The role of aspirations in migration

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Abstract   This conceptual paper seeks to engage with migration theory by examining the nature and functions of aspirations in migration processes. I argue that aspirations play a pivotal role in all migration, but in different ways. Aspirations are elusive, however, both theoretically and empirically. People's general aspirations in life form part of form part of the background to migration desires; such desires can also be described as migration aspirations, which are the focus of this paper. This conviction that migration is preferable to staying can be understood as an attitude, which helps us raise several epistemological issues. Is the desire to migrate an enduring state of mind, or a context-specific speech act? Do migration aspirations, conceived of as attitudes, comparatively evaluate places, or culturally constructed projects? Does migration have intrinsic value, or is it simply a means to an end? Addressing such questions and relating them to the factors that inhibit or facilitate actual migration can shed new light on how we conceptualize and empirically analyse the determinants of migration. It can also help understand the relationships between force, choice and mobility. In conclusion, I propose an aspirations-centred model of migration, in which observable outcomes—in the form of mobility and immobility—are interpreted as products of three interlinked processes.

Introduction

This paper is a half-way product of an ongoing research process, written with the aim of raising questions and reflecting on key issues rather than providing answers. It identifies a number of conceptual themes that all might be important, but which do not fit neatly together as a well-structured piece of prose.

I start by addressing a few basic aspects of the links between migration and aspirations, accounting for my own background and approach, and describing how my previous research feeds into this paper. In the subsequent section I discuss a number of epistemological issues related to migration aspirations, based on the premise that such aspirations can be studied a form of attitudes. I then consider the role of force and choice in migration, and the distinction between the intrinsic and instrumental value of migration. Finally, I very tentatively assemble different points from the paper into a conceptual framework.

When we seek to explore determinants of migration, aspirations play a role in two interconnected ways. First, people's general aspirations in life can be important factors that directly or indirectly affect migration. These could relate to happiness, wealth, security, or family formation, for instance. Second, we can use the term *migration aspirations* to describe the conviction that migration is desirable. In some cases, this conviction could reflect enthusiasm about migration; in other cases migration is simply the lesser of two evils, preferable to staying in a situation of danger, oppression, or poverty. Like several other scholars in the field, I use migration aspirations to describe this preference for migration over staying, regardless of the reasons.

When a person wishes to migrate, it could either be because migration has *intrinsic* value, or because migration is instrument for achieving another objective. If the latter is the case, migration has *instrumental* value. The objectives that migration helps achieve are, of course, often linked to a person's broader aspirations in life. And rising aspirations are part of the reason why migration tends not to be reduced by development (Clemens 2014, Czaika and Vothknecht 2014, de Haas 2007).

Both in people's everyday conversations about migration and in scholarly accounts, one often encounters the reasoning that people migrate (or wish to migrate) because they are poor. This proposition can usefully be analysed with respect to aspirations and instrumentality. If we disregard extreme cases of survival migration, poverty-driven migration does not reflect absolute levels of poverty, but rather, that people *think of themselves* as poor. Such a perception is related to aspirations, imagining a better life than the present one. When they see migration as a potential solution, as an instrument, it reflects an understanding of their poverty as *place-bound*. In my research in Cape Verde, I found both of these two conditions to be the case. Consequently, people saw 'poverty' as the fundamental cause of migration, despite Cape Verde's relative prosperity.

Migration aspirations and involuntary immobility

Twelve years ago I published an article entitled 'Migration in the age of involuntary immobility: Theoretical reflections and Cape Verdean experiences' (Carling 2002). Its main argument was this: the defining feature of today's migration order is not the magnitude and complexity of actual mobility, but the prevalence of *involuntary immobility*. By involuntary immobility, I mean the combination of aspirations to migrate and inability to do so. When I now explore steps towards a theory of migration aspirations, I am interested in the formation of migration aspirations, but also in the consequences of persisting aspirations in the absence of actual migration. I use 'theory' to mean a set of heuristic tools or propositions that can help us make sense of a complex reality, not a universal, testable claim about causality.

My 2002 article presented a simple conceptual framework that I called the aspiration/ability model. I will summarize the relevant parts of it here. I set out by distinguishing between people's *aspiration* to migrate and their *ability* to do so. Some people at the origin have an aspiration to migrate, defined by a belief that migration is preferable to non-migration. Among those who aspire to migrate, *some* will also have the ability to do so. These people are the *migrants*, whose international movements can be observed.

Those who have aspirations to migrate but lack the ability are *involuntary non-migrants.* They differ from the *voluntary non-migrants*, who stay because of a belief that non-migration is preferable to migration. The concepts aspiration and ability thus define three migratory categories of people.

Aspiration to migrate can be analysed at two levels. First, there is the macro-level question of why a large number of people wish to emigrate. This can be addressed with reference to the particular *emigration environment,* which encompasses the social, economic and political context that is largely common to all members of the community. A vital part of the emigration environment is the nature of migration as a socially constructed project. People who consider migration as an option relate to it through the meanings with which it is embedded. The second analytical approach to aspiration is the micro-level question of *who* wants to migrate and *who* wants to stay. Individual characteristics such as gender, age, family migration history, social status, educational attainment and personality traits are likely to provide some answers. These differentiating factors also include relations between individuals that act to encourage or discourage migration. Exactly how individual-level factors matter, depends on the particular social context. Explanations of aspiration therefore require attention to both macro-level and individual-level influences.

Migration aspirations and the epistemology of attitudes

My original argument was based on the premise that migration aspirations exist in people's minds—an assertion that is both straight-forward and questionable. Appropriate theorization and practical methodology both depend on how we relate to the epistemological challenges of studying aspirations. We might think of aspirations as a specific type of attitudes: a subjective evaluation of an object or concept, in this case migration. Epistemological discussions are rare in the study of aspirations, while they are well developed in research on attitudes (Magalhães 2011, Potter and Wetherell 1987).

Two opposing positions illustrate the issues at hand. The first would see the presence or absence of migration aspirations as an enduring state of mind that researchers can harvest information about. The second would object to this ontology and instead see expressions of migration aspirations as highly context-specific speech acts. These positions are firmly rooted in positivist and constructivist approaches, respectively. I believe that a middle ground is possible, but this is challenging terrain for research on migration aspirations.

My research in Cape Verde convinced me that migration aspirations can be 'real' in the sense of well-established convictions that persist across specific situations. I am not providing ethnographic insights into Cape Verdean migration aspirations here, which I and others have done elsewhere (Åkesson 2004, Carling 2002, Carling and Åkesson 2009), but let me present three snapshots in the form of quotes from young informants:

> Some of my friends, those I hang out with every day, say that 'Me, if I finish school and I find a way of travelling, I'll go. Because Cape Verde, São Vicente, doesn't have a future for anybody'. That's how they say. In fact we all say, São Vicente doesn't have a future for anybody. (Calú, 21)

> Once emigration was easier. Easier than today. In the past, I've heard, people were emigrating with... only their identity cards! Nowadays it's not like that anymore. Now you have to have your visa, you have to have a lot of papers, you have to have a lot of... a lot of problems. (Ira, 19)

[Those without a high school diploma] are left with emigration as their only solution for getting a better life. But sometimes, they don't even think about emigration, because they know that emigration... day by day it is getting more difficult. (Sú 18)

These quotes reflect the sentiments and experiences that made me interested in involuntary immobility. I combined ethnographic interviews with survey research and became convinced that both can play important roles in research on migration aspirations.

Surveys offer the opportunity of exploring correlations and possible determinants of migration. However, descriptive results such as the proportion of people who wish to migrate need to be interpreted with care. We can imagine the strength of migration aspirations as a continuum, in which only people with attitudes near the extremes will give predictable answers (Figure 1). In the middle, there is a large segment of people whose attitudes toward migration will produce answers that are heavily dependent on the context and the formulation of the question.

Survey questions about the possibility of respondents migrating to another country take several forms. The first type of question about migrating versus not migrating address *aspirations*, *desires*, *preferences*, or *wishes*—that is, simply an evaluation of whether migrating would be better than staying. Examples of formulations include the following:[1] 'Ideally, if you had the opportunity, would you like to move permanently to another country, or would you prefer to continue living in this country?' (Gallup 2008); 'Would you like to someday live in the United States?', (Becerra *et al.* 2010); 'Do you wish to emigrate?' (Carling 2002). The concept that questions such as these measure is usually referred to either as migration aspirations (Abrego 2006, Alpes 2013, Bal and Willems 2014, Creighton and Riosmena 2013, Czaika and Vothknecht 2014, de Haas 2010, Hoffman *et al.* 2014, Jónsson 2008, Schapendonk 2012), or as migration desires (Boneva *et al.* 1998, Cai *et al.* 2014, Hoffman *et al.* 2014)
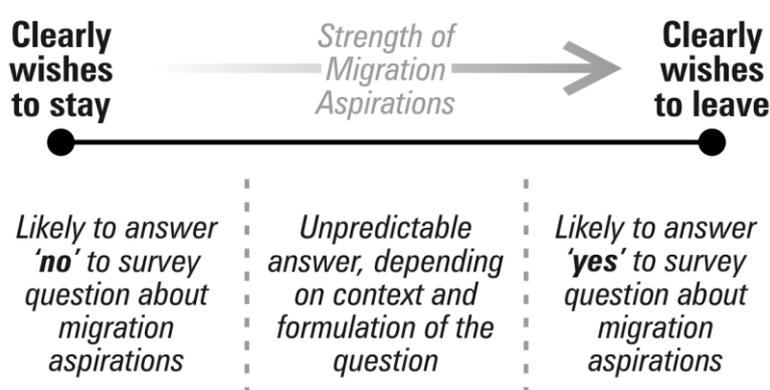

Figure 1. Migration aspirations as a continuum.

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[1] For all the examples of survey questions reported in this section, sources are publications that refer to the surveys, not necessarily by researchers responsible for the original survey. The wording has in some cases been deduced from the reporting of results and not from the original questionnaire.

A second type of question focuses on *intentions* or *plans*, either as a stand-alone alternative to asking about preferences, or as a follow-up question: 'Are you planning to move to [preferred destination country] in the next 12 months, or not?' (Gallup 2008); 'Will you try to go to [preferred destination country] within the next five years?' (Ersanilli *et al.* 2011); 'Do you intend to migrate abroad?' (van Dalen *et al.* 2005).

While these two approaches are the most common, others have phrased questions with reference to, for instance, the *consideration, necessity* or *likelihood* of migration: 'Have you and your family seriously considered moving to another country?' (Wood *et al.* 2010); 'Do you think you will have to migrate to the United States?' (Becerra *et al.* 2010); 'How likely do you think it is that you will live elsewhere in the future?' (Bjarnason and Thorlindsson 2006); 'If you could improve your work or living conditions, how willing or unwilling would you be to move outside your country?' (Drinkwater 2003). Apart from the last two, all these examples are yes/no questions. They would, in other words, divide a group of respondents in two groups (excluding non-response). If we consider the continuum presented in Figure 1, it seems plausible that all would roughly represent the same underlying continuum, but with different cut-off points.

However, the strength of the desire to migrate intersects with another dimension: the perceived realism of converting such a desire into actual migration. This, in turn, depends on characteristics of the individual (e.g. personality, resources, skills), their surroundings (e.g. networks, family commitments), and the macro-structural context (e.g. immigration regulations, labour market opportunities). The questions about intentions and plans reflect both the desire and the realism of migration.

Expressed aspirations and steps towards migration

Migration aspirations are often dismissed as poor determinants of actual migration. But such a view obscures the importance of aspirations. First, contemporary migration dynamics can only be properly understood when we see actual moves as the tip of the iceberg of aspirations, which for the most part remain unfulfilled. Second, the unfulfilled aspirations have an importance of their own. In societies where a large proportion of the population wishes to be elsewhere, this desire is a fundamental aspect of society that affects its life and development.

There are many reasons why migration aspirations do not translate into migration, including obstacles in the form of restrictive policies or prohibitive costs. In theory, migration aspirations are independent of these barriers, and therefore allow us to identify involuntary immobility. However, migration aspirations could be subject to 'sour grapes' mechanisms, which truly complicate any distinction between genuine and expressed aspirations. When migration is difficult, people may—consciously or unconsciously—refrain from committing to unrealistic ambitions. At the same time, greater obstacles to migration could also be associated with greater hardships for those who do migrate, and the overall appeal of migration could be reduced.

Another challenge is presented by the multiple functions of expressing aspirations. If we reject such statements as straight-forward reflections of an enduring state of mind, expressions of aspirations could also constitute assertions of identity. Margaret Frye

(2012) makes this argument with reference to educational aspirations in Malawi. If similar dynamics apply to migration aspirations, individual expressions have even less predictive power, but are all the more valuable for understanding the emigration environment—macro-level discourses about the emigration project and its perceived virtues or flaws.

What is being evaluated?

If we understand migration aspirations as attitudes, it is necessary to ask what the object of evaluation is. An attitude has been defined as a psychological tendency that is expressed by evaluating a particular entity with some degree of favour or disfavour (Eagly and Chaiken 1993:1). As for the nature of the 'entity' there are essentially two possibilities.

First, we can understand migration aspirations as a comparison of *places*. The value of living in a specific place depends on the characteristics of that place, modified by the individual's needs and preferences. This is the basic logic of push–pull models of migration, and connects migration aspirations to concepts such as place utility and spatial preferences. Although these concepts are associated with quantitative and positivist approaches, there is ample room for constructivism within the place-comparison framework. Potential destinations are an important part of the emigration environment, but they are present through the locally existing ideas and meanings attached to these places. This is a characteristic of the migration decision making process that has long been recognised, whether it is conceptualised in terms of imperfect information or discursive constructions (Lee 1966). Also the home community enters the comparison through discursively mediated experience.

The second possible approach is to see migration aspirations as a comparison of culturally defined projects. People's notion of migration will often be based on an 'emigration project', a socially constructed entity that embodies particular expectations. Hägerstrand (1996:653) refers to such projects as 'ready-made blueprints, preserved in the store-house of culture'. Similarly, Lubkemann (2005) refers to an idealized 'emigrant script'. An important connection between macro- and micro-level analyses of migration aspirations, therefore, is the examination of such migration imaginaries.

If people relate to leaving as a socially defined project, is the same true for staying? This question relates to the fundamental asymmetry in how we tend to think about migration aspirations: people have a wish for leaving or they do not have this wish. In this way, staying is implicitly conceptualized as a residual option. Staying and leaving are not equal projects, since greater effort is required to migrate, than to remain. However, both can be an active choice. In settings with large-scale out-migration, not going with the flow could be a momentous decision. For instance, in situations of oppression or occupation, some people decide to stay and resist while others flee. Also in less dramatic circumstances, in rural or post-industrial communities threatened by depopulation, staying could be a statement of commitment.

Perhaps, then, the wish to stay should not be conceptualized as the absence of migration aspirations, but rather as the presence of aspirations to remain in place. This observation suggests a shift from 'migration aspirations' to 'spatial aspirations' as the object of analysis, giving equal weight to aspirations for leaving and staying.

Force and choice in migration

The model of aspiration and mobility sometimes invokes questions about 'those who are forced to migrate'. My position has been that that there is no categorical analytical distinction between 'forced' and 'voluntary' migration, since all migration involves both choices and constraints (cf Betts 2013, Fischer *et al.* 1997, Keely 2000, Lubkemann 2008, Van Hear 1998). In fact, civilians in an area of warfare could have strong aspirations to leave, but limited ability to do so. In other words, even when the mobile are commonly labelled 'forced' those who stay behind could be involuntarily immobile. And the mobile might be choosing between two extreme evils, but nevertheless make a judgment that can be understood as aspirations to leave. This reasoning implies that moving without aspirations is not an issue, as long as we see aspirations to migrate as relative to the option of staying—for instance when staying means risking one's life.

I am now more interested in the possibility of migrating without aspirations. However, this acknowledgement is unrelated to the forms of migration that are normally thought of as forced. Two other research experiences have opened my mind: The first is research on transnational families and children-left-behind (Carling 2007, Carling *et al.* 2012). Children are often moved without having much say, also when they are old enough to have a clear opinion. In the context of transnational families, such moves do not only involve accompanying a parent to new places, but also being shifted from one foster family to another. Such lack of choice can apply to adolescents and, in some contexts, adult women. A related point was made by Everett Lee (1966:51) in his seminal article 'A theory of migration' who wrote that 'not all persons who migrate reach that decision themselves. Children are carried along by their parents, willy-nilly, and wives accompany their husbands though it tears them away from environments they love.' Lee, however, saw these moves as anomalies beyond theorizing, alongside exceptions caused by 'transient emotions, mental disorder, and accidental occurrences'. Today, a comprehensive theory on capability and mobility needs to engage with the family-related constraints on choice.

The second eye-opening experience for me has been research about return migration. In on-going research we deliberately take a broad approach to return, with various degrees of voluntariness. While 'forced migration' in the sense of conflict-induced migration rarely involves the forced transportation of bodies, deportation often does (de Genova 2010). The technical term is, evocatively, 'removal'. When someone is removed from a territory, they migrate without aspirations to do so.

These insights have implications for the notion of involuntary immobility. I originally applied the term only to those who have not migrated but desire to do so. Similar feelings of desiring to be elsewhere might also apply to those who have been removed from where they feel at home, be it by their families or by authorities. In Cape Verde, for instance, there are deportees who have grown up in the United States, feel out of place in Cape Verde, and most of all want to return to America. There are also teenagers who have been sent back by their parents in the diaspora in order to keep them out of trouble in the suburbs of Lisbon or Paris. How are these experiences of involuntary immobility—being stuck in Cape Verde—different from the situation of those who have never left but live with a desire to do so?

The intrinsic and instrumental value of migration

If migration has intrinsic value, this value could be rooted in engagements with either space or place. The spatial dimension gains specific importance in people's lives when they move; mobility represents command of space. As Ninna Nyberg Sørensen and Finn Stepputat (2001:313) have put it, 'experiences of mobility bestow authority on the moving subjects'. Migration aspirations can, in other words, represent a yearning for mobility as such.

Alternatively migration aspirations can represent yearning for a specific place. I am using 'place' here in the sense that is fundamental in human geography, to describe any 'meaningful location', large or small in physical terms (Cresswell 2004). Yearning for a place can be seen as a spatially oriented counterpart to temporally oriented nostalgia (Burman 2010). Migration desires, in this form, are not about mobility as such. And migration to the place in question is not an instrumental means to an end, alongside other potential strategies. What drives migration aspirations of this kind is the desire to *be* in a specific place elsewhere. This is akin to what Pajo (2008) refers to as territorial fulfilment.

Such yearning for a place is typically not related to a precise geographical location, but rather, to a meaningful spatial category. In societies of emigration in different parts of the world, the 'elsewhere' to which migration aspirations are directed is sometimes described with specific terms such as *Gurbet* in Turkey (Zırh 2012), *Stranjer* in Cape Verde (Åkesson 2004) and *Beng* in Côte d'Ivoire (Newell 2012).

If migration has primarily instrumental value, neither the place of destination nor mobility itself motivates migration. In the literature, the paramount objectives are economic ones: migrating to increase income for the purpose of higher standards of living or financing a specific project, such as constructing a house. Economists have also examined migration for the sake of reducing income *variability,* another financial objective. Other social scientists have explored migration as a strategy for social mobility in other terms. A case in point are studies on youth in Africa that analyze the struggle of becoming an adult in social terms Migration can, through a combination of material and symbolic outcomes, be a vehicle for entering adulthood. Migration to escape crises has an even clearer instrumental function, enabling migrants to survive (Betts 2013).

Thinking of migration as a means to an end, as instrumentally rather than intrinsically valuable, raises three questions:

1. What is the end to which migration is a means?
2. What would be alternative means?
3. How are choices made between different means?

For instance, if securing a family livelihood is the objective (1), alternative means (2) could include local employment or criminal activity, for instance. Choices between the strategies could be made on the basis of perceived constraints, risks and rewards. Migration might be seen as the most desirable option, but also a difficult one to access. Looking beyond the economic, the objective might be to attain social adulthood or manhood. In a study of Senegalese emigration we find that several aspects of unauthorized boat migration to the Canary Islands coalesce to affirm the manhood of the migrant (Hernández-Carretero and Carling 2012).

This analytical disaggregation of ends and means may sound overly rational. However, our efforts to simplify a complex reality need not imply that people's behaviour is simple. It may be futile to pursue such questions as the three above through survey research, despite their apparent simplicity. By contrast, the logic underlying these questions can emerge in ethnographic research. For instance, Charles Piot (2010:77) introduces his book chapter on playing the US Diversity Visa Lottery in Togo—following a chapter on the rise of Pentecostalism—in this way: 'If charismatic Christianity represents one response to the current sovereignty crisis, playing the visa lottery is another, providing a complement to the virtual form of surrogation or exit enacted by the Pentecostal.' Although not phrased in terms of strategies and objectives, the underlying analysis of the parallelism is similar.

Scholars of youth in Africa have identified a series of strategies that might be seen as parallel responses to breaking out of non-adult status (Hernández-Carretero and Carling 2012, Honwana 2012, Mains 2011, Vigh 2006). These include mobilization around political, religious, or social identities, such as entry into rebel forces (Vigh 2006), vigilante groups (Harnischfeger 2003), secret societies (Richards 1996), Pentecostal churches (van Dijk 1997)), and Islamic brotherhoods (Selboe 2010) as well as involvement in political parties. These strategies may simultaneously provide short-term benefits and have a sense of purpose beyond the material. The appeal of such mobilization needs to examined in conjunction with education: is education perceived as an accessible and effective strategy for attaining important goals—such as those related to adulthood, livelihood and respect? If it is not, mobilization could gain force (Keen 2005).

The triple constitution of migration

In this section I tentatively summarize points that have been made in the preceding sections and begin to assemble a conceptual framework. It is centred on three processes that, in combination offer an approach to the determinants of migration (Figure 2) The framework raises as many issues as it settles, but might be a fruitful step on the way in an intellectual process.

In line with the argument that staying, too, can represent a strong desire and an active choice, I suggest shifting the focus from migration aspirations specifically to spatial aspirations more generally. By making *spatial aspirations* the central concept, we allow for greater variation in how people engage with the spatial parameters of their lives and ambitions.

The aspiration/ability model conceptualized 'ability' as the decisive element in turning migration aspirations into actual migration. I accounted for different types of obstacles that prospective migrants encounter, and the resources needed to overcome them (Carling 2002). Such analyses are useful, I believe, in order to understand the size and composition of migration flows. However, the concept of ability (or capability[2]) is not fully satisfactory. Clearly, prospective migrants are differently positioned with respect to possibilities for making migration a reality. But can they be said to *have* the ability to migrate before actually doing it? Perhaps it would be better to conceive of the step from migration

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[2] Hein de Haas (2010) introduces this concept as the counterpart to aspirations. Capability has a broader theoretical foundation as a concept of its own, but essentially struggles with the same challenges as ability.
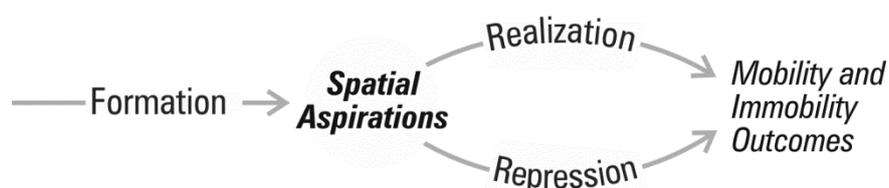
Figure 2. The triple constitution of migration – A tentative framework

aspirations to actual migration as a *process*, not the effect of a quality (ability). Similarly, when people prefer to stay but are under pressure to leave, making it possible to remain is also a process of realizing aspirations. We can call thus refer to the first of the three processes as the *realization* of spatial aspirations.

Spatial aspirations can be said to exist in a way that ability cannot. Still, there are good reasons for focusing on processes in relation to aspirations too. Spatial aspirations are dynamic and malleable, and come into being through social practices and discourses. This second process can be called *formation* of spatial aspirations

When spatial aspirations are *not* realized, it could be misleading to think of it simply as absence of realization. In circumstances where people are prevented from being in the place where they would want to be, we might talk about *repression* of spatial aspirations as a process. Such repression always implies that people are forced to be somewhere against their will, but this could either mean having migrated despite wanting to stay, or staying despite wanting to migrate.

Perhaps, by examining how spatial aspirations are formed, realized or repressed, we can advance our understanding of the interplay between individual agency and structural factors, and better foresee the ebbs and flows of migration in the decades ahead.

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