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## No One Size Fits All: Key Debates in Transnationalism Research

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### **Migrants' mobilities in the transnational world**

The world is made mobile by the large flows of one billion asylum seekers, international students, terrorists, tourists and professional migrants (Sheller & Urry, 2006). The United Nations (UN, 2016, p. 1) noted that the global number of refugees (mostly from Syria, Afghanistan and Somalia) increased to 19.5 million in 2014. Turkey, Pakistan, Lebanon and Iran were the largest receiving nations. Political and economic turmoils are said to be the major cause for this exodus. In addition, this flow is now turning from less developed countries to more developed countries, forming the South-North migration (Castles & Miller, 2009), as well as from/to and within Asia and Europe. While many European countries have been popular receiving countries, labour market shortages in newly developing economies in Asia and the Middle East have initiated large flows within and between many other regions of the world (UN, 2016).

The geographical extension of migration is created by the increasing growth of migrants many of whom try to lengthen their stay for different pursuits. In addition to less skilled labour movements, flows of highly skilled workers seem to be a response to demands from international employers and global skilled labour shortages. The flow of highly skilled people and wealthy business people is supported by the permanent and temporary visa schemes, but barriers are created to control the flow of unskilled and poor migrants (Castles & Miller, 2009). People move because of their personal pursuits, while others may be forced to move because of pressures from governments' political agendas, environmental risks and plagues. Mobilities seem to become an asset when they can support migrants in terms of meeting their personal and/or governments' demands.

Within the context of possibilities and constraints in migration, this paper presents some key debates in transnationalism research. Its purposes are two-fold. First, it can be served as a review of current research on transnationalism issues. The body of research mainly argues that migrants' transnational ties allow them to sustain their mobilities making migration an on-going process. Second, under the effects of migrants' uses of transnational ties, their mobilities are negotiated and made sense through their entwinement in the world.

This has urged researchers to employ embodied approaches to understanding the meanings of migration. Various aspects of migrants' lives such as familial responsibilities, personal motives for mobilities, expectations of employment, etc. are examined in relation to effects of policy discourse, regimes of mobility, social structures and cultural practices and economic conditions. Under a transnationalism lens, all are examined across space and time. In other words, these aspects are explored through migrants' embeddedness in the intersecting social milieu and personal domains. This interrelatedness may arise some problems because it requires researchers to follow an integrative approach. Currently, this approach is not well informed. It results in some controversy over effects of gender roles, methodologies and

some dualities. This paper primarily points out these debates in order to call for studies that attend to resolving them, looking for a reasonable way to enrich current understandings of this social phenomenon.

### **Various units of analysis in transnationalism research**

Transnationalism refers to processes in which migrants “forge and sustain multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement” (Basch, Glick-Schiller, & Blanc-Szanton, 1996, p. 7).

Transnational practices are materialised through “sustained ties of persons, networks and organizations that are said to cross “the borders [of] multiple nation-states” (Faist, 2000, p. 189). Through daily life activities, migrants maintain familial, economic, political and cultural ties across international borders, making “the home and host societies a single arena of social action” (Foner, 1997, p. 335). Transnationalism is not a novel phenomenon. Multiple histories of migration journeys, with examples of early European migration to Australia or Asian migrants to the US and other parts of Asia, are evident of transnational ties. However, transnationalism is increasingly facilitated by global advances of communication and transportation technologies, as well as practices of migration and diaspora policies, creating new processes and dynamics involved in transnational connections and practices.

Transnationalism views migration as an ongoing process shaped by multi-level influences from migrants’ interactions in demographic, political, economic, as well as cultural and familial domains. It is studied through mixed scales of analysis involving individual migrants, networks of social relations, communities in host and home societies, and broader institutionalised structures such as local and national governments, economic enterprises and political parties (Basch, Glick-Schiller, & Blanc-Szanton, 1996; Conradson & Latham, 2005; Faist, 2000; Portes, Guarnizo, & Landolt, 1999; Vertovec, 2009). Some studies look into activities of state-sponsored transnational organisations that influence migrants’ mobilities, as governments realise the importance of expatriate communities for contributions as well as political support (Portes, Guarnizo, & Landolt, 1999, p. 220). Another stream of research explores transnational activities that immigrants and their descendants are involved, such as the sending of remittances, communication and political engagement (e.g. Basch, Glick-Schiller, & Blanc-Szanton, 1996; Yeoh, Leng, Dung, & Yi’en, 2013). Some studies engage with migrants and their descendants’ cultural transfer from the West to the East and vice versa (e.g. Gowricharn, 2009).

Migrants’ interactions with the world influence the ways they experience migration. At the macro-level, their mobilities are influenced by political, economic and social forces on global and national scales (Castles, 2010). At a micro-level, migrants live their lives in relation to other people such as families and friends. They may employ various strategies for relocation, influenced not only by family members, but also by socio-economic, cultural and political conditions in both home and host societies (see Baas, 2010; Biao, 2007; Robertson, 2008; Singh, Robertson, & Cabraal,

2012). Such influences may arise from more than one domain within the national scale. Examining confluences of macro-contextual conditions as well as family and personal circumstances in social and geographical settings becomes significant in unpacking migrants' embodied mobilities. Instead of perceiving migrants as being pushed and pulled by socio-political structures in a single place as implied in government reports, a transnational lens acknowledges the embodiment of migrants' relations to the world. It provides insights into how migrants embody transnational mobilities through their embeddedness in transnational spaces.

Despite different foci and research settings, most studies on transnational connections and practices examine "everyday practices" of mobilities through the history and activities of individual migrants (Conradson & Latham, 2005, p. 228). By placing the central emphasis on how migrants use networks and relationships to make sense of migration, transnationalism literature tends to look at the "binary interaction" of migrants in host and home societies (Favell, 2008, p. 270). Studies informed by transnationalism view migrants as active selves who manoeuvre within the state regulation and policy landscapes, as well as cross-border relations with others (Guarnizo & Smith, 1998, p. 7). Research on transnationalism often takes an embodied perspective by exploring the settings and contexts where migrants live their lives in relation to others. The embodied approach to understanding transnational mobilities can provide insights into complex desires, experiences and emotions of migrants, challenging research that relies on statistics alone (Dunn, 2010, pp. 1-2). This approach looks into migrants' webs of interactions with others across various scales and geographical settings. Migrants are embedded in interconnected "social complexities" (Piper, 2009, p. 95) featuring actors and institutions on scales that constitute a global migration industry, as well as social influences of gender, ethnicity, religion and family issues. This requires migration researchers to go beyond the sole examination of places to that of migrants' relations with others in the intersecting social-personal domains in various scales.

Nevertheless, according to Portes, Guarnizo and Landolt (1999), transnationalism research forms a "highly fragmented" field without a "well-defined theoretical framework and analytical rigour" (p. 218). The issue is related to the requirement to take an interdisciplinary approach. They also point out that transnationalism tends to examine cross-border activities and relationships as the rest of the population do once in a while with their known people and relatives overseas. This critique has also been taken up by Itzigsohn and colleagues (1999), who argue that investigations of migrants' occasional contacts are neither novel nor sufficiently distinct. Contacts with families and communities in home countries and establishing relationships with those in the same ethnicity in host societies have not been new, from political diasporas to labour migration (Cohen, 1997). Instead, the high intensity of social exchanges, modes of transactions, and multiplication of activities can contribute to understandings of how migrants' transnational

relationships make sense on a regular and sustained basis. The current tendency in transnationalism research that mixes various units of analysis creates further confusion to what transnationalism actually refers to and what its scope of predication is.

In general, by taking a transnationalism lens, researchers need to cover a wide range of scopes and aspects that influence migrants' negotiations of mobilities. They must explore influences of factors from macro- to mezzo- and micro-level on migrants' lives. How can one size fit all? This lens does not offer a well-defined framework and seems to lack reflections on disruptions and disjunctures during migration. It tends to acknowledge mobilities as a result of migrants' subjectivities but does not consider mobilities as a result of social and political practices, symbolic representations or artefacts (de Jong & Dannecker, 2018). This leads to confusion over uses of a clear approach to exploring interrelated migrants' transformations on different scales in different domains. The following sections illustrate some of the ambiguous approaches to exploring these transformations under transnationalism perspectives that lead to seemingly unsolvable debates.

### **Gender roles**

Previous research on female migration have used various units of analysis including households and social networks to understand and theorize how social networks could be used as a resource for development of migrants' social relationships. The interlinked units of analysis in these studies also show how female migrants gain personal autonomy through social remittances, how female labour migrants sustain emotionalities through transnational house holding and how migration could enhance spousal relations (e.g. Yeoh, Leng, Dung, & Yi'en, 2013). By taking transnationalism as the theoretical framework to capture transformations of the family and household through migration, these studies collectively put forward the central influence of emotions of individual migrants.

However, what units of analysis should be examined is very much dependent upon migrants' specific contexts, and this is where confusion arises. For example, at the family level, influences of migrants' domestic roles and interactions with family members may constrain or open up opportunities for their negotiations of transnational mobilities. Biao (2005 & 2007) shows that the costs for education-related migration are offset by male Indian skilled migrants and their ability to call upon the value of dowries to fund their studies in Western countries. This not only guarantees the migration of their spouses, but also brings status to the bridal families in home communities. Through their interactions with people in familial and communal aspects, skilled migrants experience possibilities and constraints emerging from their encounter with gender relations. These influences shape their uses of dowries in their home communities at present, choices of information technology (IT) programs in Western countries and migration prospects after future graduation. Their negotiations of this socio-cultural norm in India illustrate how they are embedded in current time that shapes their decisions to migrate

and expectations of future migration to Western countries. In this sense, cultural norms should be investigated in relation to gender roles.

A strand of research, often before the 2000s, has portrayed the notions of females moving as “secondary” or “tied” (Yeoh & Willis, 2005, p. 211) migrants whose employment prospects and practices are constrained by domestic responsibilities. Paying little heed to female migrants’ social identities and professional aspects, some studies conceptualise female migration as being included in family migration which is initiated by the search for higher household (or family) incomes. Female migrants are often described as agreeing to “sacrifice” their career prospects, so that the family can “reap the post-migration benefits obtained by the “male breadwinner” (Boyle, Halfacree & Smith, 1999, p. 114). The migrant image as a male who is seen as being “disembodied and disembedded from contexts such as familial or household relationships” (Kofman, 2000, p. 53) narrows the focus of migration studies to an exploration of cost-benefit rationality of migrants. Approaching from a transnationalism in their study of Vietnamese bridal migrants in Singapore, Yeoh and colleagues (2013) extend understandings of development by highlighting the meanings of cultural practices and family duties included in remittances and gifts. They show complex emotions in reconciling economic pressures in these migrants’ marital families to send remittances and gifts to their natal families in accordance with cultural practices of filial piety. While these migrants strive to re-construct their position in their families as “dutiful” (p. 451) daughters and sisters and produce status for their families in the community, they have to negotiate conflicts with their husbands in terms of accessing the financial resources in Singapore. Through their uses of remittances and gifts, they reposition themselves in relation to others in interrelated familial and social domains. In addition, Willis and Yeoh’s (2000) work on Singaporean migration to China reveal that some migration decisions are made by the husbands and for the husbands’ employment, whereas wives are given little voice in this process. They may follow their husbands to China, stay in Singapore, or accompany as housewives as household strategies. In this vein, through their interactions with family members, female migrants may face patriarchy as a socio-cultural norm that affects their career aspirations and possibilities.

Other studies have mapped things and their uses in relation to other artefacts and people in familial, social, educational and legal domains. For example, Singh, Robertson and Cabraal’s (2012) research on professional Indian migrants in Australia shows that while remittances and gifts are an expression of caring, they have less weight than physical care. In this sense, transnational flows of money are used to fulfil migrants’ obligations and families’ expectations of care, enabling them to reproduce family relationships through transnational spaces. In terms of marriage, some have their mobilities initiated (and constrained) by a romance relationship and marriage bonding in host countries either by choice or cultural practices (Biao, 2005 & 2007; Willis & Yeoh, 2003). These relationships are sometimes experienced in relation to

ethnic features retrieved in castes that value relationships based on the same race (Biao, 2005 & 2007). Social media are also used as tools by migrants to sustain transnational practices (Robertson, 2008; Vertovec, 2004). For example, low-cost phone calls are served as “a kind of social glue” (Vertovec, 2004, p. 219) connecting migrants’ small-scale social formations with their kin in distant parts of the world, enabling them to encounter propinquity in the intersecting personal and social aspects of their lives.

All in all, gender roles must be examined under effects of migrants’ interactions with others and artefacts in relation to their practices of socio-cultural norms, employment and social structures, education as well as those who are immobile. A question raises here: what methodology(ies) can help unpack the confluences of these units of analysis?

### **Methodological issues**

In response to the growing challenges of contemporary social theory arguing that knowledge is positional and socially embedded, population studies should consider using mixed methods to address diverse meanings of migration. Although uses of mixed methods are not new, the purpose and significance of this approach are changed (Findlay & Li, 1999, p. 51).

Within the period from the 1960s to 1970s, by considering migration as spatial science, geographers tended to adopt “the scientific method” (p. 51) by applying quantitative techniques to migration data sets. The purpose was to uncover “empirical regularities” (p. 51) in spatial movements through positivist stances. Yet, as migration has been found to link to subjectivities, emotionalities, and meanings of migrants’ actions (Willis & Yeoh, 2000), diverse research approaches have been taken. Some migration researchers (e.g. Brettell & Hollifield, 2008; Favell, 2008; Massey et al., 1993) have pointed to the fragmented theoretical viewpoints across disciplines, including anthropology, demography, economics, geography, history, law, political science, sociology (and I would add: education). Massey and colleagues (1993) argue that contemporary theories of international migration are based on a “fragmented set of theories that have developed largely in isolation from one another” (p. 432). The common tendency in migration theories is to approach an epistemological dimension of the initiation and/or continuation of migration. It should be noted that despite Massey and colleagues’ assertion about studies conducted before the 1990s, there have still been quite a number of empirical studies focusing on isolated disciplines, particularly those on unpacking the issues of brain drain. Specifically, these studies are examined in separate disciplines, with the most dominant one in economics. However, in order to explore the meanings of mobilities, current studies must take an interdisciplinary approach because the ways migrants make sense of their mobilities are related more than just the economic desires. Economic examinations may engage with sociology in establishing hypotheses and explaining social constructs of migration. Historians may choose to draw on theories formulated by sociologists, and law may relate to history and political science (Brettell & Hollifield, 2008, p. 19).

Migration is known as a diverse and multifaceted social phenomenon that cannot be explained by a single theory (Arango, 2004, p. 15). For example, neoclassical theories attempt to examine factors that initiate migration at both macro- and micro-levels, based on rational choice theories. Decision to migrate is made under influences of migrants' household collective strategy that can help them enhance their family's economic security. Yet, these sets of theories are critiqued for downplaying non-economic factors such as cultural determinants and social ideologies (Arango, 2004; Massey et al., 1993). Similarly, by taking on board rational choice theories, the theory of new economics of labour migration seeks to examine how migrants' decisions to migrate are shaped by the family or household geared to maximise incomes and minimise risks. This theory is still unable to explain how global forces of migration and the world economic system influence migration and individual choices. Further, the scales of analysis in neoclassical migration studies explore spatial categories where migration occurs as push and pull factors from one place to another. Thus, some studies taking neoclassical approaches tend to conceptualize migration as discrete events or series of discrete events, conceptualizing migrants' experience of places as economic pushes and pulls. They do not address the questions of political and even gender-specific processes that construct the scales of mobilities (Silvey, 2004, p. 492).

The nation is normally seen as an objective scale in which national economic conditions are understood as forces that enable and limit migration. However, Yeoh and Huang (1999, p. 1164) argue that the national scale is produced through social and political process that favour some types of migrants and exclude others. Economic theories examine economic factors that impel migrants to leave one place and arrive in another on their rational and conscious choices with free will. New economic theories, on the other hand, attempt to illustrate the role of families and networks that influence migration for economic gain. The labour market theory suggests that there are factors that pull people to migrate, because there is always demand for labour in developed countries. By acknowledging migrants as rational choice makers, this theory downgrades influences of other factors such as transnational ties, social-cultural practices or even migrants' specific circumstances. By going beyond micro- and mezzo- levels, migration systems and networks theory argue that migration is often situated within the wider system including social and economic relationships between countries. Assimilation theories tend to look at issues of migrants' integration in host societies. By employing critical theory, O'Neill (2010, p. 18) attempts to examine the interactions of migration through the "connectedness and embeddedness of small-scale phenomena in the broader totality." Stemming from a feminist perspective, Silvey (2004, p. 495) similarly calls for a radical examination of migration as a political process that happens through migrants' embeddedness in the world with their families, communities, and societies. Thus, we should question the economism



currently playing the central role in migration research by uncovering power relations underpinning migration flows.

In short, each theory has its own merits and demerits. It seems that there is no integrative framework. The benefit of the absence of this kind of framework is that we can approach migration from different dimensions, depending on the purposes of our study. The inevitable drawback is that we cannot employ a holistic embodied approach as suggested by transnationalism perspectives. These theories are primarily focused on the reasons why some people move, but they do not pay proper attention to why other people do not. They do not attend to the intersecting influences of policy discourse, social structures and personal circumstances as potential influencers of migration. The next step to evolve is to integrate these current theories into transnationalism which can allow the new approach to justify migration as both rational and embodied processes.

### **Migration and development**

Whether migration allows for national and international development is still questionable. For example, de Haas (2010a & b) has confirmed that large-scale migration of the most productive members in the household causes neglect in farming, increase in dependence on the outside world, and disruption of traditional kinship and care. In this vein, migration causes underdevelopment, which causes further migration. If migration is associated with material and social achievements, it can become a norm, and staying at home can be seen as a failure (de Haas, 2010b, p. 1595). While economic, political and social ruptures may cause an outflow of people, a certain degree of socio-economic development in sending countries plus global inequality of development may also appear to be a cause of migration as well (de Haas, 2005, p. 1271). This is the case for labour and skilled migrants from Vietnam who are required to possess a certain amount of physical assets for visa affidavit and bond, skills and education, and language knowledge. Migration for work seems inaccessible for poor and disadvantaged people in rural regions where the government has aimed to increase the level of development.

While migration can fill in labour shortages in host societies, it creates negative impacts on employment, provision of public services and social welfare, social cohesion and the environment. For example, by reviewing related research on UK immigration, Spencer (2011) points out that it causes pressure on accommodation, shrinks employment opportunities for British workers, and erodes trust in the provision of social welfare. However, as noted by Spencer (*ibid.*), the public “does not know why the government cannot shut the door” (p. 2). In addition, migration researchers question the validity of the data, conclusions and judgements withdrawn from current studies on UK migration (*ibid.*, p. 3). They are doubtful with uses of statistical information which is mainly analysed in economic terms. It narrows understandings of how migration is shaped by other interrelated influences of various factors across social-personal domains.

To what extent migration for work can improve national and personal development is widely debated. For example, Vietnamese poor people with little education can borrow money from the Vietnam Bank for Social Policies to migrate for work in Southeast Asian countries. However, they receive a low wage structure of 100 – 200 USD, and this challenges their capacity to pay back the loan. Further, the effectiveness of remittances is found to be varied. For example, Nguyen and Mont (2012) examined the influences of remittances on household investment in land and housing, and they found that these dollars seem not to effectively reduce household poverty. In contrast, Nguyen (2008) found that foreign remittances have slight effects on poverty reduction but create inequality to a small degree. These studies do not acknowledge social remittances in forms of changes in social practices, ideas and values related to migration, technical remittances in terms of acquired knowledge and skills derived from migration, political remittances in terms of power issues and political awareness coming from migration, and positive externalities in terms of professional networks. In this vein, despite the debate over economic contribution of international migration, whether migration can bring forces for development seems debatable.

### **Assimilation and dissimilation**

Another debate over duality arises from the issues of assimilation and dissimilation. Migration is generally an ongoing process that brings significant changes in social structures and practices to host societies. In the recent past, migrants were considered as permanent settlers whom receiving states treated as assimilated subjects through immigration policies. However, since the 1970s, the growth of transnational networks and ethnic communities has led to a more fluid multicultural approach to immigration schemes (Jupp, 2007, p. 67), considering migrants as owing allegiance to more than one state (Castles, 2004, p. 863). Thus, multiculturalism has facilitated ethnic pluralism but at the same time, challenged social cohesion (Castles, Cope, Kalantzis, & Morrissey, 1987, p. 2). Current transnationalism studies show that such issues as migrants' assimilation and/or dissimilation and influences of migrants' involvement in intersecting aspects of life should be taken into consideration. Some researchers (e.g. Caglar, 2002; Smith, 2001; Vertovec, 2001 & 2009) juxtapose the relations between transnational and local levels in relations to migrants' place of origin that form an important part in their everyday lives. Smith (2001), for example, argues that by reaching out to diasporas, transnational practices of some countries in granting dual citizenship limit migrants in terms of assimilating to the host culture. The dichotomy between transnational and local levels is not always mutually exclusive, as transnational ties may not prevent migrants from assimilation.

A number of other studies (e.g. Basch, Glick Schiller, & Blanc-Szanton, 1996; Nagel, 2009; Vertovec, 2009) have argued that migrants do not always lose their distinctiveness to become like the mainstream population in host societies. Assimilation theories are critiqued for assuming a sequential adaptation of migration in receiving societies by constructing middle-class

society as the “norm to which migrants should aspire” (Nagel, 2009, p. 400). These theories, therefore, are unable to interpret transnational lives that exceed national borders. In this sense, transnationalism literature tends not to challenge the “ecological understanding of assimilation” (ibid. p. 401). Nagel (ibid.) has suggested studies dealing with assimilation issues pay attention to the “ideological and political deliberations” taking place in both home and host societies that shape those who are in the “mainstream” and who remain “outside of [their] boundaries” (ibid.). By placing a focus on these deliberations, researchers can understand that assimilation is not only a “pattern of sameness”, but as a “relational process of making sameness” (ibid.).

Another example to illustrate the debate on assimilation is multicultural issues in Australia. A large body of research on Australian multiculturalism has examined its influence on politics, demography, cultural identity, transnationalism and labour market outcomes (e.g. Castles, 2004; Levey, 2008; Vertovec, 2009). For example, key studies in the 1990s acknowledged that Australians supported the federal government in designing multiculturalist platform for enabling migrants’ adjustment into society after the White Australia Policy of “Anglo-conformity” (Levey, 2008, p. 5) was dismantled, but concurrently opposed policies that encouraged uses of ethnic languages and cultures (Chiswick & Miller, 1999). Other studies have reported historical changes in the governance of multiculturalism to support cultural pluralism, leading to services for ethnic language instruction and translation and delivery of ethnic broadcasting services. In place of assimilation, policy has focused on integration. For example, the recognition of overseas educational credentials has also been supported (e.g. Bastian, 2012; Jupp, 2007; Levey, 2008). In Australia, multiculturalism has become an issue of social justice in nation-building, rather than a set of cultural policies that immigrants were required to follow (Jakubowicz & Monani, 2010, p. 22). In general, Australia has encountered a “changing face” (Bastian, 2012, p. 55). It has been argued that uniformity in ethnicity and identity in the population will not serve Australia, as it requires new skills to face a changing global context in which the diversity of languages, cultures, and religions are viewed as productive forces (Jupp, 2007).

Greenman and Xie (2018) note that assimilation is often conceptualized as a multi-dimensional process that comprises acculturation, structural assimilation, spatial assimilation and generational assimilation, but most studies focus on few of these aspects with a particular group of migrants. Again, an examination of how migrants adjust their lives in the new societies appears to lack well-defined units of analysis. This is explainable because transnational mobilities are shaped by confluences of various factors (as mentioned before).

### **Effects of mobility on immobility**

Mobilities are known as creating effects and contexts that influence many aspects of both mobile and immobile people, which further transform

materials and infrastructure, families, communities and nations (Hannam, Sheller, & Urry, 2006, pp. 2-3). Spatial, infrastructural, familial, communal and institutional moorings have significant impact on mobilities, either directly or indirectly. Mobilities are engaged in everyday “power-geometry” referring to the “geographical stretching-out of social relations” within time-space compression (Massey, 1993, pp 59 & 61). Those who move or do not move are placed in ways relating to flows and interconnections, which are regulated, enabled or constrained by the broader political regime of mobilities. This regime includes political and micro-political governance of movements and infrastructures that facilitate and support mobilities on the one hand, and enhance immobilities on the other. Politics and practices of mobilities produce a “form of movement capital” (Kaufmann, Bergman, & Joye, 2004, p. 752), or a “resource to which not everyone has an equal relationship” (Skeggs, 2004, p. 49). Yet, even when migrants have arrived in a destination, they may not become immobile, as their sustainment of transnational relationships and nationalism enable them to become mobile in terms of corporeal movements such as frequent home visits and imagined returns such as nostalgia.

Mobilities and immobilities are not a duality, in which one concept exists in separation from the other. Also in this sense, mobilities are not comported to a “bourgeois masculine subjectivity” that privileges certain groups of people with the rights to become mobile as “cosmopolitans” (Skeggs, 2004, p. 49). We are always navigated in certain places, either by choice, which is also shaped by the political discourses of mobilities, or by force. Mobilities are not “free movement in a flat world”, but they entail “a complex of actual, potential, uneven and disabled possibilities [...] across multiple domains and fractures of social life” (D’Andrea, Ciolfi, & Gray, 2011, p. 150). While mobilities can be perceived and experienced as a resource, they raise the question of social inequality in uneven distribution of mobilities in connections to power (Hannam, Sheller, & Urry, 2006). This is why D’Andrea, Ciolfi, and Gray (2011, p. 158) call for integrative approaches in studying mobilities by placing a focus on how forms and meanings of mobilities are materially and historically constructed in accordance with institutional and ideological formations through negotiations and possible ruptures.

Brenner (2004) argues that deterritorialization and reterritorialization occur dialectically in the sense that the “global restructuring has entailed neither the absolute territorialization of societies, economies, or cultures [...] nor complete deterritorialization” (p. 64). According to Cresswell (2006, p. 738), research on the “new mobilities paradigm” tends to acknowledge the importance of immobile entities such as national borders, place, law and policy regimes and immobile people. “Moorings” are as important as mobilities (Hannam, Sheller, & Urry, 2006, p. 5). The influence of immobility may make movement not a “prerequisite” for engaging in transnational practices (Levitt, 2001, p. 198). Current research on mobilities tends to unpack the inter-link between roots and routes. While “roots” often signify emotional

and affective bonds with the physical environment, shared culture and locality as local anchorage into place, “routes” refer to ways that people are mobile yet attached to place as “culturally mediated experiences of dwelling and travelling” (Clifford, 1997, p. 5). These two concepts are intertwined (*ibid.*, p. 4). Yet, some studies on transnationalism acknowledge that the two concepts are not always complimentary to each other. For example, cultural and ethnic attachment and sense of belonging may distract migrants from making “roots” in host societies. Instead, the “routes” they are making are the sense of belonging to the home societies (Faist, 2000). Sustained contacts and sustainment of transnational relationships are experienced as the “routes” they are making to maintain their “roots”. “Dwelling mobility” is seen as the emergent theme of research, or as Chaney (1979) noted on the flows of Caribbean people to the United States during the 1970s. There are now people who have their “feet in two societies” (*ibid.*, p. 209). In understanding the meanings embedded in practices of mobilities, some research in mobilities challenges the notion of place in people’s movements, arguing that migration is not simply initiated and sustained by push or pull factors of places (Cresswell, 2010, p. 18). Further, the notion of differences also enters the debate on mobilities, where people experience movements in different ways with different meanings, and some mobilities depend on the relative immobility of others (Cresswell, 2006, p. 739).

Spatial mobility is interconnected and interdependent with social mobility (Kaufmann, Bergman, & Joye, 2004, p. 746). In the simplest sense, spatial mobility refers to physical movements of entities from one place to another along specific trajectories that can be described in terms of space and time. Social mobility is seen as the transformation in the distribution of resources and social positions of individuals, families, and groups within social structures. According to Kaufmann and colleagues (*ibid.*, p. 748), both forms of mobility are related to structural change and social transformations through different aspects of activities, resources, and institutional arrangements. These two forms are interconnected through people’s interactions with others, structures, and contexts within space and time. This interconnection is expressed through people’s capacity to become mobile in social and geographical sense by accessing and appropriating resources and dealing with constraints to achieve mobility. Kaufmann and colleagues (2004) define such capacity as “motility”, which is also seen as an “asset” (pp. 750 & 754). Fiedling (1992) mentions “upward social class escalator” (p. 1) within inter-regional migration from other areas to the South East region of England, which attracts young adults at a higher rate than other areas. A significant number of these professionals are found to “step off” this “escalator” (p. 1) after achieving high levels of status and pay and migrating to other areas away from this region.

These studies collectively suggest different terms: mobility/immobility, moorings, dwelling mobility, motility, social and spatial mobility, roots/routes, deterritorialization and reterritorialization, time and space compression, as

well as movement capital. While these terms can enrich our understandings of the effects of immobility on mobility (or vice versa), a question emerges: What theoretical framework(s) can be used to unpack these terms?

### Conclusion

This paper has presented a review of current research on transnationalism and pointed out several key debates over various issues in transnational migration research. While the transnational lens can provide valuable insight into migrants' sustainment of relationships across space and time, its levels and units of analysis seem to be confusing because of the lack of a concrete framework based on an integrative approach. The ultimate question is: what and how exactly can we measure in different cases? As de Jong and Dannecker (2018) have noted, as a perspective and field of study, transnational research agenda seems to become a "catch-all and say nothing" term (p. 494).

Other debates exist, of course. They have indeed flourished. But the needs to explore the multiple interrelated influences of migrants' embeddedness on the meanings of mobilities now become vital. There seems to be much more to be advanced in terms of methodological and theoretical framings that attend to migrants' negotiations of the influences of their everyday lives and social and cultural structures.

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