# Repositório ISCTE-IUL

# 2

# Migration decision-making, mobility capital and reflexive learning

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In the previous chapter, the idea was introduced that migration can be constructed out of an accumulation of miscellaneous mobility experiences. Through this means, young people can become migrants in a relatively tacit and unconscious manner, encapsulating a sense of flux and inherent precarity. In this chapter, we continue exploration of this theme, looking at the specific issues of migration decision-making and the means through which different mobility phases become connected, interpolating into the discussion the concept of 'mobility capital.' The connections between different mobility episodes are important to consider, as is the means through which one decision affects the next, making migration a concatenation of what may have otherwise been seen as separate experiences (see Samuk et al., 2021). This will be explained as a reflexive learning process, requiring young people to use their own agency and the ability to learn how to be mobile from family members, peers, educators, trainers and employers.

In some respects, this chapter represents a continuation of existing debates about the formation of a migration trajectory. It is hypothesized that during the first two decades of the twenty-first century, with an increase in proliferation of youth mobility, a change occurred in regard to the generality of a 'do-it-yourself' approach to migration, certainly within the

European context but also in other global regions. This would potentially increase the relevance of these ideas, but also perhaps show-up some uncomfortable 'Western' biases in the constitution of existing theoretical paradigms within the youth mobility research field, making us aware of our own biases as mobility researchers schooled in certain spatially orthodox ways of thinking.

## The migration decision

Decision-making is a universal concern among people seeking to be mobile. While it is not impossible that decisions will be impulsive, a large degree of premeditation is more likely considering the need to plan and make provision for departures and arrivals, not to mention the accumulation of sufficient levels of social and economic capital prior to this point.[1] It is also likely that this decision will be multi-faceted, taking into account the fact that mobility has diversified into various forms, traversing education, training and work, in addition to the leisure sphere. Therefore, deciding to undertake a student exchange may acquire more gravitas due to the fact that may be a prerequisite phase for other, perhaps longer duration stays abroad, as a part of a work placement or employment.

Another aspect of mobility in the twenty-first century is that migration can be relatively unselfconscious, to the point of feeling almost accidental or unexpected (see Cairns, 2021). This is not the same as saying that migration is unplanned. On the contrary, as noted above, a great deal of thought and effect may have taken place. Rather, it is the attainment of a semblance of permanence within a framework branded as 'mobility' and assumed to be transient that comes as a surprise. Therefore, the migration decisions of young people actually start as mobility decisions. This is a feature that is very much implied rather than openly acknowledged, at least in institutional forms of exchange (see Part 3 of this book), but the

incremental nature of migration trajectories is nevertheless vital to appreciate as this reveals the personal challenge entailed in the process of repeatedly having to decide what to do next.

## Mobility capital

The concept of 'mobility capital' is of major significance to our understanding of youth migration decision-making, providing a means of explaining the value of working, studying and training abroad. In perspectives derived from Bourdieu's conceptualization of various capitals (see, e.g. Bourdieu, 1986), mobility is recognized as a valuable resource, akin to cultural capital. In simple terms, this category quantifies the ability to, for example, attain a high level of fluency in foreign languages and access jobs in international labour markets. In practice, this form of capital can include knowledge inherited from parents and what is accumulated during a stay abroad, such as information about specific destinations or guidance regarding how to live in a particular society, as well as the actual 'profit' gained during these stays, whether in terms of financial returns or less tangible profit in the form of acquiring a mobility capacity. As possessing this capacity increases the scope of one's life chances, this form of capital is something individuals will try to accumulate and multiply, with its rarity giving this form of capital a certain cachet.[2]

This cachet, and the desire to accumulate, and perhaps monopolize, mobility capital helps explain why social closure has been identified as a potential problem, creating exclusion and reproducing socio-demographic and economic inequalities, especially where young people are utilizing inherited mobility capital from their families (Murphy-Lejeune, 2002, 52). However, while deploying mobility capital is associated with the accumulation of human capital by authors including Murphy-Lejeune, using existing stocks to 'finance' mobility episodes does not necessarily lead to positive outcomes. This issue is discussed in a previous publication on the intra-European circulation of the highly qualified, which illustrates how the

costs of becoming and remaining mobile always seem to outweigh the financial returns, making the 'migration by mobility' process a means for resource subtraction rather than multiplication (see Cairns et al., 2017). Mobility capital may therefore be lost rather than gained through engaging in a piecemeal approach to migration.

Outside Europe, this situation may be different. In a previous article, the means through which mobility capital was generated and later deployed after returning home was illustrated in the context of Chinese students moving to Norway for postgraduate education (see Hu and Cairns, 2017). That new skills and qualifications were being acquired was an important part of the study abroad experience, forming additional components of mobility capital, but these were not the only acquisitions. What was being learned was effectively a different way to live, taking on new values and predispositions. One example was recognizing environmentalism as a valuable form of civic engagement; demonstrating a willingness to engage in recycling was not only seen as conscientious but also a way of integrating into a society such as Norway where environmental considerations are prominent. More pragmatically, enhancing foreign language skills and gaining an understanding of European working culture was deployed on return to China; effectively, using a specific aspect of mobility capital to support career development.

The accumulation of mobility capital can obviously contribute to the construction of a mobility capacity (see Pustulka and Winogrodzka, 2021); a potentially durable predisposition that can last throughout the rest of a lifetime. This helps explain why accumulating mobility can lead to migrancy: not just adding up the time spent abroad but consolidating what takes place while living in other societies. In practice, this can involve earning the financial resources to fund subsequent mobility exercises and a change in perspective; the expansion of awareness of how other people live in different places, ultimately feeling that one is part of a global culture of circulation in people, ideas and capital.

## Arriving at migration

The preceding discussion implies that the basic question of why young people move between countries can be related to the mobilization and the pursuit of a specific form of capital, but even recognizing this property, we are left with many unresolved issues. Principally, there is the issue of why some people move abroad while others prefer to stay closer to home, especially where there is an equivalence of socio-economic circumstances. In some cases, there may be a strong imperative to leave, grounded in difficult economic or political circumstances, as well as any number of personal factors, but this does not mean that everyone departs. One possibility illustrated in this book is the inheriting of migration dispositions, with the desire to move abroad learnt from friends, parents or other role models who are exceptionally rich in mobility capital (Dahlberg, 2021). Through this means, their capital can be accessed through inter-generational transmission or exchange between siblings and peers, often prior to the first point of departure on a trajectory.

Looking more specifically at the spatial lives of young people, other assumptions surrounding mobility decision-making will be familiar to many readers, some of which are discussed in Chapter 6 of this book by Lucia Lo and her colleagues (2021), using a framework they term 'intellectual migration.' Student migrants in particular are seen as mobilized by an intense competition for places, and advantaged by an often greater inheritance of social and economic resources, presumably compared to their less well educated peers (see also Fong, 2011; Leung, 2013). Their mobility is however constrained by the restrictions and fixities of time, space, boundaries, communities of origin and the legal ability to enter certain destination countries, as well as their personal identities and experiences (Li and Lo, 2012; Teferra, 2005; Vertovec, 2001).

Other migration prerequisites are more obvious. Young people are thought to have more disposable income and free time than other age groups, at least those from comfortable middle

class backgrounds, meaning that they can travel more often and for longer periods of time. At this stage in their lives, it is also assumed that they have a preoccupation with enhancing their career profiles through CV-enhancing stays at prestigious international learning hubs. Maybe they are also seeking hedonistic adventure away from the staid confines of their home country or an escape from degraded education systems and labour market instability. They might want to move away from their families and friends or wish to be reunited with those from whom they are separated by distance. All these assumptions, relating to different 'drivers' of outward mobility may contain some truth, but by this measure, stating what we already know is always going to be an inadequate explanation in explaining how young people arrive at mobility, in not recognizing the complexity or the diversity of the decisions being made.

## Mobility in pieces

Part of the complexity of twenty-first century migration relates to the idea of a migration trajectory being comprised of fragments of mobility as introduced in the previous chapter (Cairns, 2021). Rather than face a definitive choice at only one point in time, individuals need to make interlocking decisions over a sustained period, a process that may involve a great deal of circulation between different locations, and stays at home and abroad. While it may still happen in some cases, the idea of migration as a one-off event, with a very clear beginning and end, needs to be challenged and replaced by recognition of migration as being in constant state of flux. We also need to acknowledge the difficulty many young people having in attempting to unite what may be disparate mobility pieces into a coherent migration trajectory. This idea, of migration in pieces, obviously challenges many of the traditional views we have about our subject and also how we study it. For instance, it is extremely difficult to credibly quantify 'migration' via analysing statistical trends due to the inherent fluidity of the subject matter. Statistics retain some value, as heuristic tool for identifying broad socio-demographic trends

over time and the evolution of specific issues of interest, such as gender and class differences (see Vögtle, 2021 in this volume), but in relation to piecemeal migration, vague estimates are of limited value.

It seems that migration in pieces must be studied taking an equally fragmented approach. Fortunately, in this book we have accounts of many of these episodes, out of which we can begin to assemble some answers. One classic example in the European context is the undergraduate exchange. The popularity of this form, or forms, of exchange explains why Part 3 of this book looks at the Erasmus programme and platforms that follow similar formats in other parts of the world. However, given that Erasmus undergraduate exchanges are already heavily researched, we will concentrate largely on engagement with the now current Erasmus+ phase, which has expanded its scope to cover areas such as training, volunteering and work placements, as well as postgraduate education and academic staff exchanges.[4]

A good example of a relatively undocumented piece of mobility relates to the Erasmus Mundus programme, which provides opportunities to extend engagement with the programme via a two-year international study programme at Master's degree level. Karolina Czerska-Shaw and Ewa Krzaklewska's (2021) account of the 'super-mobile students' participating in this programme notes that for some young people, 'one Erasmus mobility phase is simply not enough,' meaning that they will undertake multiple exchanges within the same institutional framework. This explains why the Erasmus Mundus Master's degree programme integrates multiple chances for mobility into its structure; moving to universities in as many as four different countries as part of the same course of study, and doing so as part of a cohort of intercultural learners. Also stressed is the importance of the Erasmus Mundus programme network, echoing a view from Nowicka (2012) that highly-skilled cosmopolitan migrants move across networks rather than between countries, putting students in (spatial) control of their own learning, something that can be both a privilege and burden.

Outside Erasmus, we can observe the construction of different migration trajectories in other parts of the world. For example, Syed Zwick (2021) looks at recent developments in a range of Central Asian countries (Afghanistan, Kyrgyzstan, Mongolia, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan) that have historically been at the periphery of student mobility, while França and Padilla (2021) consider the development of a relatively recently established student exchange programme in Brazil, hosting learners from Portuguese-speaking African countries. These accounts help us appreciate the diversity in mobility practices that exists across the world, providing insight into the costs, benefits and challenges of engagement.

## Moving towards reflexive mobility

How then might seemingly disparate mobility phases might be tied together? In this book, we can observe examples of moving abroad to participate in education programmes, voluntary work placements, vocational training, being an international au pair and seeking secure employment. These are all widespread practices across in a wide range of global regions, and while having value in isolation, there is the potential for this value to be multiplied through become successive mobility episodes.

To help explain how this mobility interlocks, young people make deliberate decisions using their own resources and intuition, and informed by the knowledge and information available to them, however imperfect. Using their agency, they make the best of whatever options are open to them, whether advancing their education, developing a career or just wishing to become a more interesting person. While they will generally do this alone, they also discuss their options with friends, relatives and other interested parties such as educators, trainers and employers. However, with the responsibility for mobility decisions basically privatized, it is up to the individual to make the right choices and take responsibility for the ensuing consequences of their decisions. In more theoretical terms, what we are moving

towards is a nuanced understanding of mobility, recognizing reflexivity in the planning and practicing of various forms of youth mobility, and ultimately, the production of a migration trajectory. Certain paths will be followed with a view to access other, perhaps more distant, possibilities. The decision to study abroad for a short period might then be taken with a view to ascertaining the viability of securing employment in a particular place or within a specific occupational field. Reflection about mobility therefore comes to encompass not only the immediate present but also the indistinct future.[5]

Adopting reflexivity extends our ability to think about how mobility choices are made beyond taking into account simple financial considerations. We might even see this as an ontological imperative: how will living in a different place shape one's 'being' in terms of social relationships and professional development? While an individual process, fellow travellers also play an important role. The mobility experience may be perceived as positive or negative, or both, it is only through a successful evaluation from one's peers, colleagues and superiors that the episode can be interpreted as having paid off, whether this be the completion of an educational course, integration into a training institution or becoming established in an occupational field. Equally crucial to appreciate is the self-rationalization taking place. Events that are perceived as ostensible failures at the time they take place may be retrospectively re-evaluated as successes; for instance, in terms of lessons being learnt through hardship. From this point of view, the actual value of reflexive mobility may only become clear at a later point in the life course.

Invoking reflexivity also enables us to place youth migration within an existing theoretical tradition. For example, Margaret Archer, has published in a series of books and articles illustrating how sociologists can interpret reflexivity (see, e.g., Archer 2003, 2007, 2012). This work recognizes human agency and individual capacities in life planning; that the process of being reflexive about oneself can support, or hinder, personal evolution, and the idea

that there is an 'internal conversation' within people's heads that helps them arrive at decisions. That people actively plan their lives and make use of agency is also very important to acknowledge (see also Archer 2000). Furthermore, Archer's work describes many of the basic difficulties people have in overcoming what appear from the outside to be trivial problems but, internally, feel like quite significant barriers; for instance, a difficulty in accessing job opportunities or coping with lifestyle issues.

At a more imaginative level, dreams and aspirations also matter: thinking about what one wants to do and where one wishes to go. This involves making an association between mobility and expectations of success, and ultimately a better life, and in the next chapter of this book, Mette Ginnerskov Dahlberg (2021) also recognizes the importance of parents' dreams, particularly when they lacked the capacity to be mobile themselves (see also Wilken and Dahlberg, 2017). Reflexive mobility therefore relies upon having a vivid imagination, with a possible intergenerational dimension. And mobility itself can help to stimulate this process, with a short duration visit possibly opening-up a degree of mental space for thinking about further travel.[6]

## Conclusion: The costs and benefits of new migration

Bringing this discussion to a close, can we now begin to talk about new ways of being a migrant, in the sense of there being large numbers of young people circulating via reflexive mobilization of their own spatial agency? Perhaps not yet given the amount of effort required to sustain a viable migration trajectory, and recent global developments may impede this development even further (see Cairns et al., 2021). That many young people are aware of the difficulties is also evident. To quote one of the interviewees cited in Maria Carmen Pantea's (2021) chapter, they realize that the 'streets are not paved with gold' in foreign countries. This form of circulation is always likely to be a minority rather than a majority experience. Other

hidden costs entailed in reflexive mobility idea also raise concerns. Some of the costs of short duration stays are effectively paid by local communities, outlined in the chapter by Daniel Malet Calvo (2021), but the greatest burden is placed upon individual movers. Mobility is expensive, but it can also take a toll on personal well-being. This helps explain why in their chapter, Aresi and Marta (2021) look at the mental and physical health of travelling youth, including the tendency to engage in risky and unhealthy behaviour. The winners are of course the institutions who profit from groups such as international students, and societies who get to import migrants without appearing to do so.

The costs and benefits of new forms of migration are therefore coming to light, illustrating that while there are important capacities that can be acquired through spending time abroad, there is quite possibly no such thing as 'free' movement. What remains to be seen is how fragmented and fluid forms of circulation adapt to the changing circumstances of the Covid-19 pandemic. This event has obviously interrupted many incipient migration trajectories, perhaps terminally, with many students, trainees and workers have already curtailed or indefinitely suspected their stays abroad. The severity of this event may eventually signal a move back towards more traditional migration modes (i.e. more or less permanent settlement) due to the need to find stability and security, as well as having access to a reliable national health service, facets that can be somewhat hard to obtain when feeling that one has to be constantly on the move.

## Notes

1. The idea of mobility and migration decisions being reliant upon sufficient levels, and the right combination, of social and economic capital is another theme explored in my prior work on intra-European circulation. See especially Cairns (2014).

2. Mobility capital can also be conceptualized in more abstract terms, relating to the adoption of a particular kind of cosmopolitan predisposition; in fact, Murphy-Lejeune (2002: 51) goes so far as to describe mobility capital as 'a taste for living abroad' possessed by a migratory elite, and less convincingly, seeing this resource as a sub-component of human capital. See also Kaufmann et al. (2004).

3. This includes accounts of established elements of the programme, including undergraduate exchanges, such as the account provided in this book by Ribeiro (2021), looking back on the 30-year history of Erasmus.

4. Exploration of Erasmus includes work by the editor and other contributors to this book (see, e.g., Feyen and Krzaklewska, 2013; Cairns, 2017; Cairns et al., 2018).

5. To explain this process, we have used terms like 'reflexive mobility,' recognizing a cause and effect relationship within life planning. As the name suggests, reflexivity is a process mediated by personal reflection: a choice is made by an actor, with the validity of that choice contingent upon a positive (societal) reception (Cairns et al., 2017: 19). If the feeling is that taking a specific mobility pathway has been a success, the journey is more likely to continue along this particular direction.

6. These reflections must of course be accompanied by a major caveat concerning the actual numbers of young people willing or able to extend mobility in migration. As Czerska-Shaw and Krzaklewska (2021) remark in their chapter, only a small number of traditional Erasmus students participate in Erasmus Mundus, where there is an extremely limited number of places, which are also restricted by geo-demographic quotas. We cannot therefore say that we have arrived at a point in time were the individual construction of migration trajectories is a general experience for youth, but certain possibilities exist.


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