

A Life Course Approach to High-Skilled Migration: Lived Experiences of Indians in the Netherlands

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Abstract

This article presents a framework which applies life course approach to high-skilled migration. By using the lens of the life course, migration behaviour is viewed not only in response to labour market triggers, but also in relation to other life domains such as education, employment and household. The data presented in this article is drawn from 22 in-depth interviews and visualisations of parallel careers. The results illustrate how highly skilled Indian migrants in the Netherlands shape their life course, and highlight the parallel careers that structure their migration trajectories. Parents, spouse and social networks inform the life course decisions of these migrants through the linked lives mechanism to a large extent. Our findings challenge the notion of ‘trailing wives’ and suggest that, despite of gender differences in the life course patterns, the joining spouses play an active role in the family migration decisions of the highly skilled. Life course approach enables us to understand the migration process through the lives of the highly skilled and reveals how – the often culturally conditioned – life course interdependencies frame their migration decisions.

Keywords: high-skilled migration; Indian migrants; life course; parallel careers; qualitative research

Introduction

The rapid development of telecommunication technologies and decline in transportation costs have facilitated migration at the highest pace ever since the beginning of the millennium (Levitt, DeWind, and Vertovec 2003; Portes, Guarnizo, and Landolt 1999). Diverging demographic trends between the developed and less developed countries, on the other hand, also encourage the swift mobility of migrants. Several member states of the European Union (EU) have adopted policies that facilitate and regulate the immigration of high-skilled migrants as a partial remedy against short-term frictions on the labour market caused by ageing population. The need for highly skilled migrants continues to be a pressing issue as the EU would have required 700,000 additional researchers by 2010 in order to reach the Barcelona target of spending three per cent of the member countries' GDP on research and technological development (European Commission 2003).

However, the main aim of these policy programmes designed to attract high-skilled migrants seems to be couched in terms of importing labour but not people (Castles 2006), considering migrants only in terms of economic efficiency (Ho 2006). Ryan and Mulholland (2014, 597) suggest that 'there has been a tendency to underestimate the "human face" of "elite" migrants'. Despite the clear need to include family dynamics (Clark and Davies Withers 2007) and social network factors (Harvey 2011) in the migration process, migration motives and outcomes other than economic gain are often neglected in research on high-skilled migration. Larsen et al. (2005) observe that for the highly-skilled the migration decision is based not only on financial reasons, but on

individual's values and expectations. Furthermore, the negotiation of employment and family life remains an important issue, as well as the career experiences of high-skilled female immigrants on the labour market (Lee Cooke 2007; Liversage 2009).

The aim of this article is to present a framework which links the life course approach to high-skilled migration. By using the lens of the life course, migration behaviour is viewed not only in response to labour market triggers, but also in relation to education, employment and household trajectories of the highly skilled migrants and their significant others. The article also highlights the role of context, as events in the life course do not take place in isolation but in a specific place and time. Thus expanding the focus from only economic-related outcomes of migration enables to shed light on the 'underlying social and cultural decision-making processes' (Smith 2004, 265).

This article first examines the concept of high-skilled migration. Then it continues by presenting a theoretical framework of life course approach applied to high-skilled migration and thereafter provides results from an empirical study in the Netherlands. In the final section the implications of life course interdependencies on shaping the migration decisions of the highly skilled are discussed.

High-Skilled Migration: Concepts and Definitions

Defining a highly skilled migrant has been a widely debated subject. Generally, a highly skilled migrant is considered one with a tertiary education or an equivalent specialised work experience (Iredale 1999), whereas the notion of 'equivalent experience' remains

ambiguous and admission policies differ on the requirements for the level of a university degree differ per country. In the Netherlands a highly skilled migrant is defined through the significance of their contribution as they are referred to as ‘labour migrants with nationally or internationally scarce expertise; generally highly educated and earn an above average wage; employed in sectors of great economic or social importance’ (ACVZ 2004, 144, translation). Many scholars advocate the distinction between skills-based (i.e., working experience) and qualifications-based (i.e., educational attainment) professional expertise (Koser and Salt 1997; Williams and Baláž 2005). This article retains the use of the term ‘highly skilled migrants’, and assumes that their working experience is equivalent to completed tertiary education.

From a theoretical point of view, high-skilled migration is usually presented in terms of human capital of the individuals. People are assumed to move to labour markets whose requirements match their education and work experience, and where they expect to receive the most satisfying pay-off for their investment in human capital (Borjas 1989). This line of reasoning thus views migrants rather as economic agents but not as social agents. Investments in human capital can also lead to non-economic returns (Becker 1962). Personal development, creating a professional network, gaining international experience, and better working conditions and opportunities are equally or even more important than the highest economic returns in the migration decision-making process of knowledge migrants (Guth and Gill 2008; Harvey 2011, Khoo, Hugo, and McDonald 2008). These reasons account for the temporary rather than permanent, circular rather than unidirectional nature of high-skilled migration (Koser and Salt 1997).

The circular nature of the mobility of professionals is of crucial importance for the macro consequences in terms of brain drain, brain gain or brain circulation. Migration of high-skilled labour is beneficial not only to the migrants themselves and to the receiving countries, but also to the sending countries that profit from the initial outflows of these migrants. The receiving countries gain from the accumulation of skilled labour which leads to increase in the level of productivity (Commander, Kangasniemi, and Winters 2003), boost in contributions to the welfare system (Kapur and McHale 2005), stimulation of innovation capacity and international dissemination of knowledge (Salt 2006). The professional expertise and networks of expatriates can be transformed into development of and investments in the home country (Stark, Helmenstein, and Prskawetz 1998), even when they do not physically return. Migrant remittances are a major resource for economic development (Ratha 2003). In India, remittances make up 23.1 per cent of export earnings (Hugo 2005).

Within the field of skilled migration, international student mobility holds a large share. Students are desired migrants as they bring and develop their skills and then subsequently develop the destination countries (King and Raghuram 2013). Raghuram (2013), however, suggests that the boundaries between student migrants and other skilled migrants are blurring, particularly due to increased integration in the society and the multiple potential identities of students, such as workers or family members. Post-graduate studies are a step towards career opportunities. Findlay et al. (2012) argue that international student mobility should be seen in the wider context of life course aspirations of the students, in particular it should be related to subsequent mobility intentions. As Li et al. (1996) observe: migrating to learn might lead to learning to

migrate. In the Netherlands, the focus of this article, PhD candidates are regarded as researchers rather than students. They receive a salary or a scholarship, do not pay tuition fees and they are essentially conducting research. Also the Dutch high-skilled migrant visa scheme includes PhD candidates as salaried labour migrants.

Migration of the highly skilled is not a one-off event but the acquisition of skills and work experience can trigger many movements. Salt (1988, 398) pointed out already decades ago that '[e]ach [migration] step can be understood only in the light of the sequence as a whole.' Additionally, Beaverstock (1996) suggests that professional and managerial workers need to be (globally) mobile in order to obtain the skills required for the international markets and clients. One of the main reasons why Indian IT and health professionals work abroad is the high value of such experience when returning to India (Khadria 2004), thus international working experience may even be prescribed by the norms of the origin community and culture. This view is supported by Robinson and Carey (2000) who, based on their study on Indian doctors in the United Kingdom, argue that despite economic motives migration can be regarded as a cultural and social phenomenon.

Studying High-Skilled Migration from the Life Course Perspective

Life course as an approach

This article views migration as an inherently dynamic phenomenon, as an integrated part of the life course of individuals within the context in which they live. The life course approach provides a coherent tool to examine the evolution of life trajectories and life events of individuals over time and in social processes (see Elder 1985, 1994; Kulu and Milewski 2007). Life course transitions are regarded as intermediary between contextual factors and migration outcomes (Bernard, Bell, and Charles-Edward 2014). In this article the life course approach is applied to understand the events (or transitions) and trajectories (or careers) in key life domains of education, employment, household and migration. The trajectories/careers evolve simultaneously, or parallel to each other, and often depend on one another. Due to interdependence of one's life course trajectories, an event in one trajectory can bring about status changes in other trajectories (Author, Year). Such effect of 'parallel careers' is particularly well exemplified by migration that is frequently accompanied by alterations in several other life domains (Mulder and Hooimeijer 1999; Mulder and Wagner 1993): the completion of higher education or embarking on cohabitation often implies a change in one's place of residence. The interdependencies of parallel careers are two-dimensional: direction of causality and type of dependence between trajectories (Mulder and Wagner 1993). In the life course framework unidirectionality is rarely assumed for causality between different trajectories. Status and event dependencies play a role in the interconnectedness of different

trajectories. The former assumes that the occurrence of an event in one trajectory is affected by the status occupied in the other; whereas according to the latter, it is due to the occurrence of the event in the same trajectory (Willekens 1999). The various dimensions of the life course approach are summarised in a framework proposed by Elder (1975, 1994), depicted in Table 1.

[Insert Table 1 near here]

Time is a crucial element in the life course approach. Elder (1975) distinguishes between three different dimensions of time. Individual time concerns the chronological order of life events in the life of an individual; social time includes influences from social institutions, roles, norms and values on the transitions; and historical time sees the events from the perspective of historical changes (Elder 1975; Author, Year).

Migration decision-making and life course

Given Elder's (1975, 1994) four central themes (see Table 1), in this proposed framework it is crucial to consider migration decision making in a wider setting of factors that either facilitate or hinder migration. Mulder and Hooimeijer (1999) distinguish between factors derived from the individual or household (the micro context) and factors that are created externally (the macro context). They regard micro-context factors as resources and restrictions that concern the life course of the individual and the linked lives. The factors

on the macro level are classified as opportunities and constraints that are prescribed by the social context.

Qualifications and skills, or human capital, required for a particular job are the main resources. An important restriction stems from the household composition, namely, the more persons it consists of, the more complex the migration decision making. Mincer (1978) coined the term 'tied movers' to refer to migrants who move in order to advance the partner's career and thereby often give up their own employment-related ambitions. Women have predominantly been found to be tied movers, as they tend to undergo downward mobility after migration (Boyle et al. 2008; Clark and Davies Withers 2002; Cooke 2008). However, not only economic considerations are the key motivation for family migration. Pittman and Blanchard (1997) suggest that the relative resources of both partners should be looked at, leaving more space for the discussions on power and gender relations within the family. Moreover, Ackers (2004) argues that economic factors tend to be more applicable for young and single migrants, whereas for those in further life course stages, such as migrants with a partner and/or child, family considerations are more relevant.

On the macro level, opportunities include the availability of specific jobs for the highly skilled, as well as beneficial immigration policies, whereas barriers to immigration or absence of the vacancies are constraining factors.

Networks, life course and migration

Social and organisational networks can affect the life course of highly skilled at the meso level. Social ties provide both information on settlement destinations and the means for interpreting migration as a social phenomenon, not only as an outcome of economic decision making (Boyd 1989). Emphasising the importance of social networks in migration, Massey et al. (1998) observe that the cost of migration is reduced for each new migrant when he or she utilises the social capital from the networks. Nevertheless, a critique of this theory is its orientation only towards the economic aspects of migrant networks. For the highly skilled migrants, one of the most important benefits from social networks is finding employment and recruitment via informal contacts (Alarcón 1999; Conradson and Latham 2005; Meyer 2001). Organisational networks, on the other hand, often predetermine the employment and migration trajectories, since overseas postings are integrated in the policies of multinational companies as a part of a professional career (Beaverstock 2005).

Life course, migration and the highly skilled

This article combines life course and high-skilled migration to stress that migration is not isolated from other life course trajectories and to illustrate the role of significant others in shaping the migration trajectory of the highly skilled Indians in the Netherlands.

Despite the diversity assumed in the life course approach, some general patterns within the context of international migration among the highly skilled can be pointed out.

Research has confirmed that highly educated people are more likely to move more often and over longer distances (Flowerdew and Al-Hamad 2004; Whisler et al. 2008). This is supported by the finding that long-distance moves undertaken are mainly employment-related (Clark and Davies Withers 2007; Kulu and Billari 2004). Many studies suggest that migration propensity depends on the family status and composition. The larger the family size, the less likely people are to move (Boyle et al. 2008; Kulu 2008; Sandefur and Scott 1981; Whisler et al. 2008). Married people are found to be less prone to relocation (Clark and Davies Withers 2007; Sandefur and Scott 1981; Whisler et al. 2008). However, the likelihood of union dissolution is higher among couples who move frequently over long distances (Boyle et al. 2008; Muszynska and Kulu 2007). With regard to family formation, the fertility of the highly educated appears to be lower than that of the low-educated (Kulu 2005). Some studies have concluded that migration is shortly followed by the birth of a child (Andersson 2004; Kulu and Milewski 2007; Lee Cooke 2007), although it is not clear whether this is specifically applicable to high-skilled migration. Kley and Mulder (2010) suggest that migration decisions stem to a large extent from life course events and from perceived opportunities in various life domains. Bernard, Bell and Charles-Edward (2014, 233) add that not all migration decisions are directly driven by life course events, but also through ‘contextual factors such as economic development, social inequalities, degree of gender equity, cultural norms and value systems’ which indirectly influence the life course in general and migration trajectory in particular.

Whereas a vast majority of the previous research linking life course and (high-skilled) migration has focused on the Western countries, this article will examine migrants from a

non-Western country, India, where path dependencies may not resemble those of the Western context. The discrepancies might occur due to differences in resources, restrictions, opportunities and constraints that form the life course in general and transitions such as union formation or onset of professional career in specific.

Data and Methods

This study explores life course from a qualitative perspective to understand migration processes from the micro level and to account for the historical and geographical context, timing of lives, linked lives and human agency. We have discussed the advantages of qualitative research methods for studying the life course of migrants in our earlier work (Authors, Year). In order to get insights on how highly skilled Indian migrants in the Netherlands construct their life course with regard to education, employment, household and migration trajectories, 22 in-depth interviews were conducted.

Study setting and research participants

In the Netherlands the high-skilled migrant visa was introduced in the end of 2004 and by 2011 approximately 30,000 applications were received (IND 2012; INDIAC 2009). Roughly one third of these migrants were employed in IT and other business sectors, whereas another third worked in industry, trade, or education and research (INDIAC 2009). Three quarters of the visa applicants were males, every second aged 18–30 years,

and every third of Indian origin (INDIAC 2009). High-skilled migrants in the Netherlands value the country's well-performing labour market, a high level of income per capita, and the reputation of Dutch universities and research institutes (SEO Economic Research 2010). The inflow of labour migrants from Asian countries will continue in the future and even increase as India and China will remain the largest pools of highly skilled migrants in the world (Nicolaas 2009).

The research participants of our study were sought by means of snowball sampling among Indians aged 25–40 who were preferably holders of a high-skilled migrant visa. The interviews took place in Amsterdam, Eindhoven and Groningen between June 2010 and August 2011. Among the 22 participants, 17 participants were males; 10 participants were married, four engaged and two in a relationship. Five participants were parents. Eight participants were working in the field of research, seven participants were engineers, another seven were employed in the IT and other business sectors, and one participant was currently a stay-home mother but looking to return to labour market.

Interviews and analysis

The main issues dealt with in the interviews were the life events that have led to migration accounts and vice versa. Drawing from the biographic-narrative interview method (BNIM) (Wengraf 2001), the form of the interviews gave the participants the chance to tell their life story and further reflect on the context of their migration decision, behaviour and experiences. After the narration, the principal researcher posed specific

questions stemming from the research questions to add details to the issues revealed in the first phase of the interview.

The interviews were recorded and transcribed and thereafter analysed with the qualitative data software MAXQDA. The main themes that arose from both deductive and inductive coding of the transcripts are outlined in the following sections. The data collection and analysis was grounded in theoretical saturation, thus the 22 interviews provided sufficient research material. Theoretical saturation is attained when no new information or different insights emerge from the interviews, categories are well developed with regard to their variation, and relationships among concepts are founded and validated (Glaser and Strauss 1967).

Additionally, the principal researcher depicted the life course events and parallel careers of each participant (see Figure 1). This method allows for a quick visualisation of path interdependencies and timing of events. The visualised life story was based on the information received from the participant throughout the interview. Similarly, quantitative life course studies use life history calendar (Ensel et al. 1996; Freedman et al. 1988), however, it does not allow the illumination of directionality between life domains nor the level of detail as provided by this personalised qualitative visualisation.

Results

‘I Wanted to Have International Exposure’

A culture of migration (Massey et al. 1993) is present among the participants as nearly everyone reported their family members, friends or fellow students from India were or had been living abroad. Such a culture of migration is promoted through migration networks and experience abroad of significant others which results in studying or working abroad as a norm for the highly skilled. Participants referred to such migration as ‘pilgrimage’, ‘fashion’, or even ‘craze’.

Long before me, my supervisor’s supervisor came [to a particular Dutch institute]. Then my supervisor’s colleague came here. So there’s a tradition of people coming in, going back, it’s like... this kind of... pilgrimage kind of thing. (Rahul¹, 38, scientist)

We use the life story of **Ganesh** to illustrate the different interactions between migration, education, employment and household trajectories (see Figure 1 for the visualised life course). It is not a standard life story but provides insights into the life of a high-skilled migrant. We also present experiences of participants from different occupations to show the range of practices. At the time of the interview, in June 2010, Ganesh was a PhD researcher in Groningen² and had lived in the Netherlands for approximately 1.5 years.

[Insert Figure 1 about here]

In 2001 Ganesh had moved from his hometown to Hyderabad for undergraduate studies in engineering. The choice of study field stemmed from his individual interest, but also his parents strongly suggested this specialisation due to labour market demand.

According to Ganesh, 'formula-based' decision making is very common among Indian parents.

Upon graduating he moved to Mumbai for a Master's programme at the prestigious Indian Institute of Technology (IIT). Having graduated in 2006, he worked for an IT-company and then took up a job as a research assistant at IIT Mumbai. Three months later he relocated to New Delhi to join a company which was formed by IIT Delhi alumni. After working for a couple of years, Ganesh decided to pursue a PhD to broaden his theoretical knowledge. Driven by gaining international experience, seeking PhD positions abroad was partially for financial reasons, but also because there were fewer opportunities available in the field India. He contacted his professor at the IIT who advised a department at the University of Groningen where the professor already had established research contacts.

In general, when talking about their decision and experiences of moving abroad, nearly all participants referred to it as to 'go out'. Arjun (28, IT specialist) referred to postgraduate studies abroad as 'a gateway to escape India'. The world 'out' was perceived to offer more than India, in addition opportunities to explore other countries and cultures. The first migration step was undertaken when a certain level of human capital had been acquired in the form of graduation from studies, or work experience in

India. Several participants had lived in one or two other foreign countries prior to their move to the Netherlands. Again, the motivation for the following migration account was drawn from finalised scientific degree or work-related project.

The first and foremost drive for emigration was often expressed with the word ‘opportunities’. Specific career or education advancement opportunities are sought, as well as opportunities to get acquainted with another culture. Contrary to the widespread opinion that financial returns are the primary motivation for high-skilled migration, earnings abroad were not of top priority.

All of them [former colleagues in India] are gone out India, not because they want to go there but there’s not enough opportunity to do... high-tech stuff or... It’s not just, you know, getting money, it’s also opportunities that you want. So you just go out. (Rahul, 38, scientist)

Economic benefits were nevertheless of great relevance to several participants, especially to those pursuing a PhD³, suggesting relative wage is an important motive particularly in the early stages of being a highly skilled migrant. Here, the importance of regarding significant others when making the migration decision comes into play: whereas in India the PhD fellowship or salary is enough to live on one’s own, it is often insufficient to support family or spouse financially.

Gaining international experience was another essential migration motivation for the participants. ‘International exposure’ is considered necessary for professional as well as for individual development and most importantly includes learning and applying new

skills, extending one's network, and exploring a new culture. Experience of having lived abroad is highly valued and is also expected to be of advantage for the future migration trajectory.

One was of course that economically it's better. And second that... then I thought that I would see much more how the... world works. And you meet more people in the field. (Sudeep, 26, PhD researcher)

The transition from education or employment to migration trajectory of these highly skilled Indians derives thus from the outlook to develop both professionally and personally, and less from the prospective earnings, whereas these motives are often driven by the migration norm created by others' experiences.

'Once Settled with the Job, Get Married!'

In order to fully utilise the international experience, the participants had been residing or intended to stay abroad for at least a couple of years. This time period was often perceived long enough to go through the stage of union formation, in case this phase was not yet passed.

In the Indian context, the cultural background clearly comes to forth when discussing the issue of marriage since the tradition of arranged marriages prevails. Its implications are two-fold: this life course event is very much timed, and often shaped by parents and other family members. Marriage may consciously be postponed until a certain other event,

most often entry into a job, has taken place. The participants agreed that after that event the parents' expectations are more justified. The majority of them indicated that the initiative to start searching for a spouse was taken by their family members, and given the cultural context, participants accepted that initiative. The search would usually start when the migrant has already settled down and has had a job for a year or two.

So, it just happened that at this time... Well, Indian moms, they have this attitude of... pushing their boy-child as soon as he's settled, he is firmed with his job, get married! So that translated to me as well. I was like 'Okay, no problem.' (Ashok, 29, engineer)

However, for females, marriage often takes place at the end of their education trajectory, before entering the labour market, suggesting different life course patterns for males and females. As Mukta (26, engineer) illustrates: 'If I think about my life before my marriage, then it is all educational thing.'

Once one of the spouses moves to or already lives abroad, education and/or employment trajectories of the other spouse are taken into consideration. In case of an arranged marriage, a suitable spouse candidate is usually expected to have the same level of education, thus specialised opportunities in the labour or education market in the destination country are required also for her or him.

*Two months after the research interview **Ganesh** got married through an arranged marriage (see Figure 1). His parents and other family members had searched for a candidate who would be suitable for him, but also 'compatible' with the whole family.*

The timing of marriage was facilitated by favourable visa conditions. In 2013 Ganesh planned to finalise his PhD and his wife her Master's programme, after which they intended to stay in Europe in order to gain international work experience.

Sometimes the advantages [of high-skilled migrant visa] prove to be very useful. Like for example studies of my wife, I am planning to apply for my wife here, she wants to do her Master. Because if I look at the normal fee⁴, it is very costly for me and I cannot afford it. [---] If I would have been a bursary⁵ ... then I think my wife is not allowed to work. I would have postponed marriage for a couple of years till I complete [PhD] and then I will get a post-doc, till then I would have postponed. (Ganesh, 26, PhD researcher)

However, not everyone necessarily complies with parents' request to get married even when being settled. One of the reasons is to concentrate on one domain at a time and to not simultaneously deal with transitions in several trajectories, which was particularly common among the female participants. Sanjita (28, PhD researcher) has deliberately postponed her marriage until she finishes her PhD, although her parents are convinced that 'at a certain age you have to be married'. Thus whereas she wants to advance her career at this stage of her life, her parents consider it as a hindrance to getting married. On the other hand, separation of different trajectories can sometimes also be determined by social norms, gender roles and expectations present in the culture. Indian women were

traditionally to focus on family life and not on their professional career, nowadays the trend is changing, but combining the two domains can be challenging.

Now I'm thinking that it would have been possible [to combine postgraduate studies and marriage], but at that time it was like... I either do this thing or that thing because when I was [in my] Bachelor's I realised there is a lot [to] study, lot of time you need to invest in studying and... if you are married, that means you have duty to take care of your in-laws. I mean, if you're staying with them, then... husband and in-laws and many other things, how much time I can give to study? [---] But his [husband's] parents were like 'Okay, now he will be doing PhD, he will be earning, so we should just finish off with his marriage.' (Mukta, 26, engineer)

Earlier days people preferred to divide their responsibilities, it's a typical family life. But now it's changing, everybody goes to work. And it's not limited that the women [are] at home or men at work. Like, if my wife and myself is there, we decide whether both of us will go to work or not. Nobody will ask you to go to work and nobody will... force you to stay at home.
(Venkatesh, 32, IT specialist)

The examples in this section shed light on the timing of entering into a marriage which is to a large extent explained by the system of arranged marriage in India. Although the traditional role of women as housewives is losing its place in Indian culture among the

higher educated, perceptions of the different norms of combining professional career and family life for both genders still tend to remain. Highly skilled Indian migrants rather postpone marriage than marry at early age, however, external factors such as strong pressure from parents or advantageous visa conditions may lead to a quicker marriage decision.

‘My Plans Are to Get Children Only When I Get back to India’

Many participants perceived that the transition from marriage to first child involves complex negotiating of overlap between employment, household and migration, hence this decision was usually held off for a couple of years. Several reasons for postponement were named. Again, the Indian norm of arranged marriages has to be borne in mind, and so the timing factor comes into play. The spouses are often not acquainted with one another before the marriage or at least not as extensively as generally in Western societies, thus there is a need for a time to ‘get to know each other’ after getting married and therefore the birth of the first child is often postponed for a few years. Of equal importance is to settle in the career and make most of ‘international exposure’ before planning children, both in terms of securing the financial position of the family, as well as realising professional potential:

It’s pretty clear [we will not have children] not, not, not till four years after we get married. I’m personally in such a phase of my life... Yeah, it’s, these four years are a bit... crucial for me in my own development. And making it

more secure for my family. [---] So I can see that even she is growing in her career, I don't want to stop her all of a sudden. I just want both of us to get settled with our careers, just go in a nice flow. I think then it's the right time afterwards. And I think the most important point, this is, this is arranged marriage system, it's not a love marriage or a partnership marriage, something like that. We get some more time to get to know each other.

(Ashok, 29, engineer)

Nearly all participants without children indicated their plan to have children only when they have returned to India in order to raise children in their own cultural and linguistic environment. The presence of grandparents and care provision is regarded as a natural necessity given the high priority attached to family values. *Following this line of reasoning, Ganesh plans to have his first child in about five years' time (see Figure 1). Apart from affection, the shared care from grandparents is also instrumental in the ability to maintain dual careers. Furthermore, the norm of living close to family enables reciprocal care, namely, to take responsibility of the well-being of parents as they get older.*

However, some participants who already had a child did not necessarily plan to return to India. This can partly be explained by their previous migration experience—they had lived in at least one foreign country in addition to the Netherlands—and their willingness to settle in one country for a longer time.

I have moved fairly. So one thing that it's not easy. Going to new country and then... setting up a house and, you know, getting used to the culture and place and so on. But now our son is born here, so I would like to... give him a couple of years. I mean, it's rather his choice where would he like to go. Stay here or we go back to India or we go to US. (Vinod, 41, IT specialist)

Returning to India was also in the minds of the participants who did not plan to have children in the near future. There are strong family ties and a close attachment to parents. The 'family system' is also an explanation why parents and other family members sometimes even enforce a particular organisation of the life trajectories on their children who then in turn try to conform to parents' expectations.

Until I got a job or little after that there wasn't any pressure [from parents]. For marriage. Once they know 'Okay, one thing is over,' they get paranoid about the other thing. Once I got a job and start up settling, then they thought 'What next? What next? Marriage!' So there was an immense pressure to get married soon. But with children, nothing yet. But I wouldn't be surprised if it comes up tomorrow. I've seen that pattern for everything in my family. (Diya, 26, finance specialist)

Hence, cultural norms to a large extent determine the interplay between different events in the household trajectory and are likely to result in the postponement of getting children. Return migration to India is often conditioned by couples' preference to raise

children where their own roots are and where mutual care can be shared with the grandparents.

The brief overview of **Ganesh**'s life story illustrates the multiple links between different life course events and trajectories, as well as the rich evidence of influence of significant others on one's life course which can only be revealed by means of adopting a qualitative research approach.

Conclusion

This article applied a qualitative life course approach to highly skilled migration in combination with a semi-structured biographic interview method to demonstrate the valuable in-depth knowledge on migration processes of highly skilled Indians in the Netherlands, as well as on their life course trajectories surrounding the migration trajectory. The qualitative research approach allows for a deeper understanding of the complexities of (family) migration decision-making beyond economic thinking, opening up space for including human agency and socio-cultural context (Smith 2004).

Through the theoretical framework which brings together the life course approach and highly skilled migration we have been able to identify the wealth of transitions between education, employment, household and migration trajectories. It is important to recognise the variety in the life course trajectories of global households (Yeoh, 2009).

This study extends our theoretical and empirical understanding of family migration by incorporating the timing element in migration decision making. The implications of an arranged marriage for both union formation and childbearing underline the role of timing

of life course transitions. In line with previous research (Bonney, McCleery, and Foster 1999; Lindstrom and Giorguli Saucedo 2007), we conclude that short-term goals are often connected to ambitions in career advancement, whereas long-term goals often relate to aspirations in family formation and childrearing.

Migration decision-making becomes more complex as the individual moves further in the household career. We have shown how the linked lives of the participants and their families are culturally conditioned. Only by nesting individuals within the contexts of the people in their lives (Moen and Hernandez 2009), the complexities of the processes underlying knowledge migration can be fully comprehended. Following the notion by Ryan et al. (2009, 61) that ‘focus on individual migrants has underestimated the complex roles of families in the migration strategies and decision-making,’ our study illustrated, for example, the role intergenerational care in return migration patterns of the highly skilled Indians. Similarly, Harvey (2009), based on a study on high-skilled migrants in the US, has argued that family considerations and cultural environment are among the most important return migration motives. One of our key findings highlights that the role of parents tends to be remarkable in primary transitions between education, employment and union formation, whereas the spouse influences future migration and employment decisions. As the Dutch government strives to be one of the forerunners in the EU knowledge economy, then, in order to retain skilled migrants, it needs to recognise the socio-cultural context of migrants and further develop policies favourable for family migration.

Another significant contribution of this paper is pointing out the gender division in the life course of high-skilled Indian migrants and changing gender norms. Our data suggest

that parallel careers are more applicable for the male Indian migrants, whereas cultural boundaries – although decreasingly – lead the female migrants to compartmentalise their life course trajectories and keep postgraduate studies, union formation and labour market entry as separate, rather than simultaneous events. The women in our study who migrated as dependents were not just tied movers (Mincer, 1978) but were actively engaged in labour market or postgraduate education. Although the female migrants often move to fulfil gender roles such as marriage (Guo, Chow, and Palinkas 2011), they do not sacrifice but strategise: migrating abroad can provide attractive opportunities in education or employment (Liversage 2009). Confirming the findings of Ryan and Mulholland (2014), the women in our study cannot be considered ‘trailing wives’ but active agents in family migration processes of the highly skilled.

The empirical evidence in this study advances theorising migration of the highly skilled by incorporating other key life course trajectories of education, employment and household. The timing, linked lives, and gender components influencing these life course trajectories provide valuable insights into the migration mechanisms and therefore deserve further and more elaborate research. This evidence supports Ho’s (2011, 122) suggestion that international education and work experiences form a ‘spatial strategy for acquiring the portable career competencies to build a boundaryless career’, constituting a solid base for deciding when and where to move or stay. Going beyond the boundaries of economic rationale, the qualitative results of this study enable to examine and explain the patterns of the life course that both constitute and are determined by high-skilled migration.

Endnotes

¹ All participants are given fictitious names in order to protect their anonymity.

² ‘Ganesh’ gave permission to report on the actual place names.

³ A PhD candidate was said to be paid five to eight times more in the Netherlands than in India.

⁴ In the academic year 2010/2011, the tuition fee for Dutch or EU nationalities or (the dependants of) high-skilled migrants was €1,672, whereas for others Master’s programme fees ranged from €14,200 to €19,100.

⁵ University of Groningen distinguishes between bursary-PhD and employee-PhD. The former receives payments as scholarship, whereas the latter as a salary and is thus an employee. Due to that status only the employee-PhD researchers are eligible for the high-skilled migrant visa and spousal benefits.

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Table 1. The central dimensions of life course approach.

Theme	Description
Lives in time and space	Historical and geographical context that influences the life course of individuals; the cohort effect.
Timing of lives	Occurrence, duration, and sequence of transitions.
Linked lives	Individuals' embeddedness in social relationships; the role of significant others in shaping one's life course.
Human agency	Conscious and deliberate choices in constructing one's life course.

Sources: Elder (1975, 1994)

Figure 1. Parallel careers of a highly skilled migrant and the interdependencies of linked lives.

