

Forced or Voluntary Migration?: A Relational Approach to a Theoretical Divide

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The murkiness of forced and voluntary migration

'I wanted to change the country...just to live in a different place, explore the new things'. (Kanti on his migration to Uganda from India in the mid-1950s)

The ambiguity between 'voluntary' and 'forced' migration flows can be observed in single migratory events, across the lifecycle and across generations.

By now, many scholars have acknowledged the murkiness between voluntary and forced migration (Bakewell, Castles, Chimni, de Haas, deWind, Turton).

Aims of the paper

To open a window onto the theoretical divide between forced and voluntary migration by:

- 1) Rejecting the dichotomy between voluntary and forced migration and treating both phenomena as part of a larger continuum of migration (as suggested by de Haas) via a relational approach to understanding migration.
- 2) Locating the relational approach to migration within larger currents of social theory, in particular, a renewal of relational sociology via scholars such as Andrew Abbott, Mustafa Emirbayer, Rogers Brubaker and Charles Tilly.
- 3) Explaining how the relational approach can solve two thorny problems in migration studies:
 - a) the problem of selectivity, in other words, how we understand who migrates and to which destinations and
 - b) the relationship of structure and agency in the migration experience and how they are linked.

Some propositions

- 1) The notion of the 'migrant' seems ever more real, linking and uniting all sorts of migrants under common conditions and motivations regardless of the legal structures that govern migration.
- 2) We need a new paradigm for studying forced and voluntary migration together as part of larger currents in social theory.
- 3) Relational sociology or a relational approach to migration may be one such paradigm that can address some of the thorniest theoretical problems in migration studies.
 - A relational approach to migration can answer the problem of selectivity in migration flows
 - A relational approach can show how structure and agency are linked in the migration process.

What does a relational account of migration look like?

A relational approach to migration draws on a relational sociology.

Relational sociology represents an effort to renew our understanding of social action and social life as embedded in relationships that are dynamic and changing.

It rejects the reductionism of substantialist approaches that rely on categories to explain social action, e.g. fixed notions of race, class and gender, etc.

Its empirical focus has relied on the observation of social networks, including the structure of network ties that make up networks and the relations of exchange within those ties.

What does a relational account of migration look like?

A relational account of migration also focuses on the **structure of network ties and the relations of exchange that take place within those ties.**

However, it goes beyond standard network accounts of migration, which have focused almost exclusively on interpersonal ties, to consider a large range of social ties that make up the social networks of migrants.

These are:

- a) **interpersonal ties** to individuals, households, families and communities, and
- b) **organizational ties** to workplaces, firms, schools, diaspora organizations, cultural institutes, religious bodies, recruitment agencies, 'bodyshoppers', smuggling groups, government bodies, international organizations, NGOs and so on.

The Selectivity Problem

A relational account goes further in explaining the selectivity of migration flows and in providing a bridge between structure and agency.

It is not enough to identify the common conditions or social transformations that have conditioned today's migrations. The question of **who migrates, why some and not others**, still remains a vexed question.

A relational account would look at how certain social ties form historically from various social contexts, which, in turn, would encourage the migration of some and not others, even on a mass scale. Similarly, various sorts of exchanges need to take place within those ties for migration to occur.

The Structure-Agency Problem

Social network theory has long provided an answer to the structure-agency problem through the work of Harrison White, Peter Bearman and Charles Tilly, for instance.

Social networks are the bridge between structure and agency. Through exchange relations they link the agency of individuals with the institutional, organizational or interpersonal structures represented in social ties.

Migration represents just one kind of social action we might think about within a theory of social networks that shows how individual agency links up with larger societal structures.

Conclusions

A relational account of migration can help us to see more clearly the intersection between 'voluntary' and 'forced' migration.

It can provide a basis for how to combine our study of both 'types' as well as other kinds of conditions and motivations for migration in a unified way.

A relational account also allows us to see selectivity as a dynamic process taking place rather than one that relies on static categories.

A focus on social networks as a structure of ties and exchange relations also highlights the agency of migrants and the structure of relations from interpersonal to those with the state that are continuously negotiated in a dynamic process.