Normal and Risky Transitions: the role of gender, education and capital in skilled migration in Australia

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Abstract

Australia's skilled migration program since 1996 has seen rising numbers of migrants settling in regional areas of Australia but census data suggests the skills of migrant women with post-secondary education are underutilised, resulting in potential social exclusion. The research discussed is part of a wider program of NCVER funded work, which looks at education and training, social inclusion and geographical location. The presentation draws on mainly qualitative data from more than 70 interviews conducted with skilled migrant participants and members of a range of groups and organizations, which work with migrants. The interviews reveal that settlement and securing employment commensurate with skill levels and previous employment histories are particularly difficult for secondary applicants, especially women, and those skilled migrants who have broken with their previous social and employment networks. The analysis draws on social capital theory in developing the idea that for some the transition is relatively normal and straightforward, while for others it is more risky.

Introduction

The past twenty years has seen the growth of a globally mobile workforce of skilled migrants who emigrate seeking better career opportunities and living conditions in the developed countries, such as the United States, the European Union, Canada and Australia. Since 1996, Australia's migration program has aimed to recruit some of these skilled migrants, on either a temporary or permanent basis, to 'fill gaps in the labour market where they currently exist' (Phillips & Spinks 2012, p.16). Once settled in Australia, these migrants are expected to gain employment readily because of their high levels of education and their English language proficiency and thereby contribute to economic growth. However, such an assumption reflects a view of migration as an individual enterprise characterised by an efficient transfer of skills and capital from one country to another.

The majority of skilled migrant households who settle in Australia do so in metropolitan areas, although since 2004 policy at both state and federal levels has encouraged skilled migrants to settle in regional Australia to fill skills shortages, to assist regional economic development and to redirect migrants away from congested capital cities (Phillips & Spinks 2012). In the years 2000 to 2006, 11.2% of migrants (n= 96,026) settled in areas outside metropolitan regions (ABS 2006 Census). Many regional organisations, such as area health services, are reliant on overseas trained professionals to provide basic services to the communities they serve. Finding suitable employment is more challenging for those in regional areas, particularly for secondary applicants. While increasing numbers of these secondary applicants are men, the majority are women, often highly skilled.

Women's experiences as migrants are shaped profoundly by their gender. Their migration status, commonly as secondary applicant, means that their skills and existing knowledge may not be recognised in their new country. However, the existing literature on migratory flows tends to tell a story of male migration: 'women (dis)appear' or they are relegated to the family reunion flow (Kofman & Raghuram 2005, p.149; and see also Kofman 2000 & 2004; Kofman et. al. 2000; Kofman & Raghuram 2006; Yuval-Davis & Kofman 2005). As a consequence, frequently the aspirations, needs and outcomes for migrant women in regard to work and learning are under-recognised in skilled migration policies in many countries (Curran et al. 2006; McCall 2000). The skills of migrant women in regional Australia are more likely to be underutilised, with many migrant women under or unemployed (Colic-Peisker & Tilbury 2006; Devos 2011). As with female migrants who are unable to find work, the inability of male secondary applicants to find suitable employment may also contribute to

household decisions to relocate to a metropolitan area (Hugo & Harris 2011), leading to a more troubled transition to settlement for a migrant household. The limited research to date suggests that skilled migrants, may be more likely to be unemployed or inappropriately employed, highlighting the challenges migrants face in finding employment that utilises their skills and qualifications (see for example ABS 2009, 2010).

The focus of this paper is on the migratory transition of skilled migrant households, particularly for women and for secondary applicants, in one regional Victorian location. It draws qualitative research conducted for a NCVER funded research project which investigated the transition to education, employment and settlement for migrant households.

Migratory journeys

The conceptualisation of the migratory journey as a process draws on ideas from the international migration research literature on the study of social networks. Thinking of the migratory journey in this way focuses on the roles of policy frameworks, particularly the visa categories through which they enter; the geographies of their new location and the opportunities available; the way migrant households negotiate the frames and the new context, learn and build new capabilities; and the inclusionary and exclusionary practices which are employed by the range of organisations and networks within this location.

This research literature has a history dating back to the 1960s and 1970s when social researchers identified the role of social factors in patterns of migration. Migration and specific migration flows were no longer regarded as the consequence of push and pull factors operating on individual rational actors in the sending and receiving countries. Instead attention turned to the social and economic factors that encouraged people to move and specifically supported shifts and changes in the popularity of migration between different sending and receiving countries. Metaphors such as the migratory chain were invoked to represent a process whereby different networks came into play in different contexts. Family and friends were regarded as significant players in providing information and resources to facilitate migration and support the development of a migratory chain (see Boyd, 1989 for overview).

Households are often seen as the starting point for examining individual decision-making because they mediate between a micro-level understanding of how individuals and groups are connected to specific social networks over space and time and the structural factors that affect individual decisions (Fawcett 1989; Hagan 1998; Portes 1997; Portes & Böröcz 1989). Recently, the concept of social network has been more closely examined to reveal the differential effects networks have on migrant communities. This work has been informed by research exploring the role of social capital in the migration process (see Ryan, 2011 for an overview of this recent scholarship). Attention has focused on the role of bonding and bridging social capital, a distinction that has tended to be understood as meaning bonding involves maintaining close ties with people who are similar and bridging involves developing links into new networks of people, locations and activities Field, 2003; Webb, 2004). Utilising the conceptual framework of a migratory journey and acknowledging the effects of bridging and bonding social capital on the available and useable resources arising from peoples' social networks, the migratory process can be characterised as both a personal and structural transition. Also by analysing how bridging and bonding capital affects the resources people can use, the transition can be envisaged as ranging from 'untroubled' to 'risky'. An 'untroubled' transition implies a smoother process to settlement while 'risky' may mean that an individual and his or her family must take more risks than they had imagined. We do not consider these terms as implying judgements as to the happiness or personal satisfaction of individual migrants, but view these as illustrating systemic features, which assist or hinder the migrant trajectory. While migrants themselves tend to think in terms of their individual happiness and satisfaction, at the level of policy the focus is on 'systemic

outcomes' (ABS 2012b). Thinking of settlement in terms of untroubled or risky trajectories, or on a continuum between these, helps highlight the relative social position of migrants and those others they encounter in the destination society, as well as the regulatory contexts and the resources they can muster within specific social networks and organisations.

The terms 'untroubled' and 'risky' draw on the concepts of 'normal biography' and 'choice biography' from the Bourdieusian influenced literature on the school to higher education transition (eg, Ball et al. 2002, p.57, citing Du Bois-Reymond 1998; Ball 2006). This approach to examining networks and social capital in transitions, in contrast to the work of Coleman and Putnam, brings into greater focus the concepts of power, conflict and economic inequality in social networks. In a 'normal biography', the progression to higher education is an expected transition, one which requires decisions only as to the choice of institution. The capital of family and class enable a smooth progression. For students without such capital, decisions must be made in an environment where options are limited by insufficient knowledge, financial constraints, and inability to project a pathway to a desired outcome (Ball et al. 2002). These students negotiate social structures from a weak position against others who understand how to employ their capital to attain outcomes more likely to result in successful entry to higher-status institutions and networks. The risks of failing rise for students without sufficient capital.

These concepts also illuminate facets of the migratory transition. For migrants to achieve successful inclusion in education and work that matches their aspirations and qualifications, a similar process applies. Those who have the capital to negotiate the regulatory process and to build networks in the new context, particularly those linked to their profession, are more likely to have an untroubled progression, one that mirrors a 'normal biography'. For others, who lack the capital to discern the nature of the regulatory process and the pathways towards academic achievement, successful employment and inclusion, the migratory experience may be much riskier, leading to downward mobility, a loss of professional status and a foreclosing of future possibilities. And this outcome may be in spite of the existence of strong ties to family, friendship or community-based networks to support their transition and settlement in the destination society.

We recognise that 'untroubled' and 'risky' can be construed in a number of ways but they depict particular types of transitions emerging in the case study. The terms 'untroubled' and 'risky' function to depict the factors within the individual's migration narrative which interact with the different levels of the migratory system and work to advance or limit her inclusion more broadly. We contend that these processes are mediated by gender, class and race, but individuals negotiate these in different ways rather than being determined by them.

Research methodology

Our focus is the nature of the migratory transitions experienced by different migrant households and the factors that enhanced a normal transition or contributed to a riskier transition. We draw from a wider National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) funded research project on VET and social inclusion. A qualitative approach was chosen in order to contribute to a better understanding of the strategies migrants used and the opportunities afforded by different social networks and the resources or capital available or realisable. We adopted a case study approach to the research with an in-depth study of one Victorian city and its wider region, utilising field work which consisted of focus groups and individual narrative interviews with 24 migrant women and 12 male migrant partners who identified themselves as skilled migrants This meant that the primary applicant had entered Australia under this visa category and in most cases had a tertiary education qualification. Participants were self selected or selected through a snowball method. We paid careful attention to ensuring we covered the range of recently arrived overseas born people in the region indicated by census data on recent arrivals to the case study of Greater Shepparton.

Interviews were also conducted with 35 members from 20 different employers and organisations who worked with skilled migrants in a variety of capacities, including governmental, employer and service organisations, voluntary groups and educational and training institutions in the region. Interviews were transcribed and the interview data was analysed and thematically grouped, forming the basis of the findings presented in this paper. In the later stage of the research, two workshops were conducted in which preliminary findings were presented to gain feedback from some migrant participants and members of participating organisations in order to develop the findings further.

The regional case

The regional city of Greater Shepparton was selected as the site for the research as it has a rich history of immigration from other parts of the world, and more recently has been selected for planned immigration programs. The analysis of secondary data and literature available to date about the regional case confirmed that Greater Shepparton provided an interesting case to examine the research questions. The extensive history of international and internal migration to this region and the experience that different governmental, non governmental and education and training organisations may have gained in aiding successive waves of settlement suggest that there may be much to learn from this region. At the same time, recent census data indicates that the migration flows to this region have been changing significantly during the past decade. Government policy at Commonwealth, State and regional level have contributed to these changing flows and to the types of services that have been made available to support education and training and the settlement of new migrants, including those with high level skills. Nevertheless, census data pointed to some underemployment and skill underutilisation of skilled migrants, especially women, confirming the need for research that investigated the process of social inclusion in such a location (ABS 2012, 2006).

Maintaining professional networks, a normal transition

Australia's skilled migration policy, premised as it is on the individual, is not designed to be socially inclusive of the members of the household who enter as dependants. There were noticeable differences in outcomes therefore according to whether or not the migrant had entered as a dependent, whether they were female or male, although as we have already noted, the majority of dependents are female. Therefore, visa categories were one element that played a significant role in the trajectories experienced by our participants. The maintenance of professional links which occurred when an individual entered under an employer-sponsored visa and with employer-provided settlement support contributed to a smoother transition than was the case for applicants under some other categories. The professional networks of the primary applicant in these households were maintained, contributing to a sense of continuity.

> There's no difference for me, I get into the car and come to work. [Vinayak, male, primary applicant]

The assistance provided by employers who hired skilled migrants through a sponsorship arrangement also aided a family's transition to their new location.

> The hospital... gave us a house for a while, which was furnished. So you didn't need to worry immediately about getting things... We just settled in. [Roshan, female, secondary applicant]

A number of our participants came from households where one member was employed on an employer sponsored visa and while the secondary applicant often experienced difficulty in finding suitable employment or in adjusting to the regional location, the employment of one member supported the family which meant less immediate financial pressure.

It was a big time gap between Ireland and Australia... and we felt we had difficulty, she has to work after three days. But compared to refugee people's problems, we are lucky because we got a job here, so we didn't face any financial troubles... The initial four or five months it was very difficult for me to find a job. [Moncey, male, secondary applicant]

At the same time, continuity in employment also assisted in the development of new networks, which in some cases provided access into local networks which assisted in supporting the transition for family members.

The previous manager who used to be here and they helped us a lot so a lot of credit goes to their families that support my wife and children. So they used to come and take every day to make sure that she is not feeling lonely and everything, so that was fantastic support I got from my other colleagues in the organisation, so that went very well. [Vinayak, male, primary applicant]

Disrupted professional networks, a risky transition

For those who arrived in Australia as permanent skilled migrants seeking employment, the transition could be much more difficult. Skills and experience gained overseas were seldom accepted by employers and the households were under immediate financial pressure to accept whatever job they could find to support their families, particularly as they were usually ineligible for benefits payments for the first two years. Expectations of a smooth transition did not eventuate for several of these households, and often if children were involved, the female partner bore the brunt of child-care while the male partner tried to find employment.

We both came on skilled migration visas, thinking that we'll instantly get jobs in our areas and all that. But we had to obviously change our thinking... He was going to low levels, trying to find a job, because obviously, he had a wife and child to feed. [Aanchal, female, secondary applicant]

The biggest problem you face is that when you come here they do need experience and the experience that you have is from overseas. Probably is not considered as important or relevant to here. [Satwinder, female, secondary applicant]

I worked at a lot of odd jobs. I worked at Safeway for 3 months or 2 months... My husband was working as a handyman. We're both doctors okay, but we came here but the jobs don't come to you on a plate. It takes time. [Fauzia, female, secondary applicant]

I wanted to find out any job because it was the starting point, and I needed to for the living as well, although my husband was working at that time, for him as well it was very hard to get in, although he was a skilled migrant. [Archana, female, secondary applicant]

This search for work meant that these four households relocated from one area to another, including interstate and from metropolitan to regional locations as well as the reverse.

My husband had a friend in Sydney. So we came and lived with him for about six or seven weeks and that's when we started to look for job. And after six weeks or so, we got a job in Shepparton. And since then, we are here. [Aanchal, female, secondary applicant]

The complete rupture with their previous professional networks and the loss of capital that resulted meant that gaining work commensurate with their qualifications and experience became more difficult over time, often requiring requalification at a higher level or in a different field.

> I worked in a packing shed and things like that for some time, but then finally I decided that I need to probably go back to uni and I did a year of dip ed in primary. [Satwinder, female, secondary applicant]

The risky nature of their transition contrasted sharply with their expectations and for these migrants, proved more challenging and longer lasting than they had anticipated.

> We are on the road where we can't turn back, we only have to go forward... Sometimes, we think whether it was a wise decision or not... Migration has a huge influence on all aspects of life. It's not only your workforce, it's not only your personal relationships, it's every stage... It keeps on going. [Aanchal, female, secondary applicant]

Those who entered Australia on temporary visas and sought to remain once they had gained work faced a different set of challenges. Temporary visas restricted the opportunities open to them, including further education or training. For those on employer sponsored temporary visas, changing jobs was risky as their eligibility to remain in the country depended on their remaining with their employer.

> I was on a temporary business visa with them, so that was a little bit of a worry, because I couldn't just walk away... It wasn't a very nice working environment. I was struggling a bit, and they weren't treating me very well, and I felt that they tended to almost own me, because they got my visa, and I didn't really know how to move forward. [Elisabeth, female, sole applicant]

The process of gaining permanent residency from a variety of temporary categories was difficult and often risky, both financially and in terms of emotional demands.

> I have to manage 9,000 dollars to get permanency. So I was confused. If I not get PR, then my 9,000 is gone... it is not refunded. So I was confused at that time. This is my position of risk. Every time I took the risk, I'm successful. So I thought to just take one chance and see what happens. [Rohit, male, primary applicant]

> That was the barrier to get the permanent residency because you need a statement of accreditation from the body to say that this person is qualified to practise in Australia in this field. So we couldn't get that without the English... For three years my wife was getting 6.5 and the required level was 7 overall... The employer was really willing to give her a permanent job but you can't get a permanent job while you've got a temporary visa. You've got to be a permanent resident to get a permanent job. These things are inter-related. [James, male, secondary applicant]

Those migrants who were best able to negotiate this process and gain professional level employment were determined and resilient and found ways to build new local networks beyond their immediate family and friends or community groups. They identified the importance of assistance from an independent advisor, or from a supportive employer and described accessing these opportunities by chance through forming new networks through sports clubs or voluntary work.

Social networks – opportunities and barriers

The most successful transitions with the minimum of disruption occurred when an individual migrant's professional capabilities and networks were maintained through employment that built on and utilised their existing skills and experience through permanent employer sponsored categories; through immediately finding work in an industry or profession where there were existing skills shortages and high demand for those skills; and where professional networks developed through associations overseas or through local higher education institutions could be utilised. Such networks created bridging opportunities for migrants to

participate in the local Australian experience. At the same time, these networks acknowledged the transition migrants were undertaking. At their best these networks acknowledged the relevance of migrants' previous experience and enabled migrants to access new resources in Australia to realise their full potential in these new contexts.

> We were lucky because we came to an established job... the company looked after our relocation expenses and into a permanent secure job, so we've been very fortunate...There was a great amount of job satisfaction because you're coming and you're actually using your skills. [Stuart, male, secondary applicant]

> The fact that I went through the university and the university helped me and they did a couple of workshops to understand how people in Australia would see your career and your skills and how would you present those skills ... assisted me in that process of finding a job and do my profile that would fit this market, this country, this culture, because it's very different. [Yas, female, sole applicant]

> I'm quite lucky that when I arrive in Australia I didn't have to study for my skill because I was already doing drafting before I came here... but as soon as I arrived here I just send resumes and then I got calls for interviews and when I did have interview and that was it. So straight away. [Daphne, female, sole applicant]

Our findings suggest that it is necessary to consider migration as a family enterprise located in wider social networks. Successful settlement in regional areas, such as Shepparton, depended as much on the networks in place to support secondary applicants, as on the experiences of the primary applicants. These secondary applicants were male, as well as female, accompanying partners who had gained jobs in the region on either employer sponsored visas or as the partner of a principal applicant through the permanent skilled stream. Yet few formal agencies provided services for skilled migrants and their partners.

> I don't think for skilled migrants there are many support services. For refugee migrants, for others, we have many agencies working for them, but I don't know whether they have the assumption in their mind that skilled migrants will manage themselves. [Shalini, female, secondary applicant]

For these migrants, family and friends are the primary source of encouragement both pre- and post-migration. For many of our participants, these personal social networks provided valuable support to enable migrants to integrate socially and culturally into new communities and locations.

> We had this friend from India, who we had known for many years before coming here. So he and his wife were here. So it was no problem at all because they were there. We just settled in. [Roshan, female, secondary applicant]

> The first day I was here, I was thinking okay, how do I meet Filipinos and I just thought I have to go to church because we're all Catholics, most of us are Catholics in the Philippines so I went to church that Sunday and met a couple of Filipinos and from there I got phone calls from everyone saying, come to this, come to that so it was very easy for us. [Cecilia, female, secondary applicant]

Such networks provided opportunities to develop new friendships and to undertake activities to support other members of the community.

> The Mosque is one of the main places. And you'd pray for five minutes and after it you'd go and talk to them and we'd meet many people from that way. [Fauzia, female, secondary applicant]

> What else do I do at the club? I do volunteer brunch. I do applications for grants and things like that and help with those new ones coming here or anything they want to know. [Daphne, female, partner visa category]

Such activity clearly bonded people to particular ethnic and cultural enclaves but at the same time it provided opportunities to move out into wider social networks. For some of those participants who were active on a voluntary basis in a variety of religious and cultural groups, which supported new migrants as well as enhancing their own capacity and agency, their activities enabled them to build connections with other groups in the community, including the wider non-migrant society. Where the development of individual capacity within these groups contributed to a heightened engagement with the wider Australian community, several participants becoming involved with the political process at a local level as a result of their experiences over time in these religious and cultural groups.

> I'm running for council, because I know a lot of people and a lot of people have encouraged me to do that. It's just a good chance to have someone on the council that actually represents the actual community, a woman from a different country. [Abida, female, humanitarian visa]

Other network participation, which can be described as instrumental and designed to facilitate a move beyond the migrant's ethnic or cultural network, centred around specific and purposeful activities such as parents' groups at schools and sporting clubs. However, participation in these activities was often highly gendered with women more frequently mentioning schools and men more frequently (though not exclusively) mentioning sporting clubs. And noteworthy is that when these connections did lead to employment, the work opportunities associated with schools and childrens' networks tended to be in traditional more female dominated and lower level labour markets, than the work opportunities that arose through networks and labour market intelligence obtained through sporting clubs.

> And then first of February, the children went to school. And then the school ... had organised a morning tea with six other new mums, which was very, very nice. They were all in my circumstances. They'd all come here because of their husbands' jobs. [Damayanti, female, secondary applicant]

> For a year I did some running for the footy club, what they call a trainer. That meant that I know every plumber, every electrician. I know them all from the footy club. [Robert, male, secondary applicant]

In a small city, information can be transmitted through these routes rather than be made public. Through becoming part of such a group a migrant can pursue a particular interest through which they may gain contacts with others who share the same interest, but within these circuits they also hear about opportunities in relation to employment or to other networks from which they may otherwise be excluded. Often these social networks were the main sources of information for a migrant's transition into employment in her new country, thereby, demonstrating a continuation of the informal methods of job seeking and routes to employment that may have been used prior to migration.

> One of my friends she works here, so I just talked to her ... luckily they had that position, because she was working there and she was to reduce her hours, so then she said that if you are interested I can talk to someone in my office. [Shalini, female, secondary applicant]

However, for those who arrive lacking family or friends in their new environment, it can be difficult to establish new networks especially beyond their immediate cultural group. If they have family responsibilities and have lost the support they may otherwise have had in their country of origin, female secondary applicants were most likely to report that the first years can be very difficult, increasing the risk of a less successful transition.

> When we came here, I felt so isolated. And I was a stay at home mum for more than two years and in the meantime, I had my second baby. After I had my second baby, when my in-laws were here to support us, then I started to work. [Aanchal, female, secondary applicant]

Conclusion

Despite all efforts to attract and retain skilled migrants into regional areas, if members of a family are unhappy, the family will not remain. Feeling part of a community is one part of the settlement process for which informal networks of support can aid the transition into new social and cultural ways of living. But the focus on social networks solely in relation to a migrant's sense of belonging to a community disguises the complex role networks play in bonding and bridging migrants into different opportunities, particularly employment. While government provided settlement services exist for humanitarian migrants to support them as they build new lives in Australia, there are no services provided on a systemic level to assist skilled migrants, who enter through other visa streams, into employment. Instead, in their settlement transitions, skilled migrants draw heavily on informal networks of support, either those developed pre-migration or those they build post-migration. Skilled migrants are resourceful and work to build new networks. However, the process of rebuilding was often gendered and culturally differentiated, resulting in different opportunities being generated for migrants from different countries and regions of origin, sometimes segmenting migrants into networks and activities dominated by Australians and those dominated by migrants of a similar ethnic or cultural type. The process of enabling new network building can be enhanced when local networks are welcoming and offer opportunities for migrants from different backgrounds to connect to others in the wider community. Those migrants who were adept at network boundary crossing and had been able to retain or rebuild their professional capital in the Australian context reduced the risks of downward mobility and social exclusion. Cultural and professional capital, educational background and a capability to be creative and agentic across network boundaries enabled migrants to quickly develop an understanding of how the formal processes of job recruitment and education and training opportunities operate in Australia and resulted in a normal transition.

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