

**Structuring the life course:
biographies of highly skilled Indians in the Netherlands**

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Introduction

As articulated in the Lisbon Strategy, the European Union (EU) aims at becoming the 'most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world' (European Council, 2000). The functioning and sustainability of knowledge-based economies are dependent on the qualifications and skills of the labour force. Since many developed countries, particularly in the EU, are undergoing population ageing and thus decrease in the pool of potential labour force, competition for the best talent from abroad is not a new phenomenon (Koser and Salt, 1997). Several EU member states have therefore designed specific programmes and policies to attract highly skilled migrants.

In the Netherlands the highly skilled migrant (*kennismigrant*) visa was implemented for these purposes in the end of 2004 and has justified itself already within the first three and a half years when 13,210 applications were approved (INDIAC, 2009). Roughly one third of these high-skilled migrants are employed in IT and other business sectors, whereas another third of them work in industry, trade, or education and research (INDIAC, 2009). During the last few years three quarters of the visa applicants have been males, every second aged 18-30 years, and every third of Indian origin (INDIAC, 2009). According to the population projections of Statistics Netherlands, the inflow of labour migrants from Asian countries will continue and even increase (Nicolaas, 2009). India and China will remain the largest pools for highly skilled migrants in the world.

The objective of this paper is to examine the life stories underlying high-skilled migration from India to the Netherlands, in specific how their life course is shaped regarding events in employment, migration, and household path. The patterns of these parallel paths and the influence mechanisms from significant others on the life course of highly skilled migrants will aid in describing knowledge migration beyond the trends expressed in numbers. We aim to do so by means of adopting the life course approach and biographical method, which allow us to study the migration decision making process and its setting within other life events from the perspective of the migrants self.

Life course of highly skilled migrants

The theoretical argumentation underlying high-skilled migration is widely presented in terms of human capital of the individuals. People are assumed to move to labour markets that fit their education and working experience, and where from they expect to receive the most satisfying pay-off for their investment in human capital (Borjas, 1989). Nevertheless, personal development, creating own professional network, gaining international experience, and better working conditions and opportunities are equally or even more important than highest economic returns in the migration decision making of knowledge migrants (Guth and Gill, 2008; Khoo et al., 2008). Khadria (2004) shows that one of the main reasons why Indian IT and health professionals work abroad is the high value of such experience when returning to India, thus international working experience may even be prescribed by the norms of the origin community and culture. This view is supported by Robinson and Carey (2000), who,

based on their study on Indian doctors in the United Kingdom, argue that despite economic motives migration can be regarded as a cultural and social phenomenon. Several researchers have also observed the concentration of human capital itself in a region as a remarkable attraction factor for high-skilled migrants (e.g., Whisler et al., 2008). Fielding (1992) describes such areas as 'escalator regions', which attract young and qualified people outside the region and facilitate their upward social mobility, often distributing them thereafter to other regions.

As receiving countries benefit from the accumulation of skilled labour which leads to increase in the level of productivity, stimulation of innovation capacity, international dissemination of knowledge, and increase in the pool of human capital in general (Salt, 2006), it is for governments desirable to attract flows of high-skilled labour. In the Netherlands a highly skilled migrant is even defined through the significance of their contribution as they are referred to as 'labour migrants with nationally or internationally scarce expertise; generally highly educated and earn an above average wage; employed in sectors of great economic or social importance' (ACVZ, 2004: 144). It is this scarce expertise that increases the propensity of individuals to move as this expertise is constantly in demand. The acquisition of skills and work experience can trigger many movements which are dependent on the life course of the individuals and the interrelatedness with the life trajectories of their significant others.

The life course approach examines the evolution of life trajectories of individuals over time and in social processes (e.g., Elder and Giele, 2009). The focus lies on life events—or transitions—of individuals and the ways in which these events constitute their life trajectories (Elder, 1975, 2009), also referred to as life careers or paths. The events under consideration take place in various domains of life, of which education, employment, migration, and household are essential in the present research. The transitions concern status passages or roles that account for particular change in the life of individuals (Elder, 1975; Dykstra and Van Wissen, 1999), such as entering the labour market or becoming a parent alter employment and family status, respectively. Moreover, due to the interdependence between different trajectories, an event in one path can bring about status changes in other paths of the individual (Dykstra and Van Wissen, 1999). The effect of 'parallel trajectories' is particularly well exemplified by migration that is frequently accompanied with alterations in several other life domains (Mulder and Wagner, 1993; Mulder and Hooimeijer, 1999): the completion of higher education or starting cohabitation often imply a change in one's place of residence.

The variability of timing and sequence of transitions across different trajectories underlines the diversity and unpredictability of life paths (Elder, 1975; Clark and Davies Withers, 2007). Time is thus a crucial element in the life course approach. Elder (1975) distinguishes between three different dimensions of time. Individual time concerns the chronological order of life events in the life of an individual; social time includes influences from social institutions, roles, norms and values on the transitions; and historical time sees the events from the perspective of historical changes (Elder, 1975; Dykstra and Van Wissen, 1999).

The various dimensions of life course approach are summarised in a framework consisting of four central themes proposed by Elder (1975). First one, 'lives in time and space', refers to the historical and geographical context that influences the life paths of individuals. Second component, 'timing of lives', looks at life course in terms of occurrence, duration, and sequence of transitions. The concept of 'linked lives' emphasises individuals' embeddedness in social relationships, and recognises the role of the lives of others in forming the transitions and trajectories of an individual. Last element, 'human agency', connects the previous ones as it states that human beings are consciously and planfully making choices in order to construct their own life paths.

Given the four life course framework characteristics developed by Elder (1975, 1994) and the potential life course patterns of migrants, it is crucial to consider migration strategies in a wider setting of factors that either facilitate or hinder migration (see Figure 1 for a visual summary of the conceptual framework). Mulder and Hooimeijer (1999) distinct between factors derived from the individual or household itself (the micro level) and factors that are created externally (the macro level). As for the highly skilled, human capital is the major resource for migration since it provides with the necessary qualifications and skills required for a specific job. An important restriction stems from the composition of a household, namely, if it consists of more than one person, the migration decision making is more complex as its influence on the lives of all household members has to be taken into account. On the macro level, factors that enable and disable migration are opportunities and constraints (Mulder and Hooimeijer, 1999). Regarding highly skilled migrants, opportunities include the availability of particular jobs in the host country, and constraints would be shortage of these vacancies.

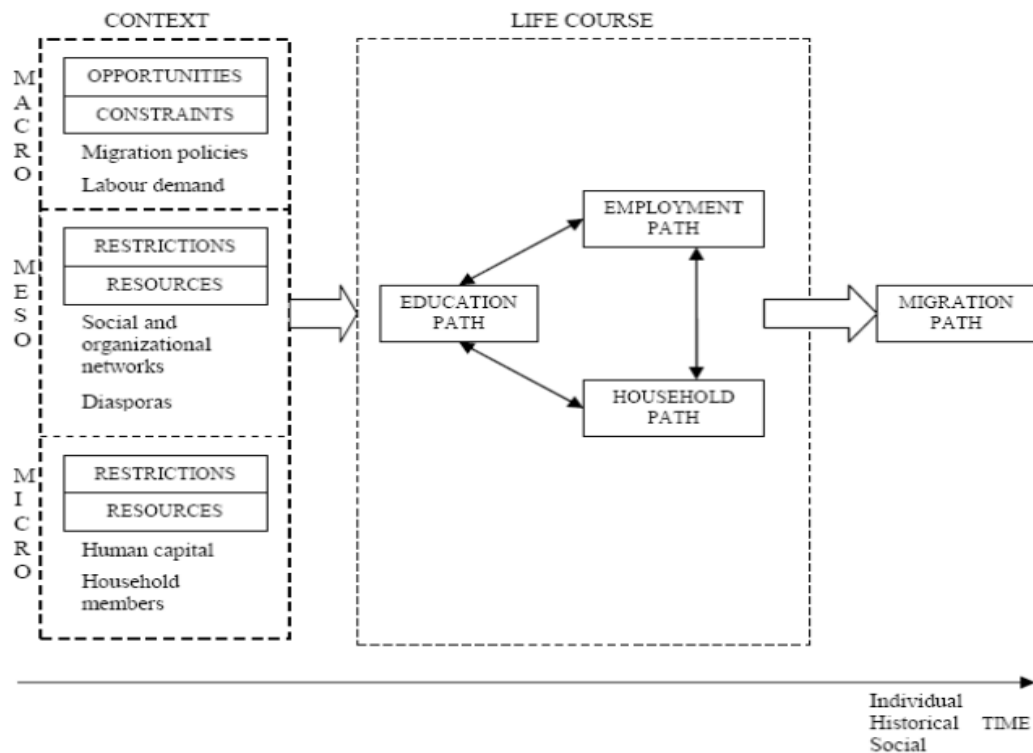


Figure 1. Life course and migration decision making of highly skilled migrants

At the meso level, social and organizational networks, and diasporas provide highly skilled migrants with resources or restrictions. Drawing on Elder's (1975) concept of linked lives, life trajectories of the significant others are a necessary component in understanding the life path of an individual, particularly in shaping union and family formation. Moreover, particularly for highly skilled migrants, social networks are sources of employment opportunities via informal contacts (Alarcón, 1999; Meyer, 2001). Organizational networks, on the other hand, often predetermine the employment and migration path, as overseas postings are integrated in the policies of multinational companies (Beaverstock, 2005).

Diaspora then is the cultural face of the social networks. Apart from markers such as identity, migration research has shown that the migrants have an agency by which they apprehend, negotiate, and transform the social structures that influence their lives (Gidwani and Sivaramakrishnan, 2003). With this agency they also reorganise places or structures to reflect their homeland, providing a coping strategy. Vertovec (1997) describes (South Asian) diasporas as social forms: they help to maintain collective identity and institutionalise exchange and communication networks. By means of those features diasporas bring together expatriates and create new mechanisms for continuing their usual behaviour and activities in the host country. Harvey (2008) finds that participation of Indian scientists in Boston in such diaspora networks depends also on the size of the expatriate group and the length of time the group has lived in the host country. Thus the extent to which the migrants draw their identities from diasporas, the extent to which diasporas are embedded in the host countries, and the level of diaspora network maturity can have an influence on the decision to stay or to move.

Approach

In order to get insights on how highly skilled migrants construct their life course with regard to employment, migration, and household paths, and how opportunities, constraints, resources, and restrictions shape these interdependencies, we will employ biographical approach as it provides understanding of migration processes from the much-needed micro perspective. The main issues dealt with in the biographical interviews are the life events that have led to migration as well as how migration has affected the following life events. It is equally important in both cases to consider the role of significant others—whether it be members of family or social networks—and larger structures—such as diasporas or migration policies—on those processes. Biographical approach lays emphasis on the social embeddedness of individuals and its influence on their decision making (Halfacree and Boyle, 1993; Findlay and Li, 1997; Ní Laoire, 2008), hence recognises all the central themes of life course approach (historical and geographical context, timing of lives, linked lives, and human agency). The individual narratives underline the 'role of the teller in constructing her/his own life narrative, through a process of selection, ordering and giving meaning to particular events and stories' (Ní Laoire, 2008: 198). The sequence of events and their significance for one another is crucial in biographical narratives (Liamputtong and Ezzy, 2007) and thus further espouses the combination with life course approach. Examining migrant biographies provides insight into how individuals construct their life course in terms of both geographical and social mobility (King and Ruiz-Gelices, 2003). This approach combined with the life course framework is thus means to comprehend the motivation and decision making process of the highly skilled migrants in the historical, social, and cultural context which is much beyond just cost-benefit analysis.

The feasibility study for the framework presented in this paper is carried out in North Netherlands. Research centres such as University of Groningen, Philips Innovation and Development Centre in Drachten and Shell/NAM in Assen attract great numbers of internationals. The research participants are sought among Indians aged 25-40 who are holders of a highly skilled migrant visa. The findings will be incorporated in the paper.

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