Part 1

Introducing youth mobility and migration

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Part 1 of this book consists of five chapters focusing on theoretical issues of relevance to the study of youth mobility. The aim is to introduce some of the conceptual tools researchers have developed to help explain young people's spatial movement, especially in education, work and training contexts. We also reappraise the relationship between mobility and migration, seeing them as nested practices rather than distinct practices. The chapters also discuss how mobility is imaginatively integrated into life planning, with moving abroad while young potentially starting a migration trajectory. This work is, we hope, an appropriate starting point for this book, in establishing a starting point for mobility, and arguing that what happens in the youth phase has lasting value.

In regard to including mobility within the broader framework of migration, the idea is that what that take place while young can become part of a greater continuum. Using the evidence contained in this book we are hence able to conceptually re-appraise 'migration,' focusing on how it actually happens rather than how it has been traditionally conceptualized

by many academics in the field of Migration Studies. This idea also views a migration trajectory as fluid and fragmented. Rather than moving definitively from one place to another and staying there, young people prevaricate and circulate. That this process is incremental means that mobility and immobility co-exist within this trajectory, rather than the former supplanting the latter. Our understanding of migration thus goes from being definitive and solid to a point where intangibility and unpredictability can made feel being a migrant unselfconscious, to the point of being taken for granted by many young people.[1]

Equally self-evident is the importance of decision-making when engaging. When a migration trajectory is broken down into a series of hard to connect phases, working out what to do next becomes a fundamental concern, especially when these mobility episodes come at a high economic and emotional cost, imbued with risk, precarity and unpredictable outcomes. Putting this decision-making process into more sociological terms, constructing migration out of mobility relies on the exercise of reflexivity, and by the idea that what young people are required to do is inherit, accumulate and invest mobility capital.[2] That this form of capital is a fragile, perishable and quite hard to obtain commodity explains why the mobility decision – or the series of mobility decisions that need to be made – acquires such importance in contemporary migration.[3]

From the point of view of young people, this approach enables us to recognise their agency in making mobility choices, and the roles played by family members, friends, educators, trainers and employers in constructing a migration trajectory. Young people make decisions using their own resources and intuition allied to the knowledge and information available to them, however imperfect. Their choices can also be grounded in an extra-economic logic, moving beyond a simple desire to accumulate immediate wealth, recognizing the aspiration to become part of a globalized culture or to follow lifestyles that revolve around international conviviality.

These themes are represented throughout Part 1 of this book. Mette Ginnerskov Dahlberg continues the discussion of mobility decision-making in Chapter 3, looking at the role of family relationships, especially the role of parents in encouraging migration among their children. This helps us understand how and why mobility happens, using evidence from Denmark as a means of illustrating inter-generationally transmitted mobility predispositions among students from post-communist societies, a process that is largely imaginative considering that these parents have had little or no actual mobility experience. 'History' therefore matters to how people relate to circulate in the present day, with parents providing an impetus for their children to pursue opportunities to which they themselves had limited access during the era of state socialism. This perspective also helps explain why the creation of a mobility favouring habitus needs to be recognized as a process taking place across a sustained period of time; in this case, traversing the decades between generations.[4]

To further help us appreciate how mobility happens, various heuristic ideas have been developed, encapsulating some of the key aspects of decision-making. In Chapter 4, Paula Pustulka and Dominika Winogrodzka acknowledge two conceptual building blocks of contemporary migration: mobility capacity and mobility imperative, focusing on the Polish context. These ideas enable us to look beyond the obvious economic motivations, linking structural conditions with personal agency. Although moving far beyond the traditional 'push and pull' theories about the origins of mobility, this perspective does not contradict the idea that much migration is economically driven. However, it is acknowledged that there is no way to become an economic migrant without being in possession of the requisite knowledge and skills: to follow a mobility imperative you need to have a mobility capacity. Furthermore, particularly within Europe, there is much mobility taking place that is quite obviously not driven by financial imperatives but rather other motivations, such as the desire to acquire cosmopolitan dispositions.[5] They may actual enjoy exploration and engaging in the 'fun'

dimension of the youth phase of life.[6] We therefore acknowledge that mobility can be about seeking out a particular lifestyle as well as pursuing a career. Imagining that a better life, or at least a different life, awaits one abroad thus constitutes an alternate or additional mobility imperative, albeit with desires constrained by the relatively high costs of circulation.[7]

Other conceptual materials explored in Part 1 include the relevance of interculturality, with Thor-André Skrefsrud looking at the difficulty of generating this faculty via student mobility in Chapter 5. The idea of an internationalized learning hub is certainly seductive for learners and educators; places in which students from across the world learn from each other. Out of their social bonds, established through spending a fixed period of time within an international group, a supranational learning space can be established, characterized as experimental and dynamic, but at the same time, intense and fragile, socially inclusive (of other international students) and exclusive (omitting the presence of local cultures). Therefore, having cited issues such as historical and familial legacies, and recognized mobility imperatives and capacities, it is also appropriate to acknowledge the significance of peer relationships in the formation of migration trajectories, with positive and negative consquences.[8]

Interculturality is not only a highly evocative and emblematic way of 'being together' at a formative point of the life course but also of (geo)political importance. It has value for states and transnational entities such as the EU, as well as education and training institutions, who rely upon internationalization in order to brand themselves with cosmopolitanism. Tertiary education in particular comes to be imagined as a chic product, this being an effective way to justify its elevated cost to students. A premium product however can only sustain its cachet when comparatively rare (i.e. it must be socially exclusive), explaining why youth mobility is always likely to remain a niche product, lacking the potential to contribute to social inclusion. For societies on the other hand, the presence of young, and not so young, migrants might be less valued. As Skrefsrud points out, international migrants do not necessarily enhance the

cosmopolitan outlooks of people in the host community. Quite the opposite. Their presence may be a source of alienation, inviting increased scepticism towards human globalization and hostility towards incomers, who come to be seen as different from what is perceived as 'normal' because of their interculturality. We therefore need to take account of the perverse effects of mobility and acknowledge that raising levels of youth circulation does not necessarily lead to freer and more equal societies.

Notes

1. The idea that migration consists of nested mobility episodes that start in the youth phase of the life course is explored further in Chapter 1 of this book (Cairns, 2021a).

2. Mobility decision-making is elaborated upon in Chapter 2 (Cairns, 2021b), building on perspectives developed in our previous work (see, e.g. Cairns et al., 2017).

3. This is also an issue that is widely recognized in youth mobility policies, most visibly in the EU supported Erasmus+ programme, which has emphasised the importance of 'learning mobility,' not only in the sense of learning about mobility opportunities but also how to take advantage of them.

4. For an earlier discussion of the relationship between youth mobility predispositions and habitus, see Cairns et al. (2013).

5. This is in fact a long-standing theme in youth mobility research. See, for instance, King and Ruiz-Gelices, (2003) or Skrbis et al. (2014).

6. For a more in-depth account of having 'fun' during mobility, see Krzaklewska (2019).

7. This idea points towards looking at mobility decisions as being oriented around choosing 'a life' rather than just subscribing to a lifestyle (Cairns, 2014: 28).

8. These intercultural environments have been conceptualized as learning 'bubble' environments by Cuzzocrea et al. (2021).

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