PhD of Sociology

Skills as Borders, Skills as Routes: Rethinking migration categories through lived experience

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**Summary**

Relying on numbers alone to explicate the realities of migration does little to accurately represent human experience. Distilling migration into quantifiable units relies on data that has been critiqued for being limited, faulty, inaccurate, and blind to the vagaries of life (Bircan et al., 2020; Borderon et al., 2021; Kofman, 2000).

In 2019, women made up nearly 50% of international students in Europe and one third of labour migrants (Hamedanian, 2022). However, policies fail to account for women as skilled migrants, focussing instead on women only as family migrants who are assumed to lack labour market skills (Baeyens et al., 2020; Dumitru, 2014). Non-EU students pursuing advanced degrees also face low retention in local labour markets (Mosneaga and Winther, 2013; NBB, 2020). Irregular migrants, despite their participation on the labour market (Fox-Ruhs and Ruhs, 2022), are often only seen through a lens of threat or vulnerability (Polychroniou, 2021). The portrayal of Ukrainian refugees in 2022 as skilled and educated and thus deserving of humanitarian intervention from the EU, contrasts sharply with how irregular migrants from the Middle East or African countries are treated (De Coninck, 2022; Ellison and Andrews, 2022; OECD, 2022).

Focusing on “skilled” migration suggests that merit is limited only to those who meet certain quantifiable standards (Levatino, 2012; Liu-Farrer et al., 2021). This also furthers the assumptions of meritocracy embedded in neoliberal capitalism (Hearn, 2021). Given the implicit and often explicit way in which skill appears to be a proxy for gender, race and ethnicity (Liu-Farrer et al., 2021), we examine the assumptions around skill from the perspective of migrants. This dissertation is structured around in-depth semi-structured interviews with 110 non-EU migrants who arrived in Europe after 2000, 17 expert interviews with practitioners and policymakers and findings from related fieldwork in Belgium, Sweden, and France (Calais). Our methodology centres lived experience as evidence and reflects on migration theories and policies through the strategies of migrants.

The study begins by scrutinising the sorting mechanisms of migration categories. In the EU, migrants are grouped at the very outset based on the distinction between legal and illegal migration; legal migration is further bifurcated into labour migrants, students, family migrants, asylum seekers and others. These seemingly common-sense categories form the basis on which each group is then treated by host countries and EU directives. Skill becomes a bordering mechanism and shapes the material conditions under which power is constructed and hierarchies are maintained. Our approach critiques rigid migration categories (legal/illegal, skilled/unskilled) that affect migrant rights and integration, finding instead that these classifications perpetuate inequality and precarity (Dahinden et al., 2021; Brubaker, 2013; Grommé and Scheel, 2020; Kunz, 2020).

To foreground skills among demographic groups often silenced in this discussion, we question how discourses also invisibilise people. Our methodological approach draws inspiration from research that calls for blurring interdisciplinary boundaries (Christou and Kofman, 2022) and we engage with a gamut of empirical and theoretical studies. This includes literature on the economic contribution of migrants, the legal framework of Human Rights, feminist studies on migration polices and post-colonial studies on the role of place and space in the hierarchies of skill.

Looking at categories from the perspective of our respondents we found direct corelations between categories assigned at the time of migration and accruing disadvantages throughout the integration process over the course of several years. Categories are bordering (Dahinden et al., 2021), performative and polyvalent (Brubaker, 2013; Grommé and Scheel, 2020; Kunz, 2020) and blinding (Kofman, 2000) as previous literature has argued. In addition, we find that while there is little room for dynamism in how migrants are categorised, categories themselves are responsive to the priorities of governance.

Categorisation through policies constantly makes exceptions to meet specific labour market demands at different moments in time. This alerts us to the sliding scale from disdain to desirability that migrants are slotted along. We find that these are not disparate perspectives but co-constitute each other – the rejection of one group of migrants on the basis of (their perceived lack of) skills is reinforced by the acceptance and valorisation of another group assumed to be highly skilled.

Our findings indicate that lived experience has rich and nuanced insights to offer on this discussion. Experiences indicate an urgent need to rethink the segregation of migration and integration under two separate policy-levels/competencies and, increasingly, theoretical umbrellas. As the terms of access to the labour market become a key aspect of migrant categorisation, we see how permits given at the time of migration become an enduring hurdle for years to come. In this schematic, migration categories become embroiled with ideas of skill to hierarchise, invisibilise and cause degrees of precarity among migrants. Our findings concur with literature that these processes come about at conjunctions of gender, race, class and other markers of difference that are deployed through the discourse of skill (Christou and Kofman, 2022; Naumann et al., 2018; Raghuram, 2021; Riaño, 2011; Sandoz and Hercog, 2018). However, we found that migrants are not passive recipients of these processes but can also be policy-aware and pragmatic, often strategising around policies to access channels to meet their aspirations. Building on literature on aspirations and agency, we explore the underpinnings of a framework of strategic migration. To think of migration strategies brings together both, the strategic decision-making behind policies, such as the expansion of the skills corridors in light of sector-wide shortages, and the strategic pathways that migrants adopt in the face of constraints. Doing so might offer a vocabulary removed from high/low skills, highlight continuities between macro level policies and individual level choices, and connect the dots between migration and integration.

As we unpack our findings on skills and work our way towards new understandings of migration, we find epistemic value in the term *strategy* and hypothesise if, perhaps, thinking in terms of *strategic migration* might offer a more inclusive vocabulary for mobility.