns, the

> causation [of migration] is cumulative in that each act of migration alters the social context within which subsequent migration decisions are made, typically in ways that make additional movement more likely. (1993, 451)

Massey *et al.* (1993; see also Massey 1990) additionally argued that to understand why certain regions produce significantly more migrants, something else must be happening. They introduced the notion of 'cultures of migration' to help understand the impact of 'culture' on migration decision-making.

Cultures of migration

Cultures of migration have since received increasing attention in the social sciences, most notably from anthropology. A culture of migration is defined most eloquently by Ali as:

> Those ideas, practices and cultural artefacts that reinforce the celebration of migration and migrants. This includes beliefs, desire, symbols, myths, education, celebrations of migration in various media, and material goods … [When such a culture exists, migration becomes] A learned social behaviour; people learn to migrate, and they learn a desire to migrate. (2007, 39)

A culture of migration is a cumulative factor that produces migratory aspirations when there appear to be few tangible economic and/or social motivations (Bal and Willems 2014), as the act of migration becomes a rite of passage and/or source of social capital (Bal 2013).

Cultures of migration have been identified on national scales in the Philippines (Asis 2006), Morocco (Mescoli 2013), Mexico (Wilson 2010) and Senegal (Degli Uberti 2014; Willems 2013), and on local or regional scales in Hyderabad, India (Ali 2007) and Dhaka, Bangladesh (Bal 2013). In all these places, migration initially began in response to poor economic conditions. Success stories of migrants, and the development of migrant communities, encouraged and facilitated further migration through social networks. Eventually, the idea of migration becomes 'normatively conditioned' so much so 'that not going is not a choice' (Ali 2007, 54).

Existing studies researching cultures of migration focus primarily on how the decision to migrate is developed, giving less consideration to the decision about where to migrate to. Scholars may note how certain migratory

pathways are more common and become culturally embedded as destinations (Mescoli 2013; Schultz 2013), or how the USA is a dream destination for many aspiring migrants (Ali 2007; Bal 2013; Wilson 2010). Yet, for example, when a respondent in a study carried out by Bal (2013) on the migration desires of young Bangladeshis 'dreamt of becoming a barrister abroad, preferably in the United Kingdom. But she also talked about Australia and Norway' (2013, 284), Bal was not concerned with why such places featured in her respondent's dreams, and was only interested that she believed her dreams were achievable abroad.

Furthermore, as recent scholarship on migration within Asian contexts has highlighted, migratory patterns are becoming increasingly complex and the where(s) ever more important (Abella and Ducanes 2014; Battistella 2014). The rise of stepping-stone migration in particular points towards a heightened importance of place in migration decisions. Migrants are willing to move to undesirable places to gain the skills needed to access their dream destinations (Battistella 2014).

Therefore, to account for the importance of place and to more widely incorporate ideas of 'culture' into analyses, it is necessary to expand on understandings gained from cultures of migration. To do so, as the remainder of the paper shows, it is fruitful to integrate insights developed by scholars employing the concept of geographical imaginations. This approach, analyses imaginations of places and culture, while also recognising the importance of economic, social and political factors. It allows for a more holistic and critical understanding of migration decision-making.

A geographical imaginations approach

Geographical imaginations are the mental images we hold of different places and of the people living there (Riaño and Baghdadi 2007). They are imaginations of landscapes and climates, perceptions of cultural qualities and understandings of economic, social and political characteristics of places. Geographical imaginations include understandings of places we directly experience, and those we have never been to. Often, these imaginations are relational; unknown places are imaginatively compared with known ones. While geographical imaginations are generally over-simplifications, they are important in making place accessible and understandable (Chang and Lim 2004).

Geographical imaginations are not disconnected from ontological knowledges and have 'real world' consequences (Mai 2004; Marcus 2009; Radcliffe 2012; Riaño and Baghdadi 2007). Although they are understood as distortions of 'the real world', they are inherently valuable to analyse, as the ways we understand the world influences how we experience and react to it. Places may be imagined as desirable or unattractive, and these imaginations impact our quotidian experiences (how we travel through our localities) and our less mundane activities (our choices of destination for tourism or migration). As Riaño and Baghdadi state:

> Imaginations about the qualities that specific places in the world may have, as well as the people who live there, and the social, economic or political opportunities that those places may open up are significant in the decision of whether or not to migrate and of where to migrate. (2007, 7)

These imaginations, then, are implicated in producing social worlds as well as reflecting them (Chang and Lim 2004). The imagination and reality are mutually constitutive.

A small number of studies have explored the impact of geographical imaginations on migration decision-making, interrogating the relationship between place and mobility. From these studies, I have identified four major facets of geographical imaginations that are invaluable in advancing understanding of migration decision-making. These are: the nature and influence of geographical scale (Fujita 2004); ideas of culture and place (Teo 2003a); understandings of home and away (Marcus 2010); and ability to account for non-migration (Timmerman *et al.* 2012).

While previous studies tend to recognise just one or two of these facets, this paper brings the four together to fully utilise the potential of geographical imaginations. It must be noted that although the four facets are presented separately, in practice participants would discuss these factors together. Each factor is always at play in forming the overall geographical imagination, and thus the resulting migratory decision.

Fieldwork with Filipino nurse migrants

The opportunities of a geographical imaginations approach first became apparent to me during undergraduate fieldwork with Filipino healthcare migrants living in northeast England in 2013 (Thompson 2013). While this project was primarily concerned with understanding participants' engagement with dominant occidentalist discourses, it is useful to briefly reprise this work to frame the advantages of the approach. During interviews, it emerged that imaginations of life in places within 'the West' that participants held before migrating had produced specific desires of mobility. This is exemplified by Catherine (a senior nurse, aged 40, who moved to a rural area near Newcastle in 2003), who

discusses how her initial desire to move to Canada waned as she was introduced to positive information concerning the UK. She goes on to explain why she has never desired to migrate to the USA:

Researcher: So did you always want to come to the UK?

Catherine: No, actually I was applying for a job in Canada, but it's taking a while, and then I heard about my friend, who is leaving for the UK, and I heard good things about the United Kingdom at that time. But I wasn't really sure . . . [But then] when the girls came over [to the UK] and then I was left in the Philippines, they said 'it's very nice, especially the place where we live' and until now really, I love where I am. It's like the countryside, like some people would like to go to London, but not my type, I'd rather live in a place like this, you know nice people around. . .

Researcher: So in the Philippines did you have any ideas of what America and Canada might be like?

Catherine: Well for America it's because we have family over there. The pace is like very fast and I think like most of the Filipinas working there have to have this and have to have that, what other people have, and I don't want to follow that. I just want to be as simple as can be. We could have moved a few years ago to America with our family, but I chose to live here, not move because I'm quite happy.

As this quote shows, Catherine's preference of migratory destination was based on imaginations of the characteristics of people, the pace of life and the opportunity to move to a more rural area. Additionally, Solana (a nurse in her mid-30s, with six years migratory experience in Kuala Lumpur before her move to the UK in 2004) noted how information she heard about the UK from a chief nurse in Kuala Lumpur initially dissuaded her from accepting a job offer:

Solana: She said 'oh, you won't manage to adjust in there', cause when it's winter, according to her, it's very cold, it's freezing. Sometimes you will have frostbites and things like that. So it's just the thought of that. Plus the fact that it's on the other [side of the] globe . . . It's not really attractive for me.

Solana focuses on the physical geographies of the UK – the climate and actual distance from the Philippines. Both quotes highlight how imaginations of places can lead to the desire or disinclination to migrate. These imaginations demonstrate how an approach that connects the ideas of place, culture, geography and the desire for mobility is required.

My current PhD fieldwork seeks to expand on these findings and focuses specifically on elucidating the geographical imaginations of respondents before migration. This research is being undertaken with nurses living in Metro Manila, the Philippines, a region with one of the highest emigration rates in the world, and a well-established culture of migration (Asis 2006). The Philippines is arguably the world's largest nursing 'exporter', providing nursing labour to over 50 countries (Lorenzo *et al.* 2007). The following sections outline the geographical imaginations approach drawing on findings from a representative selection of the 46 interviews undertaken.

The nature and influence of geographical scale
Geographical imaginations are formed from a multitude of sources, including but not limited to education, media, popular culture, personal experience and social networks. As Chang and Lim (2004) and Fujita (2004) have found, personal experience and the experiences of our social contacts are generally the most influential forces in producing imaginations, which is clear in the narrative of Catherine above.

However, where a lack of such information exists, imaginations are impacted by discourses embedded within national education and media (which includes cultures of migration), and by global popular culture (Gould and White 1974; Madaleno 2010; Quiminal and Blum le Coat 2011). While national education may produce relatively homogenous imaginations, people select which media and popular cultures to engage with, resulting in a diversity of imaginations (Riaño and Baghdadi 2007). For example, in the present study, participants who engaged with anime, K-Pop and gaming (dominant forms of Asian pop culture) generally aspired to migrate to destinations within Asia. For Bridget, a nurse in her late 20s working as a healthcare call centre operative, 'Japan is a nice place. I am a fan of anime and gaming, so it would be nice to work there.' Those who primarily engaged with US and British pop culture, conversely, aspired to move to 'the West', such as Ariel, a nurse student in her early 20s: 'I actually have plans on migrating . . . Especially London, I am a huge fan of the UK, I don't know why, I think cause of the accent, and Narnia, and Harry Potter!'

Accounting for culture and place

Not all migrants move towards the best economic, social or political opportunities. And where there are opportunities in destinations with similar economic, social and/or political opportunities, potential migrants express preferences for some places over others. As Teo (2003a) reminds us, the most impoverished constitute the overwhelming minority of international migrants. Most migrants are middle class, well-educated and able to afford the financial costs associated with migration. It therefore seems unlikely that such people would indeed move anywhere, and thus a greater consideration of culture and place is required.

This is exemplified by Isabel (a 26-year-old dialysis nurse, studying part-time for her Masters), who is not willing to move to destinations that provide improved socio-economic possibilities, due to perceived negative cultural qualities:

Isabel: Actually there is a lot of opportunities for dialysis nurses in the Middle East, and a lot of my seniors are there and they are saying that the pay is good and the work is not that hard, and the opportunities are easy. But I don't really like the country … I'm not against their culture, but I don't see myself living there for 2–3 years … When you think of the Middle East you immediately think of not having freedom.

Additionally, the specific geographical qualities attached to places, landscape, distance, climate and the prevalence of natural disasters impact decision-making making. Teo (2003b) found respondents based decisions to move on imaginations of climate and geographical distance. Some seek dense urban areas that provide 24-hour access to services, while others, such as Catherine above, prefer quiet rural areas. Camille, who has temporarily left the nursing profession to save money by working for a health insurance call centre, expressed a desire to move anywhere that offered a better standard of living, so long as the weather conditions are acceptable:

Camille: I'm the type of person who can adapt easily on different type of characters, so, I think the major factor will be the weather. Just the weather. I don't want too hot, and I don't want too cold. I don't want to be like in the northern part of America where it's gonna be too cold, like in Alaska, I don't think I can survive there.

For Camille, it is the distinctly physical geographical qualities about places that encourage or dissuade movement.

Connecting 'home' and 'away'

While existing migration theories analyse push and pull factors, there is a tendency to focus on what pushes migrants to move, relegating images and goods coming from abroad as secondary factors. Geographical imaginations, however, are not just imaginations of what life would be like elsewhere. They are imaginations of how life is now, and how it may be different elsewhere (Marcus 2010). People imagine their own homes in vastly diverse ways and this in turn impacts whether they wish to leave for greener pastures, and/or whether they desire a place dissimilar from their own. Participants such as Ella, a call centre worker in her mid-20s, would never migrate as for her the Philippines is a beautiful place where her family and friends are – it is her home. However, Roberto, a 27-year-old volunteer nurse adopts a much more negative stance to his homeland: 'when I reached the age of 26 … I really see how hard it is. I really see how hopeless this country is. That's why I realised that I have to get out [of the Philippines]'.

Additionally, geographical imaginations are inherently relational. Often places are categorised according to existing oriental and occidental discourses. In the present study, the Philippines is naturally the main reference point for imaginations. Yet its uncomfortable position as being 'in but not of Asia' (see Hogan 2006) means imaginations of 'home' differ vastly. For some, such as Tisha, a nurse in her early 20s who has studied in Singapore, briefly worked in the USA and spent time on international volunteering projects in her teenage years, the Philippines is a traditionally 'Eastern' nation, and movement to 'the West' is imagined to represent a clear crossing of a cultural boundary:

Tisha: I have noticed when I was volunteering, the participants were Belgian, German, British, Thai, Malaysian and Turkish… European people [were] just together at the same place, while the Asians are here at the other side…

Researcher: And do you think Asian people are quite similar?

Tisha: Um yes, in terms of culture, and food! We have one in common.

Researcher: Rice!

Tisha: Rice! And also Chinese and Oriental [people are] family oriented... But if you are in America, you will barely find that.

For Ian, however, a former nurse who now owns a health supplements business, the Philippines is imagined as a 'Westernised' place, whereas Asia represents more problematic cultural adaptation:

Ian: It's easier [to live] in the US. We were influenced by US culture, so have an ability to adapt with that... So it's easier compared with the Middle East and China, as well as in Japan.

Researcher: So even though Japan is so much closer, culturally it's ...

Ian: It's far. It's further [than the USA].

Accounting for non-migration

Finally, researching the impact of geographical imaginations can help to contribute to literature concerning immobilities or non-migration. Migrants constitute just 3.2 per cent of the global population (UNFPA 2013), and although studies suggest that up to 15 per cent of the world's population aspire to migrate (Bal and Willems 2014), this leaves a considerable majority who desire to stay. Even in the Philippines where there is a particularly high level of emigration, migration is by no means the 'norm'. The Philippines has a culture of migration (Asis 2006), efficient, world-class systems to facilitate migration (Cai 2011), and a positive reputation of Filipino migrants in global arenas (Laquian 2011). There are generally poor opportunities for personal development within the country, and the sizeable overseas population means most can access transnational networks to facilitate overseas employment (Cai 2011). Yet only 10 per cent of Filipinos migrate (Calzado 2007) and the most recent survey indicates that just 1 in 5 would do so, if given the opportunity (PulseAsia 2008).

When considering migrant decision-making, it is not enough to understand why people (desire to) move. Consideration must also be given to the vast majority with no aspirations for migration. There is a need to contextualise the decisions of migrants in the reality that these decisions are by no means ordinary.

A geographical imaginations approach can account for those with no aspirations to migrate. Everybody has geographical imaginations. Everybody imagines their own place and others. For most, imaginations of other places may be positive, but only enough to result in (aspirations of) tourism. A decision to migrate is based on socio-cultural understandings of elsewhere being preferable and offering more opportunities than the Philippines, engaging with the national 'culture of migration' discourse. Those who wish to stay, conversely, imagine improved economic and political opportunities are not worth forsaking their own cultural and social realities. Erin, a former nurse in her early 30s who left the profession to open a health business, perfectly encapsulates this dichotomy when discussing how she no longer desires to migrate. Her initial desire to migrate was primarily economically motivated, but her current decision to stay can be understood as a socio-cultural motivation:

Erin: My friends who are in the US, they are nurses there, they are working there, earning big. Before, I envied them, I told them 'oh I wish I'm there'. But now they envy me! Because here, anytime, you can go out and talk to anybody, unlike when you go abroad, you can't find people just sitting, talking. Most Filipinos just love to talk! I've been to Singapore and I stayed there for 2 months, and everybody is busy. Here, everybody is just relaxing.

Conclusion

To fully comprehend migration decision-making, it is essential to adopt an approach that is flexible enough to account for the myriad of influences. As has been argued throughout this paper, a geographical imaginations approach has the potential to do so. Additionally, the geographical imaginations approach, with its central focus on elucidating imaginations of the cultural and geographic qualities of places, is essential in contributing to understanding the choice of destination for migration. The approach demands a much more nuanced consideration of understandings of places beyond (but without ignoring) the traditional focus of migratory decision-making research on economies, societies and political structures.

I have argued, by drawing on examples from interviews carried out with Filipino nurses and nurse students, that a geographical imaginations approach is beneficial in understanding all aspects of migration decision-making – it does not just explore why people aspire to migrate, it can also ascertain why certain destinations may be favoured, and contribute to understanding why the majority of people have no desire for international migration.

Note

1 I prefer the terms 'non-migration/non-migrant' to 'immobility/immobile'. This is not to signify a shift away from existing immobilities literature, but rather highlights the problems inherent in the term 'immobile'. Even if 'non-migrant' is not a perfect term (many participants have already participated in domestic migration to move to Metro Manila from the provinces), 'immobility' evokes connotations of being stationary beyond international movement and can signify social and physical immobility.

Acknowledgements

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