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MIGRATION THEORIES

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Synonyms

Theories for human mobility, the laws of migration,

Definition

Migration theories seek to understand the reasoning behind and motivations for the decisions of individuals and households to move from one location to another – domestically or internationally – as well as the factors that explain the maintenance of migration flows over time. Different theories employ different concepts, assumptions, and frames of reference depending on their discipline of origin and the time in which they were formulated.

Overview

Theories on the initiation and perpetuation of international migration

There is a rich body of literature that has explored migrations from a theoretical perspective. The joint effort made by Massey and colleagues (1993) to compile different perspectives on the study of migration has become a classical reference for the study of migration theories. Massey et al. (1993) classified the theoretical perspectives into two categories: initiation and perpetuation theories.

From the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, we can find the forefathers of migration studies. Important antecedents such as 'The Laws of Migration' by Ravenstein (1885-1889) or the 'The Polish peasant in Europe and America' (1918-1920) by Thomas and Znaniecki set the foundations for later developments in this body of literature. Complementing Ravenstein's Laws, Lee's (1966) work points to life-cycle stages as one of the enduring generalizations of migration. However, these precursors did not strictly propose migration theories (Arango 2000).

During the mid-20th century, neoclassical economic theories were extended to multiple dimensions of the social sciences, including migration (Massey et al. 1993). The **neoclassical economics perspective** combines an individual decision motivated by income maximization (microlevel) with country-level structural determinants such as wages and employment conditions (macrolevel). The main criticism of this theory is that it grounds the migration rationale exclusively in wage differentials across countries and does not consider other dimensions such as legal restrictions, cultural differences, or family-related issues (Arango 2000). Neoclassical economics theories of migration were developed by envisioning young rather than old labor migrants. The neoclassical perspective consolidates the conceptualization of

push and pull factors in migration that subsequent theories, such as dual migration systems or the new economics of labor migration, have also incorporated in their postulates.

Over time, migration flows became more heterogeneous and complex, and new conceptual frameworks appeared by the end of the 20th century. The **new economics of labor migration** theory (Stark and Bloom 1985; Stark 1991) derives from the neoclassical perspective and is its most refined version. The key feature of this approach is that it regards migration as a family or household decision rather than an individual decision. According to this perspective, migration allows for the diversification of household resources in the event of a failure or risk regarding local income sources. Thus, older relatives and other kin who stay in the country of origin can rely on remittances, thus ensuring the well-being of older cohorts, especially in developing countries where institutions do not always have mechanisms for welfare support (Massey et al. 1993). While the new economics of labor migration theory incorporates the consequences for the sending countries, the **dual labor market theory** (Piore 1979) focuses on destination countries. This approach also switches from the microlevel view of previous economics theories to a macrolevel explanation of the structural factors determining migrations. Piore's approach states that a constant labor demand for foreign workers is an intrinsic characteristic of labor markets in modern industrial societies. The structural demand for the foreign workforce is generated by a segmented labor market in which autochthonous workers refuse to occupy jobs in the lower segments of the occupational scale. Aging processes in developed countries also contribute to perpetuating a labor demand for second segment jobs in personal care and health services for older adults, which are often filled by foreigners (Warnes and Williams 2006). The dual labor market theory has been criticized for ignoring the role of *push* factors in the countries of origin and for not being aware that a great deal of migration flows today happen outside of recruitment processes (Arango 2000). A third theoretical perspective considered by Massey et al. (1993) as part of the initiation theories of migration is the **world systems theory**, which stems from the same assumption of permanent labor demand for foreign low-skilled workers. This perspective is rooted in the idea of a world market economy in which capitalism from developed countries expands toward peripheral noncapitalist societies, thus generating migration flows from the latter to the former regions (Portes and Walton 1981; Sassen 1988). In this framework, international migration and massive rural-urban migration of younger workers strengthens the aging processes of older people left behind in less developed areas. This perspective overlooks the determinants of international migration in the global south (periphery).

Once migration movements have started, there are other factors different from the initial determinants of migration that explain their perpetuation over time. At least four theories are included in this group (Massey et al. 1993). **Network theory** (Massey et al. 1987), which is close to Bourdieu's social capital theory, points to the transmission of the migration experience from migrants to relatives and friends in the countries of origin as a driver of international migration. As a result, there is a multiplier effect often known as 'chain migration' (Arango 2000) where new migrants relocate with the advantage of lower costs and risks of migration. This process is cumulative—that is, easier for every new migrant—until reaching a saturation point. Network theory has been a useful perspective for understanding family reunification processes and global migration care chains. Likewise, **institutional theory** operates at the meso level, pointing out how profit (i.e., smuggling networks) and nonprofit organizations mediate the migration process by capitalizing on the mismatch between a large number of potential migrants seeking to migrate

to developed regions and the restrictions imposed by governments on legally admitting those migrants into their territories. This perspective is fundamental to highlighting vulnerable groups such as women, children and older populations that are presently the primary target groups for humanitarian organizations ensuring the defense of their human rights and improving their living conditions upon arrival and while in transit (Massey et al. 1993). According to Myrdal (1957), there are other factors beyond migration networks and intermediary institutions that contribute to perpetuating migration flows. **Cumulative causation** is a process by which previous migration movements change the reality and social contexts in which future migration decisions are made (Massey 1990). In this regard, previous studies identify changes in six socioeconomic processes that might potentially induce more significant migration: the distribution of income, the distribution of land, the organization of agrarian production, the emergence of a culture of migration, and the human capital distribution or the social meaning of work, among others (Massey et al. 1993). While these factors do not directly speak to the migration of older people, older migrants are involved in this reasoning to the extent that their migration experience and aspirations might be intergenerationally transmitted to younger members of their families. The last of the perpetuation theories proposed by Massey et al. (1993) is the **migration systems theory**. Migration systems are spaces defined by a relatively stable association over time of recipient countries with regions of origin (Arango 2000). Connections and links of different kinds reinforce such associations; for example, political, social, cultural or historical ties, as well as structural homogeneity, geographic contiguity, similarity of migration policies, or common belonging to regional organizations. It has been argued that migration systems theory represents a broader frame of reference that could include all the abovementioned theoretical perspectives. However, critical voices see it as a descriptive framework that does the following: first, it neglects the decision-making at the individual level (Stark and Wang 2002); second, it only identifies migration systems from the perspective of the recipient countries (Arango 2000); and third, it informs on the emergence of migratory systems but not on its crisis (De Haas 2010a).

The classical theories introduced up to this point represent an essential contribution to the understanding of the emergence and perpetuation of migration. However, there is a consensus among scholars that they offer only partial explanations of a complex, heterogeneous and dynamic phenomenon. To cite just one example, none of these theories address the sometimes involuntary nature of migration addressed by the perspectives that study forced migration (Castles 2003; McLeman and Smit 2006) or migration in the context of a humanitarian crisis (Martin et al. 2013, McAdam 2014). As Arango (2000) argues, the causes of migration are innumerable; therefore, migration theories can only be reductionist. For the same reason, older migrants are underrepresented among classical theories due to the theories' marked focus on economic and labor migration and their systematic neglect of return migration, a typical migration experienced by retirees.

Consequently, other theoretical perspectives have emerged in response to the necessity to adapt to times of globalization and new technologies. Following network theory, the **transnationalism** perspective is based on the idea that migrants, as they settle into destination countries, also develop aspirations and plans for having transnational lives and identities (Vertovec 1999, 2001). This is possible thanks to a technological revolution that has facilitated the maintenance of links with societies of origin through advancements in transportation, telecommunications, or the sending of remittances. Transnationalism has also changed the traditional view of the integration of migrants as opposed to assimilationism (De Haas 2010b). The former approach has important

implications for the migration of older people because it acknowledges migrants as individuals embedded in transnational families. Family units exchange care, remittances, values and expectations between relatives in destination locations and locations of origin. On the one hand, transnational practices of economic migrants that fund care and other expenses through remittances might dissuade the reunification of old parents and migrant children, instead enabling a transnational form of care or a pendular migration between two societies. On the other hand, the prospect of the return migration of former economic migrants who have *aged in place* might be dissolved or become pendular migration as well.

The main theoretical frameworks considered to this point were included in the seminal work of Massey et al. (1993); however, more recently, Hein de Haas (De Haas 2010b) has intensified the discussion on the drivers of international migration by revisiting its links to human development. Wilbur Zelinsky (1971) made the first attempt to interpret the long-term trends of internal and international mobility by looking at demographic transitions and development. He introduced the so-called “hypothesis of the mobility transition”, according to which international migration occurs from rural to urban migration in early transitional societies when natural growth spikes. From this perspective, most of the world should now be witnessing a recession of international migration, as natural growth has decreased, and more than half of the world lives in advanced stages of the demographic transition. However, Zelinsky’s approach also conceived of both economic growth and demographic change as part of a broader process of development. Acknowledging this, Hein De Haas (2010b) introduced a discussion on the **developmental drivers of migration**, following the work of Martin (1993) on migration humps in the wake of economic shocks. His assumptions and findings challenge the belief regarding the negative effect of development on international emigration from developing regions, arguing that, on the contrary, human development promotes international emigration from developing countries as educational expansion and globalization contribute to globalizing the aspirations of the population. This framework also does not address the specifics of older people in permanent and temporary migration or return migration.

Theories of return migration

The drivers of and motivations for return migration understood as temporary or permanent reverse migration have been considered from the perspective of neoclassical economics, new economics of labor migration, transnationalism and social network theory (Cassarino 2004). According to Cassarino (2004), the neoclassical perspective understands return as a failure derived from the miscalculation of costs and benefits of first-time labor migrants. This excludes any other form of utility maximization such as cost of living, access to amenities and health services, among others that might be relevant for addressing older people’s return or pendular migration. The new economics of labor migration points to return migration as a natural stage of the migration process and as a strategy to continue maximizing benefits for the individual and household migration plan. In contrast to the neoclassical perspective, success is measured based on the financial and economic resources brought back to the countries of origin, which include retirement benefits (Cassarino 2004). Finally, transnationalism and social network theory conceive of return as a not-necessarily final stage of migration that is prepared along with visits and other forms of exchange with family and friends at the points of both origin and destination. Both transnationalism and social networks are the main frameworks based on which return (temporary or permanent) and the circular migration of retirees and grandparents have been studied.

Key Research Findings

During the 1990s, coinciding with the proliferation of transnationalism, the intersection between international migration and aging became a more common research topic among social scientists and gerontologists (Warnes and Williams 2006). The process of population aging has motivated one of the main research lines that links aging and migration at the macrolevel. Aging processes have been understood as a *pull* factor motivating labor migration flows. This link can be broadly understood as the increasing need for a labor force of working age due to the aging process of the native population, and, in particular, due to the specific job demand for young adult migrants to care for older persons (Socci et al. 2003, Van der Geest et al. 2004, Warnes and Williams 2006).

When focusing on the interaction between older generations and migration, we can differentiate two central bodies of literature that draw on different theoretical strands: care-related motivations for migration and other motivations.

Care-related migration

Previous literature on family-related migration of older generations has mainly drawn on the transnationalism theory to illustrate how the migration of older populations could be motivated by the need and desire to provide or receive family care rather than by economic motivations (Baldassar 2007; King et al. 2014; Van der Plaats et al. 2013). The new family arrangements emerging after migration processes led to the development of the concept of ‘modified extended family’ (Litwak 1960) based on how families adapt to changing circumstances, including the dispersion of their members. Transnational families are considered entities that continue providing care in different ways regardless of space and time, including the so-called transnational migration **care chains** (Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2003). The emigration of (mainly) females as domestic workers and caregivers to wealthier countries (Williams 2010) implies leaving behind a labor demand for the care of their own families remaining in the countries of origin (Yeates 2005). Two critical implications for older populations need to be mentioned. First, the aging processes in developed countries generates a labor demand for caregivers of their dependent older populations within the framework of a dual segregated labor market in which reproductive jobs are less desirable for locals. Second, the same demand for foreign female labor opens a window for the migration of their parents (especially grandmothers) who later migrate from the country of origin to be caregivers of their grandchildren, giving full meaning to the idea of ‘care chain’.

Numerous works refer to transnationalism and ‘care chains’ when analyzing the intersection between migration and family studies. Past research has distinguished between those parents who will later become participants in the migration process in order to receive care or to provide care to their migrant children and their grandchildren and those who are left behind and are (or end up being) dependent or in need of care. Several scholars (see for example Nedelcu 2017, Treas 2008; Treas and Mazumdar 2004) have found a more complex relationship among migration, aging, and family care. These works highlight how the role of older migrants in supporting their children is often related to the maintenance of strong ties with and commitments to their homelands, yielding a ‘pendular migration’ rather than a permanent migration.

Additionally, the migration of parents to support their children in destination countries is closely linked to the literature on ‘global care chains’ and the economic theories of labor demand

(Williams 2010). Indeed, some studies have pointed out how the ‘zero generation’ – the parents of the first-generation migrants – (Nedelcu 2009) can sometimes struggle between providing care to their children in destination countries and their duties to care for their parents – the ‘minus-one generation’ – residing in the countries of origin (King et al. 2014). The logic of ‘care chains’ also applies to those cases in which migrants leave their children behind in (or send them to) the countries of origin under their grandparents’ – mostly grandmothers’ – supervision (Bastia 2009; Pantea 2012; Parreñas 2001).

The transnationalism perspective is also present in numerous works focused on the well-being of the grandparents who were left behind. This literature is often related to the implications for the transnational relationship between parents, children and grandchildren (Baldassar 2008; King et al. 2014; Sigad and Eisikovits 2013). In this sense, new forms of copresence in grandparenting have appeared with the arrival of the ‘digital age’ that imply a reconceptualization of the meaning of transnational families (Nedelcu 2017).

The second important line of research that studies care-related migration and aging is focused on older generations as care recipients. Three main situations might emerge when the parents of first-generation migrants need care. First, they might migrate themselves and join their children to receive care from them in the destination country. In this case, migration more likely occurs after the loss of a spouse or due to health-related problems, especially among parents who are 75 years of age or older (Liaw et al. 2002). Second, they might lead to the return migration of their descendants who then become caregivers (Baldock 2000; Zimmer and Knodel 2010) or give rise to new forms of transnational intermittent care from their migrant children (Baldassar 2014). Third, they might generate the outsourcing of care facilitated by migrant descendants from destination countries, i.e., the hiring of full-time private care (Van der Geest et al. 2004).

Other motivations for the migration of older people

Retirement poses the question of where it is best to live regardless of the retiree’s migration status, but the possibilities have the broadest geographical scope in regard to international migrants. On the one hand, those *aging as immigrants* (Bolzman et al. 2007) are torn between returning to their country of origin, staying at their current location, or becoming seasonal migrants between two or more locations. On the other hand, those who had never experienced migration may engage in seasonal or permanent migration. Both groups weigh their options, considering the benefits and costs of pursuing well-being somewhere else. This section addresses the main factors identified by empirical research that acknowledge the motivations related to (receiving or providing) care but that also point to other variables of concern.

Seminal contributions to the characteristics and motivations of older people’s migration can be found in the work of Wiseman (1980) and Litwak and Longino (1987). According to Wiseman (1980), around retirement age (60-69 years old), motivations have to do with the attraction of amenities and better weather (i.e., ‘Snowbirds’ migration), reduction in the cost of living, shrinking of support networks, changes in lifestyle, desire to return to the region of origin, or the desire to live near kin (i.e., own children), to mention but a few. These authors consider short- and long-distance migration in the U.S. context, although many of the stated motivations can apply to international migration decisions as well. In fact, recent literature on the international migration of retirees has documented all or some of these motivations in the migration of Canadians to the U.S. Sunbelt, the migration of Americans and Mexicans to Mexico, and the migration of northern Europeans to the Mediterranean, to cite just a few examples (McHugh and

Mings 1996; Van der Geest et al. 2004). A study on the pendular migration of first-time migrants from the Netherlands to Spain has added the relevance of proximity to age peers to the motivations for international migration (Salvà-Tomàs 2002). Social capital accumulated in both countries of origin and destination is also decisive when considering return migration, as has been shown by Rodríguez and Egea (2007). These and other research studies that are also based on the transnationalism perspective have highlighted the *sense of belonging* to one place or another as a driver of return or pendular migration among international migrants (Wimmer and Schiller 2002; Zontini 2015). Finally, the institutional approach has recently contributed to identifying the drivers and inhibitors of the migration of older people by addressing the relevance of political and legal conditions that determine access to social security payments and other benefits abroad (Gehring 2017).

Later in life, after turning 75 years old, motivations are often related to the loss of health and the demand for care related to moderate disabilities or major chronic diseases; at this point, return migration becomes more likely than other forms of mobility (Litwak and Longino 1987). In fact, the so-called ‘Hispanic paradox’ of the better and longer survival of migrants of Hispanic origin in the United States could be partly associated with a selection bias among migrants – they are healthier than nonmigrants – but also with a ‘salmon bias’ that is based on the assumption that the less healthy migrants return home, thus lowering the mortality rates of migrants remaining in the United States (Riosmena et al. 2019).

Future Directions for Research

Future research will need to continue developing an appropriate framework to understand the interaction between aging and migration and its implications for both migration and social protection policies. Research on older migrants to date has focused more on care-related migration than on those who migrate independently. Further research should address, on the one hand, how population aging in developed societies will influence the dynamics of the international migration of retirees. The role of governments in managing the contributions and expenditures of the older population will also need to be focused on from a global and a transnational perspective. Additionally, the technological and digital revolution in a globalized world will continue changing how transnational extended families operate, opening new research opportunities.

Summary

Theorizing about migration has been a prolific topic on the social scientists’ research agenda since the 20th century. Multiple theories have emerged to help understand the causes of and motivations for individual and household migration decisions as well as the macro determinants of such decisions. Classical theories have primarily focused on economic migrants and have subsequently included older migrants as long as they belong to the kinship network of economic migrants. More recently, older migrants, mainly retirees, as agents of their migration projects, have occupied new theories on migration and aging.

Cross-references

Aging migrants; retirement migration; health disparities among aging migrants; intergenerational migration

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