

Satellite Migration – Conceptualising High-Skilled Migration Beyond Existing Approaches and Disciplinary Silos

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Abstract *This commentary contends that prevailing migration theories struggle to explain the career-driven, recurrent mobility of highly skilled migrants (HSM). Bridging migration and organizational studies, the authors introduce 'satellite migration': HSM orbit among organizational-national "gravitational fields," where the strength of embedding tightens or loosens orbits and misalignment triggers 'escape velocity' to new destinations. While sharing barriers and recognition needs with other migrants, HSM's transferable capital and legal latitude produce distinctive post-mobility dynamics, motivating a cross-disciplinary reframing of high-skilled migration.*

INTRODUCTION

Highly skilled migrants (HSM) have recently become a prominent group in global migration flows, marking a significant shift both in migration practice and research.¹ We define HSM specifically as highly educated (at least master's degree) professionals (managerial or specialist tasks) that migrate for career abroad for a new job (labour migration) that is adequate to their professional and educational background (no deskilling or devaluation of qualifications). This specific definition is narrower than that used in other research on HSM. However, it enables us to focus on HSM who are legally and officially permitted to move around their profession multiple times for career development. Despite their growing numerical significance and societal impact, existing theoretical frameworks within migration studies have proven insufficient to capture and explain the distinctiveness of HSM's spatial experiences,² trajectories, future mobility aspects³ and societal positioning.⁴

OVERVIEW OF EXISTING THEORIES

Throughout our work on the research project 'SkillsINCORP - ensuring retention of high-skilled professionals in Denmark' we have engaged with different theoretical approaches within the field of migration studies that address the issues surrounding migration, such as the perception and experience of the move itself, settling somewhere, adapting to the changes that follow a move, disconnecting and reconnecting to places and people, etc. Within the project we addressed, among other things, i) the transferability of capitals across borders;⁵ ii) the flexibility and entrainment of belonging and recognition;⁶ and iii) the intersection of professional and personal wellbeing after migration.⁷ Our review of the existing social scientific concepts within the migration and integration literatures can be roughly divided into three main groups:

1) The assimilation and integration theories, traditional and historically dominant concepts within migration research. They largely assume permanence of residence, linear processes of cultural adaptation, and eventual absorption into a host society.⁸ However, these concepts fall short when applied to HSM, whose migratory journeys often entail temporariness, significant mobility, and considerable socio-economic resources.⁹ Highly skilled migrants, characterized by their advanced educational qualifications, professional expertise, and heightened mobility, often view migration not as a singular, permanent relocation, but rather as

an ongoing, flexible process intimately tied to career advancement and personal aspirations.¹⁰

2) The concepts of transnationalism and superdiversity,¹¹ a response to the limitations of assimilation and integration theories. While transnationalism highlights the significance of sustained connections across national boundaries¹² and superdiversity emphasizes complex layers of difference within contemporary migrant populations,¹³ neither provides a sufficiently robust analytic framework to detail the unique interplay of agency, temporality, and positionality that characterizes HSM.¹⁴

3) The concepts of embedding and anchoring, which seek to capture the fluidity, dynamism, and subjective dimensions of migration. Embedding, for instance, highlights how migrants build connections and attachments within multiple contexts (local, national, and transnational) and across a range of dimensions (social, professional, familial etc).¹⁵ Anchoring similarly emphasizes migrants' strategies for establishing stability and security in unfamiliar environments, reflecting the psychological need for orientation and belonging, and taking into consideration their agency for negotiating these.¹⁶ Nevertheless, even these recent innovations have their limits. They do not adequately address the potential of HSM to alter the structural contexts they engage with, through the specific relational demands they place on institutions and societies after the migration process. This may include, for example, the use of a third language (usually English), acknowledgement of their skills and contributions to the labour market and their companies, or other forms of official or unofficial recognition sought by HSMs. The HSM's leverage to achieve these changes is usually their ability to leave the country for a better opportunity abroad, thereby taking their skills and expertise elsewhere. This entitlement follows from their perceived agency and elevated status as highly skilled professionals who are invited into new places of

employment when they are selected from a transnational pool of talent.

LIMITATIONS OF EXISTING THEORIES

Recognizing these potential limitations within theory to date to capture the experiences of HSM, we propose there is space for a new framing that explicitly engages with the unique characteristics of HSM.¹⁷ Given HSMs' specific position, resources, demands and needs, it is essential to approach their study with a lens that accounts for the particular temporality shaping their lives (as seen in concepts like anchoring and embedding). HSM often do not remain in one location for extended periods of time, and are therefore not consistently embedded within the long-term structures of a single nation-state. Their relationship to space also differs, as they frequently benefit from the ability to travel internationally, often identifying as global citizens or individuals entitled to mobility for work, therefore inhabiting spaces that transcend national boundaries (as highlighted by transnationalism and superdiversity). We suggest that HSM, even if they do not see a new place of residence as permanent, will be seeking to evaluate how a relocation has the potential to offer them the possibilities for establishing a social position for themselves that is in line with, and will further facilitate their movement towards their imagined future trajectory, social status, and sense of identity.¹⁸ Moreover, the highly skilled nature of their qualifications and experiences must be central to any analytical framing, as these are in high demand, are seen as transferable across borders, as well as central to their self-identification, all of which affords them greater migration choices. As a result, HSM often possess greater agency within and after their migration process than other migrant groups—agency to shape their environments, and to leave when dissatisfied—which must be reflected in concepts that seek to make sense of their experiences. The agentic roles HSM play, and the relational dynamics they form with the spaces they inhabit, require deeper theoretical attention.

At the same time, HSM do share some important characteristics with other migrant groups. These include legal and policy structural barriers - such as difficulties in acquiring permanent residency or citizenship, and limited access to welfare services imposed by state policies - which varies in different national contexts. Additionally, social structures such as everyday experiences of discrimination, family dynamics, othering, and racialisation often form part of their lived realities.¹⁹ The universal human need for recognition²⁰—that is, the need to be emotionally supported, legally acknowledged, and socially valued—also connects HSM with other migrants and should form a core element in any extended framework that seeks to understand their post-mobility experiences. Furthermore, questions around whether HSM can achieve social mobility, secure social reproduction for their families, or face symbolic and economic status loss are just as relevant for them as for other migrant populations. In addition to these dimensions - temporality, spatiality, skills, privilege, agency, structural barriers, recognition, and social (im)mobility - we suggest that insights from adjacent research fields could enrich the conceptualisation of HSM experiences. For instance, business and management studies offer valuable perspectives on the 'incorporation of skills' as a reciprocal process, where both HSM and employers engage in mutual adaptation and understanding.²¹ This approach could inform sociologically grounded migration research by highlighting how professional integration and the co-creation of supportive work environments intersect with personal and private life experiences. Ultimately, the interplay between work and private spheres is likely to shape HSM's overall migration journey in complex and interdependent ways.

Acknowledging their continuous, multi-directional trajectories, sustained mobility, and professional-driven movements across different national and organizational contexts, means encountering different professional opportunities, institutional contexts, national policies, and social settings. These need to be analysed through an

understanding of how structural forces shape possibilities for individual agency, and are in turn potentially altered by HSM and their growing presence in workplaces, residential communities and cities around the world. Our study of contemporary high-skilled migration suggests the need to engage with existing approaches and concepts, but also extend the conceptual tools and framings at our disposal, bringing together ideas from migration studies as well as business and organisation literatures.

INTRODUCING THE CONCEPT OF SATELLITE MIGRATION

This has led us to developing the metaphor of satellite migration that works within a transnational frame and uses embedding to make sense of why and when future mobility is enacted in a multiple migration trajectory that characterises the HSM group we have studied. Borrowing from ideas from astrophysics, the metaphor of satellite migration in a social context conceptualizes HSM as orbiting between gravitational fields—each comprised of a unique configuration that is determined by the specific company and position they move into, and the broader structures of the city/country to which they move. These fields then exert varying degrees of gravity, understood as the strength of the social and professional embedding an HSM experiences. Their paths—orbits—can widen or contract based on how embedded they feel in their current location and job. The more embedded they are, the tighter the orbit; the more dis-embedded, the looser their connection—and the closer they move to being taken up by an escape velocity. The escape velocity is the threshold at which the HSM decides to or feels compelled to leave one gravitational field for another. Using the idea of a satellite migrant recognizes that while HSM may appear to be globally mobile, their decisions are never made in a vacuum. Their lives and future plans are shaped by the push and pull of company culture, career prospects, bureaucratic regimes, accessibility to work and social environments formed by language, family obligations, and ideological alignment with

national values (e.g., support for welfare, commitment to sustainability, cultures of inclusion). This new metaphor accommodates multiple moves, hybrid identities, professional aspirations, and contextual dis-embedding.

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