

Transnational Work Careers

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Abstract

This essay deals with transnational work careers, an issue that is relatively new in social-scientific research and is discussed here in particular against the background of recent migration and management research. Both disciplines consider the emergence of transnational work careers in connection with economic globalization. In terms of methodology, most of the studies that are relevant to this issue are based on qualitatively oriented analyses and deal empirically with a variety of regions and nations (e.g., China, India, the United States, Canada, Germany, and Scandinavia).

INTRODUCTION

In a strict sense, transnational work careers have been marginal topics in the social sciences, with the particular exception of migration research and some parts of management research (e.g., Cantwell, 2011; Kreutzer & Roth, 2006; Liu-Farrer, 2011; Stahl, Miller, & Tung, 2002; Suutari & Brewster, 2003).

Traditionally, migration research deals with permanent shifts in one's place of residence. The main causes for migration, according to the literature, are economic. The push-and-pull model—developed in the 1960s by American researcher Everett Lee—was for many years drawn upon as a theoretical explanation for this kind of migration (Lee, 1966).

Only in more recent years, since the mid-1990s, migration research started to focus on transnational forms of migration (Faist, 2000; Goldring, 1997; Levitt, DeWind, & Vertovec, 2003; Massey, Goldring, & Durand, 1994; Pries, 2001; Vertovec, 1999; Wimmer & Glick Schiller, 2003). Studies on this phenomenon locate such novel transnational forms of migration in connection with global economic processes. Migration is argued no longer to be exclusively characterized by permanent relocations of principal residences, as more recent research indicates: The beginning of the twenty-first century has seen a diversification of the patterns and forms of migration. We now observe an increase in temporal, short-term, circular migration and in transnational and chain migration.

Considering the concept of transnational work careers in this connection, this author would like to propose to give rise to yet other accentuations. In general, an individual's career can be understood as a sequence of related jobs usually pursued within one economic sector or related sectors. Transnational work careers would be careers that extend beyond countries' frontiers. This may apply to various forms of occupational mobility, for example, short-term professional activities in one's employer's branch abroad, frequent work-related mobility, and business trips, as well as transnational commuting and job-related mobility in border regions. Ultimately, the concept of transnational work careers implies that transnational commuting becomes a normal aspect of people's everyday professional and social life. Transnational work careers then are not typically associated with occupational reorientations or descent, quite the contrary. This is in contrast to many migrants' occupational careers and their frequently committing themselves, within migration, to employment relationships that do not correspond with their qualifications (Berry & Bell, 2012).

FOUNDATIONAL RESEARCH

MIGRATION

In order to understand transnational work careers, it is important to revert to the core concepts of migration research. The "classic approach" to migration acts on the assumption that the primary reasons for migration are to be found in the economy. Furthermore, migration is seen to imply a permanent shift in one's place of residence and economic, social, and cultural integration/assimilation within the host society. The push-and-pull model is particularly important in explaining these forms of migration. In this model, it is commonly assumed that migrants follow the principle of economic rationalism, acting in response to push-and-pull factors. The key push-and-pull factors relate to the situation in the employment market and attainable individual income, respectively, which in theory are inadequate in the migrants' country of origin and considerably more attractive in their countries of destination (Fielding, 1993; Stark, 1993; Stark & Bloom, 1985; Todaro, 1986). In general, this model refers to economic gains from migration, as they are perceived by migrants and included in their decision for migration, conceptualized as differences in wages, in working conditions or available fringe benefits. Much of migration to the United States, Canada, and Australia empirically corresponds to these model representations. Similar arguments apply to intra-European migration between Mediterranean countries (e.g., Italy, Greece, Turkey) and highly industrialized countries in Central Europe (e.g., Belgium, Germany, France) in the second half of the twentieth century.

TRANSNATIONAL MIGRATION

Recent investigations into the various aspects of transnational migration are also to be seen as an important element of foundational research on transnational work careers. The point of departure for this work is the idea that the traditional distinction between temporary and permanent migration no longer applies to many migrants as they shuttle back and forth between their new and old home countries. The lifeworld of these so-called transmigrants spans a variety of both domiciles and social and geographic spaces. The central argument here is that mobility across national borders is closely associated with a far-reaching process of economic, cultural, political, and social globalization (Pries, 2001). Thus, in this view, globally active enterprises, the new communications technology, the Internet, and the global consumption of mass media culture all weave a network of globalized transactions of information, goods, and people, which lead to new transnational spaces beyond customary societies and social systems.

The typical trait of transmigrants is double integration in social, cultural, and economic domains within divergent societies, rather than medium- or long-term and complete assimilation in their host societies. The expansion and increasingly low-priced availability of modern forms of telecommunication and the Internet (access to information, cost-saving communication in real time), together with transnational social networks, are important motors promoting such double integration.

HIGHLY SKILLED MIGRATION

Even though research on highly qualified migrants does not explicitly broach the issue of transnational work careers—or if so, then marginally—it remains an important link for the present issue. Over the past two decades, a growing number of authors in migration research has explored migration as a process among highly qualified individuals (Amit, 2002; Beaverstock, 2002, 2005; Cheng & Yang, 1998; Koser & Salt, 1997; Martin & Lowell, 2002; Peixoto, 2001; Salt, 1992). These scholars have argued that important causes of increasing migration of the highly skilled have been the boost in foreign direct investment and the growth of multinational corporations. In this logic, highly skilled migrants are crucial to the flows of knowledge and capital movements of international corporations, as well as their economic strategies and success. Beaverstock's publications can be drawn upon as one example of this kind of research (Beaverstock, 2002, 2005; Beaverstock & Hall, 2012): This author studies highly skilled professionals circulating within and between transnational corporations. Beaverstock describes this specific group of transmigrants as important constituents of the global economic system. His research suggests that these professionals' individual

career paths and social and business networks, stretching across national boundaries, are the key factors that (re-)produce traits of “transnationalism” in the global cities of postindustrial economies. Correspondingly, Beaverstock also argues that the economic competitiveness of global cities is substantially dependent on the functioning of their global labor markets, of which a key factor is the influx of highly skilled migrants from various regions of the world.

CUTTING-EDGE RESEARCH

Only in more recent years does the literature include studies that explore transnational career patterns in the narrow sense of the term. Exemplarily, this essay deals with three important keywords in the scope of the ongoing debate: We discuss research in cross-border labor markets/transnational commuting, transnational entrepreneurs, and the so-called expatriates.

NEW EMPIRICAL FINDINGS ON TRANSNATIONAL COMMUTERS/CROSS-BORDER LABOR MARKETS, TRANSNATIONAL ENTREPRENEURS, AND EXPATRIATES

The emergence of transnational, cross-border labor markets has become a cutting-edge topic. A number of studies on various cross-border labor markets and other forms of transnational labor markets have come to light over the past decade. In Europe, cross-border labor markets in Luxembourg (with commuters from Belgium, France, Germany), at the Dutch-German border, at the Swiss-Italian border, or in the Austrian-Swiss-Bavarian region have been investigated (Baruffini, 2011; Buch, Torben, & Annekatrin, 2009; Decoville, Durand, Sohn, & Walther, 2010; Gottholmseder & Theurl, 2007; Verwiebe & Reinprecht, 2012-15).¹ Most scholars agree that an increase in the numbers of transnational workers has to be seen in the context of the establishment of the European Union. A turning point was the implementation of the Maastricht Treaty (1992), according to which all Member State citizens became entitled to unrestricted mobility within the EU (Mau & Verwiebe, 2010: 266). The cross-border labor market between the United States and Mexico is yet another example that has recently attracted much attention (e.g., Alegria, 2002; Davila & Mora, 2000; Mollick, Rayas, & Moncisvais, 2006; Mora & Davila, 2011). Over the past 15 years, increasing cross-border commerce, intensified economic integration, and the growth of the Mexican manufacturing industry after the NAFTA treaty was concluded have created

1. The labor market in Luxembourg is an exemplary and interesting object of study in this context. Each day, Luxembourg's labor market draws 160,000 border crossers. This amounts to 50% of those employed in that country's labor market. For three decades, this phenomenon has been continuously on the rise (e.g., in 1975, only 9% of those employed were cross-border commuters) and is now taking place in a labor market region that spans four European countries (Schmitz, Drevon, & Gerber, 2012).

many new employment opportunities for workers on both sides of the US-Mexico border. Most available studies deal with Mexican cross-border commuters. In turn, Mora and Davila (2011) recently developed a different focus while examining the income situation among the US-born population residing in the United States and working on the Mexican side of the border.

Transnational entrepreneurs and their work careers is another cutting-edge research issue (Connelly, 2010; Drori, Honig, & Wright, 2009; Lin & Tao, 2012; Portes, Haller, & Guarnizo, 2002; Riddle, Hrivnak, & Nielsen, 2010; Wong & Ng, 2002). For some of these transnational entrepreneurs, seeking business opportunities is an important reason for their migration to another country in the first place. Other transnational entrepreneurs may have had experiences as expatriates in a transnational corporation or transnational NGO and established their own business using this expertise, thus giving their work career a new direction. Most of the current studies on the topic elaborate on the ways in which transnational entrepreneurs pursue new business ventures while relying on economic, social, cultural, and institutional opportunities that stem from dual locations. This is the primary mode of transnational economic activities that span the national business environments of more than one country (e.g., the countries of migrants' origin and residence).

Finally, the more recent literature concerned with the so-called expatriates is also crucial for understanding transnational work careers. This essay has focused on divergent issues (e.g., Berry & Bell, 2012; Black, 1988; Cantwell, 2011; Roos, 2013; Stahl *et al.*, 2002; Suutari & Brewster, 2003; Tung, 1998; Yan, Zhu, & Hall, 2002). Many studies explore the various implications of expatriate careers with regard to career advancement and personal development, as well as their families', spouses', and children's situations. Differences are also discussed between various economic sectors and organizational contexts. Yet, other studies focus on the long-term effects of expatriate career episodes and analyze the employment and familial situation after they return home. These investigations frequently emphasize that expatriates perceive deficits in corporate career management and believe that their organizations make insufficient use of their international experience.

KEY ISSUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

In an increasingly globalized world, it will prove to be a task for social-scientific research to more systematically deal with transnational work careers. We may identify several concrete challenges in terms of research strategy.

An initial focus for future investigations could be placed on integrating the various research perspectives and methodical and conceptual approaches. Interdisciplinary projects are still the exception to the rule. At present,

transnational careers are dealt with in the framework of migration research and management research. A promising approach would consist of systematically intertwining biographical analyses (migration research) and analyses of organizational contexts (management research).

Similarly, in terms of methodology, expansion beyond the present status of research is conceivable. Qualitative single-case studies focusing on one or several enterprises are predominant, while large-scale quantitative investigations and internationally comparative investigations are exceptional cases. Such studies would be particularly important to more fully understand the various aspects of transnational work careers. For example, we may assume that there are differences between transnational work careers in Eastern Africa and Southeast Asia, or the United States and Europe. However, we still poorly understand in what ways these differences persist and what magnitude they may assume.

This author suggests that the largest challenge by far is the more systematic application of biographical designs, life-course methods, and panel designs. Turning to such novel methods of collecting data would serve to generate a class of insights that is rare in this form. Initial studies working with a panel design (e.g., Suutari & Brewster, 2003) have indicated the associated potential. Little is known as yet about the entire life courses of transnationally mobile individuals, as research is dominated by studies that concentrate on singular life-course episodes.

Thematically—and admittedly formulated in sharp terms—research is required to exceed the prevalent focus on highly skilled middle-aged white men. We still know little about transnational work careers of individuals with medium-level qualifications. Recent research on cross-border commuters indeed indicates the presence of such groups, for example, in the Austrian-Slovakian-Hungarian region or in the US-Mexico border region. Another research desideratum to be addressed is a more systematic investigation of the specific conditions governing women's transnational work careers. Finally, we still have much to learn about transnational work careers between African countries and Latin American societies.

SUMMARY

Transnational work careers can be understood in terms of sequences of related jobs pursued within one economic sector or related sectors across national boundaries. The concept of transnational work careers implies that transnational mobility may become a normal component of migrants' occupational life and social lifeworld. Job-related episodes abroad are a part of occupational biographies and thus temporary by definition. Such episodes can be realized in various economic sectors, including industrial production,

various areas of the financial and other services sectors, NGOs, research institutions, and universities. Transnational work careers are expected to expand even further than today, motored by continuous processes of globalization and transnational processes of integration in Europe, Asia, Africa, and the Americas.

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