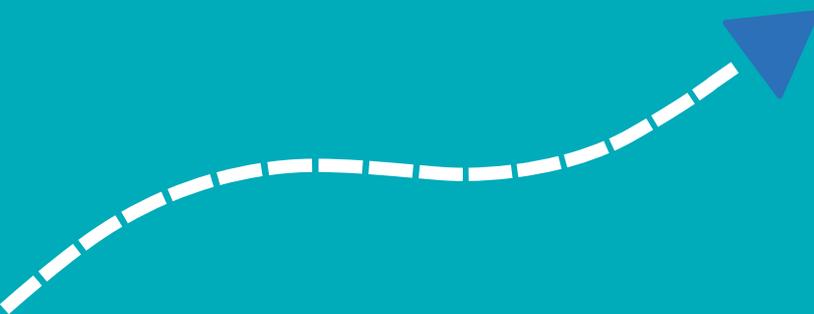


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3. WHY DO PEOPLE MIGRATE?

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This chapter introduces theories of migration – patterns that researchers have discovered in human migration. We will explore the reasons why some people decide to migrate while most people do not, examine the push and pull factors that affect migration, and try to understand how the migration decision is born.

Every day, thousands of people around the world pack their bags and go abroad in search of a better future. Why are they doing this? On the one hand, each migrant has his or her own migration story and personal reasons. On the other hand, researchers have identified several patterns that help us understand why people migrate. These have been written down as various migration theories. Let's take a closer look at them now.

Migration as a rational decision

Perhaps we could start by responding to the question of why most people do not undertake an international migration journey. Although there are hundreds of millions of people in the world living in a country other than their country of birth, they constitute less than [4%](#) of the world's population. Even in the European Union, where moving from one country to another is not restricted for citizens, less than [4%](#) of the population lives in a Member State other than their country of birth. How to explain that?

In fact, migration is an inconvenient and often quite risky process. And although nowadays travelling is not usually a life-threatening experience, it is still somewhat stressful. You have to adapt to a new linguistic and cultural environment, where there may be less support from friends or family, and often a lot of bureaucracy.

Economists (such as Larry A. Sjaastad in his 1962 article "The Costs and Returns of Human Migration") have compared migration with an investment: people migrate to increase the productivity of their human capital, that is, their knowledge, skills or simply manpower. Migration usually takes place when there is hope that the investment that is made through migration is cost-effective. This is why predominantly young people migrate because their cost-benefit calculation returns are positive in the long run, and mostly those whose profitability of human capital increases more as a result of migration.

In other words, according to this theory, migration is a rational choice. Of course, not everyone calculates only economic costs and benefits. Migration research shows that even if these calculations are made at first, people often do not have complete information about the conditions in the country of destination or about all the costs related to migration. There are also things that are difficult to directly convert into money. For example, the Swiss sociologist Hans-Joachim Hoffmann-Nowotny has pointed out that in addition to economic profitability, individuals also consider social power and prestige to be important. And because this is something that is harder to achieve abroad, people do not necessarily embark on a migratory journey, even if it would be economically beneficial. Furthermore, personal factors are also certainly important: an individual has to be sufficiently adaptable, with a high risk-bearing capacity, so that different people's emotional cost and benefits calculation should look quite different.

How do immigration and emigration countries emerge?

Another question that migration researchers have been looking to answer is why some countries become emigration countries and others immigration countries.

Several researchers have tried to explain the direction of migration, but one of the most widespread ones is the theory of migration push and pull factors published in 1966 by the American demographer Everett S. Lee. The push factors are the reasons that make us consider leaving: for example, military conflict or insecurity, persecution, lack of jobs or simply relative poverty. The pull factors consist of everything that makes a migration destination attractive: desirable jobs, access to land (in the past), higher wages, education that provides better opportunities and cultural or political freedom. People can be driven by both push and pull factors, often both together. Various intervening obstacles can also change migration plans.

The push and pull theory explains why migration is directed mostly from poor and developing countries to richer and developed countries. It is often described as migration from the Global South to the Global North. However, the theory of pull and push factors, together with the principle of investment, also helps us to understand why a very large proportion of migration takes place on a much smaller scale and, above all, within the so-called Global South. Migration is an expensive undertaking, especially for people in developing countries. As a result, people fleeing conflict, for example, often end up in less prosperous neighbourhoods: the push factors do not allow them to stay home, and even if the pull factors are not exactly strong in a neighbouring country, life there is better than remaining in the country of origin.

However, demographers have provided another interesting explanation for the direction and causes of migration. In 1971, Wilbur Zelinsky published a model for mobility transition that explains emigration from developing countries. Migration is intensifying in countries that are modernising, have high birth rates and increasing life expectancy. Everyone might not find work, so some young people have to undertake the migration journey. Nowadays, we see this situation in many African countries, as well as in many Asian countries. However, 100–150 years ago, most European countries, including Estonia, were in this situation. And so it happened that many siblings from one family went to Russia to acquire new land. By the way, relative prosperity is important not only for raising large migration cohorts but also for sending them on their way, because migration usually comes with an initial investment.

Nonetheless, this theory is somewhat overly one-dimensional in providing a true overview of migration. Sometimes emigration from such countries continues even after the demographic balance has been reached, and the population in the country of origin may even begin to shrink. This is so-called chain migration, where initial migrants who were forced to leave in search of better jobs also bring along their families, or many others follow, as the economy of the country of origin has shrunk due to rapid emigration and the local market and employment opportunities have dwindled.

What are migration networks and how do they explain migration trends?

Migration research has also shown a trend that is not very rational: why is it that many migrants from a few countries usually arrive in one destination country, but only a few people arrive from very many countries? This can be partly explained by migration treaties between countries. For example, in the 1950s and 1960s, the Turks came to several Western European countries as guest workers under international agreements. There was a similar arrangement in place in several countries for nurses from the Philippines, for example.

But how can we explain, for example, that the trading city of Guangzhou in Southern China suddenly saw the emergence of a community of Nigerians of almost hundreds of thousands of people? There has been no migration treaties between the two countries, and no Chinese company has run major recruitment campaigns in Nigeria. These two countries do not have any common history either.

The migration network theory will provide an answer. Migration costs and stress can be significantly reduced if there are already fellow nationals ahead in the host country, someone who can provide information on life and migration opportunities, perhaps even provide accommodation at the beginning, help you find a job and make things easier. This network is not always made up of people who are relatives or friends. The networks often include professional intermediaries: recruiting agents, employment agencies, removal service providers and many others. For example, when labour migration from Ukraine to Estonia began to grow rapidly, one low-cost airline launched an affordable Tallinn-Kyiv route, which further increased the attractiveness of Estonia as a destination. As the emigré community grows, there will also be on-site service providers, who in turn will connect the network: small shopkeepers who sell special groceries and consumer goods from the home country, restaurateurs, hairdressers or doctors with whom migrants can communicate in the same way as in the home country and so on.

However, the growth of such emigrant communities will not last forever. Migration networks also have their saturation point up to which the communities grow and after that, they start to shrink. Why so? On the one hand, there may be a change in public policy in the country. For example, the number of Africans in Guangzhou fell to almost nothing in mid-2010s, as the country began to significantly restrict immigration from Nigeria; and those who had already arrived were not exactly treated with affection.

However, policy changes may not always be the reason. For example, when Germany closed its borders to Turkish migrant workers in the 1970s, migration from Turkey increased. It happened because the ones who were already in Germany decided to bring their family members along using the right of family reunification.

But in some cases, there is a natural slow-down or even decline in growth. On the one hand, the decline repulsive of immigrant communities can be explained by the effect of push and pull factors: for example, the standard of living in Estonia and Finland is no longer as different as it was 10 or 20 years ago; therefore, migration to Finland has decreased and return increased. However, the network theory states that the network itself also plays a role. Over time, migrant communities may become less hospitable towards new arrivals – especially if they have come under criticism in the host society. Confrontation between "newcomers" and "old-timers" of the same origin, who already see life through a prism more similar to the locals, may occur. The "old-timers" may be wary of reputation damages or simply of the responsibilities that come with networks. Over time, migration networks will begin to disintegrate: the interest of professional intermediaries will disappear and those who remain will integrate into the host society.

How is a migration decision made?

Migration researchers have also tried to understand how people migrate. Today, the migration process is often gradual. In most cases, no one thinks "Goodbye, homeland. I'm never coming back!" People leave for a limited time at first – a few months, a year, until the end of their studies, to see how life abroad suits them. However, quite often a short visit lasts longer and soon people become visitors in their country of origin.

It is also interesting to note that people often settle abroad for other reasons than their original reason for migration. This is particularly true of young people's migration. If the initial reason was to go to study or earn money, then the reason to stay is because of a more general social context, for example, the openness of the society. Interviews with young people from Estonia who have moved to major metropolises also suggest that although many have Estonia in their heart and wish to return home someday, it is often impeded by a few reasons. First, their area or professional specialisation is so narrow that there is simply not enough work in Estonia, and second, there are no comparable culture consumption opportunities in Estonia.

But of course, not everyone moves as freely as young people. German economist Oded Stark has developed the New Economics of Labour Migration (NELM) theory, which explains that a migration decision is often not an individual decision but rather a collective one, such as a household decision. Even if only one household member actually migrates, the whole household is involved in the migration process. The migration investment is not necessarily made only by the person who moves, but also by the family members who support the decision.

For example, if one spouse goes abroad to work, it means that the other spouse has to take more responsibility for the household – he or she will also experience migration-related stress even without moving. Therefore, it is important to consider the costs and benefits of migration from the perspective of the whole family. Does the relative welfare gain from migration, for example the purpose to make repairs at home and buy another car, outweigh the risks and temporary inconvenience brought about by the migration of a family member? Certainly, other formulas can be considered: perhaps chain migration is more beneficial, which means bringing the family abroad later on. Needless to say, this is also a decision that needs to be carefully considered, for example in terms of the cost of living and economic well-being and regarding the challenges of integration. However, migration policies also play a role – if the host country were to make migration regulation more restrictive, a wave of chain migration would likely follow, i.e., families would join the migrant in the destination country because it would no longer be easy for him/her to visit the family. However, people often prefer the circular migration solution, where one family member occasionally goes abroad to work and sends money home, and the other family members adjust their living arrangements accordingly.

To conclude, migration happens because of many different factors at the societal, community and individual levels. Migration can be a forced choice or part of a rewarding lifestyle. It can turn a person into a cosmopolitan globetrotter who enjoys the new adventures and exciting discoveries that a new destination country offers. However, people can also become trapped in migration when it turns out that what was initially promised or hoped will not become a reality, and there are few opportunities to move back or onwards.

Discussion points

- Tell someone's real migration story or invent your own story (who migrated from where to where and for what reasons) and discuss it based on the theories introduced in the chapter: to what extent is the migration decision related to an economic cost-benefit calculation, pull and push factors, mobility transition and networks? Was it an individual or collective decision?
- Discuss to what extent migration is rational and to what extent irrational.

Further reading

A more in-depth academic overview of **migration theories** can be found here, c.f.: [Hagen-Zanker, J. \(2008\) Why do people migrate? A review of the theoretical literature. MPRA Paper no 28197](#)

An interesting podcast about migration by the International Migration Research Network: [IMISCOE taskuhäälingu sarjast.](#)

Brettell, C. B., & Hollifield, J. F. (Eds.). (2014). *Migration theory: Talking across disciplines*. London; New York: Routledge.



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