

# Briefs on Methodological, Ethical and Epistemological Issues

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## **Studying Immobility \***

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### **Abstract**

Given wide inequalities in wealth, security and material well-being worldwide, the number of international migrants is surprisingly low. International migrants have long composed only two to four percent of the world's population. Existing migration theories would lead us to expect far more people to migrate than actually do.

There is a 'mobility bias' in migration studies, meaning research tends to focus on the 'drivers' of migration and overlook the countervailing forces that restrict or resist these same drivers. This one-sided focus on migration processes leads to distorted understandings about the social forces shaping migration and immobility dynamics. By asking why people do not migrate, however, migration scholars can advance what they know about why and when people do.

## Introduction: Defining immobility

Immobility may be defined as continuity in an individual's place of residence over a period of time. Immobility is never absolute, as indeed all people *move* in their everyday lives—to school, to work, to the market. Thus, just as migration must be distinguished from everyday forms of movement, most often by a change in residence for a certain length of time, immobility may be distinguished by continuity in a place of residence, relative to spatial and temporal frames.

The 'spatial frame' designates the boundaries within which an individual may be deemed 'immobile.' For example, someone who has moved from a rural village to a nearby city may be immobile relative to international movement. However, this same person may be considered highly mobile relative to those who stay in the village. Thus, just as research makes a distinction between residential, internal, and international migration, immobility may also be analyzed relative to different geographic scales.

The 'temporal frame' designates the period of time within which the researcher wishes to assess immobility outcomes. Immobility can refer to periods of spatial continuity across the life course, life-time staying behavior, or even immobility across generations. Why some people 'stay put' for their entire lives is an important research question, but it is not the only one. Even for 'migrant populations,' periods of immobility raise important research questions. Too often, someone who leaves home once becomes a 'migrant' for life, and the moments in which further movement is renegotiated, resisted, or restrained – when migrants are not migrating – are lost.

Within this definition, immobility can take many different forms. Just as migration occurs along a spectrum of 'forced' to 'voluntary,' so too does immobility: it may be a result of constraints on the desire to move or the realization of an aspiration to stay. Like migration, there is a vast area in between 'forced' and 'voluntary' immobility that requires more theoretical and empirical attention.

## Theorizing immobility

The aspiration-capability framework is one promising conceptual approach for studying mobility and immobility. It makes a distinction between the *aspiration* and *capability* to migrate (de Haas 2014; Carling and Schewel 2018; Schewel 2019; see also Carling 2002). A migration 'aspiration' refers to the conviction that migration is preferable to non-migration (Carling 2002). It can vary in degree and in the balance between choice and coercion, meaning that someone who desires to migrate, even under highly constrained



conditions, can be said to have the ‘aspiration to migrate’ (Carling and Schewel 2018: 946). This is important to highlight that some individuals, under the same constrained conditions, may prefer to stay.

The capability to migrate refers to the freedom and resources people have to realize a migration aspiration. The concept ‘capability’ comes from the Capability Approach, a development framework that places the freedom to achieve well-being as development’s ultimate aim and suggests its evaluation in terms of people’s capabilities to do and be what they have reason to value (Sen 1999; see de Haas 2014). Migration aspirations and capabilities change over time. They are impacted by development processes, and can vary from person to person, depending on, for example, gender, education, wealth, social networks and social norms.

The aspiration-capability framework provides the conceptual tools to analyze the determinants of a wide range of mobility and immobility outcomes: *mobility* (i.e., having both the aspiration and capability to migrate), *involuntary immobility* (i.e., having the aspiration but not the capability to migrate), *voluntary immobility* (i.e., having the capability but not the aspiration to migrate), and *acquiescent immobility* (i.e., having neither the aspiration nor capability to migrate) (see Carling 2002; Schewel 2019). This conceptual approach also suggests three lines of research inquiry to better understand immobility trends:

- 1) Why do people prefer to stay where they are? In other words, what are the determinants of voluntary and acquiescent immobility?
- 2) What constraints do people face to realize an aspiration to migrate? In other words, what are the determinants of involuntary immobility?
- 3) How do aspirations and capabilities to migrate, or to stay, interact and influence each other over time?

## Researching immobility

The logic of the aspiration-capability framework resonates with a wider body of migration research that Carling and Schewel (2018) refer to as ‘two-step approaches.’ These studies span the quantitative and qualitative domains yet share the analytical distinction between (1) the evaluation of migration as a potential course of action and (2) the realization of actual mobility or immobility at a given moment (Carling and Schewel 2018: 947). This distinction allows researchers to analyze the social forces that lead to an aspiration to migrate or to stay, and how these aspirations are realized or frustrated in light of the structural opportunities and constraints people face.



Opportunities to assess the aspiration to stay increase with the growing number of surveys that ask about international migration aspirations (see Carling and Schewel 2018 for a review). However, because the choice to move within one's country is often a more viable alternative than international migration (Malmberg 1997), future surveys should examine (im)mobility aspirations relative to both internal and international boundaries. Doing so would allow researchers to explore the degree to which staying or internal mobility strategies act as imagined alternatives to international migration.

Assessing actual immobility behavior is easiest over shorter time frames.<sup>i</sup> For example, Lu (1999) uses American Housing Survey data to examine the links between residential mobility intentions and actual moving behavior over a four-year period and the sociodemographic factors that predict (im)mobility outcomes within this time frame. Lifetime stayers are often harder to capture from a quantitative perspective. Some censuses many include a question about whether a resident has ever lived outside the country for more than 12 months. Long-running panel datasets, such as Panel Study of Income Dynamics or the UK Household Longitudinal Study, also provide the opportunity to trace (im)mobility outcomes over time, but researchers should be attentive to potential attrition related to moving and to potential movement that occurs between moments of data collection (Mulder 2018). Alternatives to track long-term immobility include population register data, provided it is sufficiently detailed or of sufficient historical depth, or life-history surveys, which researchers can tailor to their interests.

Complementary to large datasets, micro-level case studies and more qualitative methods can provide nuanced insight into the contexts that shape each step of a two-step approach: the sociocultural contexts in which (im)mobility aspirations emerge; the opportunities, constraints, and social relations that shape the nature and realization of these aspirations; the ways in which aspirations and capabilities shift at different stages of the life course; and how people experience and make sense of their immobility at a given time (see, for example, Hjälml 2014; Mata Codesal 2015; Gaibazzi 2015; Vigh 2009; Bordorano 2009; Jonsson 2008).

Finally, many questions for further research remain. For example, a mobility bias often leads researchers to assume that everyone engages in 'migration decision-making'. But not everyone meaningfully considers migration as a part of their imagined futures. How do we understand immobility when people never really weigh the costs and benefits of a migration project (see Van Houtum and Van Der Velde 2004)? Relatedly, is it possible to speak about a 'culture of staying' (Stockdale and Haartsen 2017) in the same way that we speak of a 'culture of migration' (Kandel and Massey 2002)? Is immobility also a learned social behavior; do people learn to stay and to desire to stay (c.f., Ali 2007, 39)? Finally, most research on migration and



development to date focuses on how development shapes the aspiration and capability to migrate (e.g. de Haas 2010). However, equal attention should be given to how development processes impact the aspiration and capability to stay. Examining the causes and consequences of immobility is an opportunity to understand migration (and development) processes in a new way.

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<sup>i</sup> This is also true for assessing actual mobility. Migration is often defined in very conventional terms (e.g. a period of residence abroad for more than one year) or based on available migrant flow or stock data. There is relatively little regularly available data on the migration behavior of individuals over longer periods of time.

