16 Sustaining a Multi-local Life: Possible Theoretical Foundations for Livelihood and Transnational Migration Studies

Susan Thieme[1]

Abstract

An increasing number of people around the world are diversifying their sources of income through migration. In most cases only some members of the family migrate, making their livelihoods multi-local, be it within a country or across international borders. There are two major ways of approaching migration in research: from a livelihoods perspective, on the one hand, and from the perspective of transnational migration and transnational social spaces, on the other. Scholars rarely combine the two. One major criticism of both approaches is that they are not linked to other existing social theories. A theoretical foundation is necessary in order to gain a better understanding of people's access to and use of resources, of the relationship between subjects and society, and of socio-economic dependencies, as well as to be able to extrapolate the results of case studies. The present article addresses this criticism by proposing Bourdieu's theory of practice as a means of filling this theoretical gap.

Keywords: Multi-locality; livelihoods; transnational migration; Bourdieu's theory of practice; South Asia; Central Asia.

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16.1 Introduction

An increasing number of people worldwide are diversifying their sources of income through migration. This mobility in most cases involves only parts of the family migrating, with the result that people's livelihoods take on a multi-local dimension. Scholars have studied this increasing mobility by applying either a livelihoods approach or a transnational migration approach. The livelihoods approach is used to explain the diversity and complexity of the ways in which people make a living. Livelihood strategies are linked to people's social, human, financial, natural, and physical capital (Rakodi 2002). Scholars in transnational migration research (e.g. Glick-Schiller et al 1992; Pries 1999) point out that the intensity of cross-border activities has led to the emergence of transnational social spaces with multi-local geographical links often connecting more than two places. Work, housing, life trajectories, and time horizons span different localities in different states. Both approaches – livelihoods and transnational migration – have been criticised for their lack of social-theoretical contextualisation, as a result of which they do not permit any fundamental analysis of the relationship between subject and society, power relations within a society, and the changes that human mobility effects in power relations (e.g. Dörfler et al 2003; de Haan and Zoomers 2005; Kelly and Lusis 2006). In most studies, researchers consider migrants as one group, one entity, imposing an ideal image of community and celebrating the importance of social networks with reference to the very loosely defined term "social capital". By contrast, both approaches rarely include analysis of unequal power relations in the migration process and within the conflicting networks of migrants and other non-migrating people involved, such as those between or within communities or households, men and women, or different age groups.

Against this background, the present article aims to suggest a more open analysis of migration and its embeddedness in people's livelihoods in order to interlink it with existing social theory. Bourdieu's theory of practice is proposed as one possible means of locating people's livelihoods within wider societal structures and of considering specific migration dynamics, such as the resulting multi-locality of households. A brief explanation of Bourdieu's theory of practice is followed by its application to analyse various dimensions and impacts of migration using empirical examples of labour migration from Nepal to India and from Kyrgyzstan to Russia. The article concludes with suggestions for further research.

16.2 Bourdieu's theory of practice: habitus, capital, and social fields

Bourdieu's theory of practice is a response to the dualism of objectivism and subjectivism and postulates a dialectical relationship between social field and habitus. The social practice of an individual or a social group is analysed as the result of the interaction of habitus and social field (e.g. Dörfler et al 2003). The two main concepts of habitus and social field are supported by ideas such as strategy, struggle, and various kinds of capital, which determine social practices; they are briefly explained below.

Habitus operates at the subconscious level. It is a socially and culturally conditioned set of durable dispositions towards certain social actions, and thus a product of history (Bourdieu 1977, pp 78–87; Bourdieu 1990, p 53). Habitus is internalised and gives individuals a sense of how to act in specific situations, without continually having to make fully conscious decisions. It generates practice and limits people's possibilities at the same time. In Nepal and India, for example, caste affiliation determines social and economic practices. In this way, power relations, hierarchies, and dependencies are ritually justified and manifested in daily activities. Habitus is also reflected in the practices of patriarchal intra-household decision-making structures and gender-segregated labour markets, resulting in gender-selective migration patterns. Women bear the main responsibility for housekeeping and caretaking. The man is seen as the main cash-income earner and consequently it is he who migrates for work. Although these patterns are now changing, women end up with 'double duties' combining income generation and unpaid management of the household.

Capital is accumulated labour and includes all material and symbolic goods that present themselves as rare and worthy of being sought after in a particular social formation (Bourdieu 1986). Bourdieu distinguishes between economic, cultural, social, and symbolic capital. Economic capital comprises goods of monetary value that can be cashed in, such as a house or livestock that can be sold. Cultural capital is the product of intellectual ability or educational qualifications. Social capital consists of a network of lasting social relations. When Nepalis in Delhi use their social networks and mobilise social capital to form credit associations, it provides them with access to financial capital to repay their debts and to finance daily needs (Thieme 2006). Symbolic capital is the recognition and legitimisation of other forms of capital. When migrants in Kyrgyzstan finance costly feasts and gifts, this increases their own honour and reputation. This understanding of capital is quite different from the

notion of capital in the livelihoods approach, according to which not all forms of capital are fixed assets, nor do people simply own different kinds of capital. Ultimately, the form capital takes only receives a value if one enters a social field where it is valued. Capital and power amount to the same thing. Resources are transformed into capital "[...] when they function as a social relation of power – or, in other words, when resources are objects of social struggle" (Navarro 2006, p 17).

Practices, which are generated by habitus, exist in a structured framework and are conceived of as belonging to a social field. Each social field, such as education, politics, the sciences, etc. has its own respective rules and social structures. These structures and principles constitute what is allowed and not allowed within that social field. In order to occupy a particular position within the field, people apply strategies. Strategies are products of habitus and of practices adapted to a social field. They can be seen as constraints, but at the same time they make action possible. The availability of multiple forms of capital conditions the position of an actor in relation to other social actors within a social field (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, pp 94–114). The position of an actor in a society and in a social field is never absolute, but always relative. Inequality of and access to resources are the basis upon which each field operates. Power relations are contested and conflicts and compromises are negotiated. Moving from one context to another provides a different framework for interactions, just as, for the people who remain behind, power relations and interactions change within transnational or multi-local social fields.

16.3 Migrants' social practices as a result of the interplay of habitus and transnational social fields

In a receiving country, migrants have to act in different social fields to gain access to employment, shelter, and loans or to remit money. Their different forms of capital are valued differently when they enter new social fields, and power relations change. One example is the social field of the global labour market, which is segmented into sub-fields such as different sectors of work and the informal and formal labour markets. Labour markets in Delhi or Moscow, for instance, can be perceived as additional sub-fields. Employers and customers have their specific demands, and migrants (as jobseekers) become engaged in this social field hoping to use their power to their own advantage.

When migrants enter the labour market, they regularly face problems, such as the fact that cultural capital – education, general knowledge, and abilities – that was important in the rural context of Nepal or Kyrgyzstan, is not valued in the new social fields of the urban (and often foreign) labour market. For example, agricultural knowledge is not important for survival in the city. Migrants in Nepal instead need to know how to ensure security in an urban neighbourhood as watchmen; women have to run a middle-class household as domestic workers (Thieme 2006).

Such examples suggest that moving from one country to another is only one dimension of creating new social spaces. Due to the cultural similarities that exist between Nepal and India, on the one hand, and Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and Russia, on the other, it can even be argued that the change from a rural, geographically marginalised place to an urban place with access to physical and social infrastructure has the same influence as a change of country (or perhaps a greater one). Moreover, globalisation has contributed to greater restriction and informalisation of economic activities (Bürkner 2005). The majority of individual migrants feel stigmatised by society as 'rural and low-skilled immigrants' in their urban working places. Many internalise and get used to the stigma, which results in low self-esteem and a feeling of being incapable of achieving a higher social position. They are afraid of losing their jobs, feel insecure because of the mismatch between their current jobs and their professional experience and education, and do not know their rights and their options. Migrants tend to accept occupational and wage discrimination, and they hesitate to ask for external help or to organise themselves, which blocks their social mobility at their destination point. As a result, in both India and Russia, male migrants were found to occupy a distinct niche in the low-skilled, informal labour market. In India, many male migrants from Nepal, regardless of caste, work as watchmen and even hand down their jobs from generation to generation (Thieme 2006). In Moscow, Kyrgyz men are 'well-known' for working as street-sweepers. Social and financial capital is essential for migrants to ease their lack of other capital and to find a job. Jobs are arranged by friends or fellow villagers. However, the same social capital can also exclude certain people if they cannot satisfy other preconditions laid down by their fellow villagers in order for them to get a job. For example, among men in Delhi, jobs are often 'bought' from one's predecessor for up to three times the monthly salary. However, this social capital carries no value in other sub-fields of the labour market, for example, when migrants look for higher-skilled and better-paid jobs.

Another reason for migrants' limited social mobility is the fact that they oscillate between at least two worlds. The majority of migrants have part of their families at home. They dream of going back to their home country and never having to leave again, and this has an important influence on how they invest in or sustain their different forms of capital. If they think that they are only going to be working abroad for a limited time, they do not invest in their own cultural capital and choose instead to follow the easiest path, that is, obtain a job through their social networks. Furthermore, they do not build up more social capital but instead remain within their existing social network. They live for years with the psychological burden of being separated from their family members, although some do earn sufficient money and stay away long enough for their family members to join them, whereby the latter gain access to education, basic infrastructure, and chances to earn an income. The family members who remain behind and those who want to return to their village depend on the cooperation of the agricultural community, their caste, patron–client affiliations, and on their neighbours, as well as all other forms of social and symbolic capital, in order to survive in society. This gives us an insight into the heavy psychological burden migrants carry whenever they return to their villages. Most migrants need to go back from time to time so as to be able to cope with living away from their families for most of the year; at the same time they must endure the stress of knowing that if they do not fulfil reciprocal obligations, their support networks and social capital might erode.

The process of migration influences habitus and renders transformation and adaptation both possible and necessary over time and from one generation to the next. In cases where women come from Nepal to join their husbands in Delhi, the men are a source of both financial and social capital. Women respect the traditional patrilineal and patrilocal family networks through which normative expectations, such as kinship obligations, are reinforced. However, while keeping to these patterns, they can gain new economic independence by finding employment through their husbands' contacts, earning their own money, and being able to manage their own financial self-help groups, which can in the long run transform habitus (Thieme 2006).

Linkages between sending and receiving regions are intergenerational and reproduce power relations and habitus. But these can at the same time be transformed and merged with modern patterns. While in the villages traditional elders – men and, in Nepal, the respective castes they belong to – are the leaders, in the cities people who were previously excluded from power have a chance to participate. Examples of this in India are mixed-caste mem-

berships in financial self-help groups or the fact that people work in the same job regardless of their caste. Nevertheless it takes a long time to change social structures, and change does not affect everybody in the same way. Personality and a sense of responsibility, whether for one's own life or as a leader of a group, are important factors in initiating change. Moreover, change does not take place on the same timescale and has different dimensions in sending and receiving regions.

Additionally, other axes of social differentiation such as gender, class, age, or status of migration might influence people's habitus (e.g. Herzig 2006), just as migrants might change their habitus and attitudes, while people remaining behind might not. For example, some migrants who settled in Delhi with their families tried to return to the Far West region of Nepal. Those of lower caste who tried to return to this part of Nepal came back to Delhi again because they felt paralysed by the traditional structures that marginalised them socially and economically in their home villages (Thieme 2006). If migrants earn enough money to invest, they might be tempted to do so in other towns or villages in their home country in order to escape from the conservative environment, weak economy, limited labour market, and lack of adequate social infrastructure such as schools and health care in their home villages. However, migrants often lack the financial capital to invest in land immediately. Therefore, they do it step by step, which leads to an even more diverse pattern of internal and international migration, with one part of the family working and living in the foreign place, one part living on the newly bought land, and yet another part of the family continuing to reside in the original village. Thus, multi-locality becomes an integral part of people's lives.

16.4 Conclusion

There are two major ways of approaching migration in research: from a livelihoods perspective, on the one hand, and from the perspective of transnational migration and transnational social spaces, on the other. Both approaches face the major challenge of enhancing their theoretical foundations. A theoretical foundation is necessary in order to gain a better understanding of people's access to and use of resources, of the relationship between subject and society, and of socio-economic dependencies, as well as to be able to extrapolate the results of case studies. This article proposes using Bourdieu's theory of practice as a means to achieving this goal.

According to Bourdieu, social practice is a result of interrelations between habitus and social field. Habitus is a system of lasting dispositions and internalised behaviour. A social field is constituted by the positions of different actors and the relations between them, for example between employer and employee in a job market, or between persons of different sexes and different ages in the same household. The relations between actors' positions constitute a 'social topography' in which some actors are more powerful than others. No actor's position within a social field is absolute. It is based on whether and to what extent an actor possesses various kinds of capital, be it social, economic, cultural, or symbolic. The key characteristic of all kinds of capital is that they can be transformed into one another through transformation work. However, common to all kinds of capital is the fact that individuals only receive a value for it if they enter a social field where it is valued. Resource access and inequality are at the basis of each social field operation. Individuals will automatically be advantaged or disadvantaged, depending on their background. Therefore, the notion of social field is not only determined by strategies but also by the struggle for a position in the field. Moreover, using the theory of practice also enables us to consider changing power relations between migrating and non-migrating household members or between an individual and his or her community.

Migration affects not only those who migrate but also those who do not, with the latter including both the family members who remain behind and the people living in the receiving area. They all have to renegotiate their positions and needs; this can open up new opportunities but can also reinforce or create new power imbalances. This sheds more light on explanations of how and why migrants and their non-migrating family members may benefit from migration, as well as on what sometimes prevents them from doing so; at the same time, it reveals the interlinkages between sending and receiving regions. Therefore, the theory of practice does not only help to assess the valuation of various forms of capital, but also provides a theoretical background for exploring how such valuations are reached.

Based on the above conceptual thoughts, some suggestions can be made with regard to possible further research. The major argument of the present article is that power relations and dependencies are central to understanding social practice. On this basis, one challenge for further research is to think about and understand these power relations not as fixed resources but as socially constructed resources that require concepts such as habitus and social field to be further operationalised. In order to better understand the relation between

actors and their surrounding society, there is a need to research not only 'the' migrant and his or her household members, but also non-migrating people who are affected by migration through the fact that they live in the receiving place. Furthermore, it is important to consider migration as only one category of research amongst many – it is always combined with other categories such as gender, age, and ethnicity. All of them are fluid and only in-depth analysis of power relations can reveal which category or categories are important for certain social practices. Given the increasing incidence of multi-local households, empirical research has to be multi-local as well. A complete record of migration patterns could serve to reveal the possible linkages between internal and international migration as well as the linkages between different income sources in cases where, for example, remittances fund the purchase of land for agriculture and livestock breeding, small business creation, or education. It could also give us an insight into how power relations between people change.

Endnotes

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[1] Susan Thieme is a lecturer in Human Geography at the University of Zurich, Switzerland. She specialises in social geography, livelihoods, and labour migration, with a regional focus on Nepal, India, and Kyrgyzstan.
E-mail: susan.thieme@geo.uzh.ch

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