

Thomas Geisen

The Complexity of Migration: Life Strategies of Migrant Family Members and Their Families

In migration research, the concepts of network and trans-nationalism have gained new insights into migrants as social actors. Most important is that decision-making and balancing processes were reconnected with the individual and his/her network of relations. Concomitantly, a new emphasis was placed on the relevance of the migrant family as an important social actor in migration processes. For trans-nationalism, the family is the most important social unit, binding individuals together in an intergenerational social context, often arching over great geographical distances. It seems that the family has become the most emblematic social form of trans-nationalism (Pries, 2008). However, looking at concrete family practices, it can be shown that the family itself is embedded within a reticulation of wider social relations built up inside the community or the society.

Based on our empirical research on migrant families, the proposed paper seeks to develop a conceptual approach for migration research which is centered on migrants as social actors. Here migration is understood in a wider perspective as a change in residence beyond communal borders. Proceeding from such a vantage, not only can different forms of migration be identified viewed within the context of a biographical or life-course perspective. It can also be shown what relevance the experience of migration and mobility acquires for individual and collective actors, what motives are relevant for migrants in intergenerational and interactional perspective, and what individual and collective motives and orientations lead migrants and migrant families to migrate, e.g. economic, political and educational. Viewed from such a process grounded perspective on migration, the still existing cleavage in migration research between international and internal migration reveals its inherent limitations for understanding migrants and their families. Based on Norbert Elias' concept of figuration and Ernest Jouhy's notion of a 'scheme of social relations,' the paper discusses the complexity of migration by introducing the additional concept of life strategies. It tries to enrich understanding of migration networks and dynamics by exploring the decisive relevance of the 'subjective factor' for better grasping the migration of family members and migrant families in its fuller complexity.

The complexity of migration

Operating from a very restricted perspective, migration is often understood principally as international migration. Internal migration is relatively neglected and separated from this understanding and often even designated by a different term, such as moving or mobility. This perspective not only points up the extent to which the nation-state and its borders has shaped our perception of migration, but also illuminates how our research perspective and practices tend to be dominated by a species of “methodological nationalism” (Glick Schiller & Wimmer, 2002). Moving beyond such a perspective is relevant for the perception of migration and its realities: migration is better understood as a special situation in human life and an action taken by others, mainly those coming from abroad, but not as a core principle shaping human life. Decoupling our understanding and perception of migration from methodological nationalism means to see migration in a context where the modern nation-state is only a condition, albeit important, but not migration’s implicit or explicit reference point. In a more comprehensive conceptualization, migration can be understood as a process by which people shape and change their established social relations by changes in residence beyond communal borders, for example relocating from one village to another, from a village to a city, from one region to another, from one country to another, from one continent to another (Page Moch, 1997). Such a view of migration means to focus on the influence and effects on social relations engendered by the act of leaving one’s home and establishing a new home in a different place. Viewed from a wider perspective, migration can be understood in modernity as a process of socialization (Geisen, 2005). According to Weber, socialization is a social relation in which social action is motivated by a rational connection and balance of interests (Weber, 1980, p. 21). From this perspective, migration can be understood as both a context and a process (Geisen, 2009). Migration as a context refers to a social situation in which those already established and newcomers come together in a certain place and region and make a new beginning, entering into new social relations. By contrast, migration as a process does not focus on the new relations and social changes driven and influenced by migration but rather on the migratory move itself and its conditions. Both aspects of migration are intrinsically intertwined with each other. Taking this into account, migration as a social practice is driven by individual and collective motives, decisions and actions. It is a result of negotiations and decision-making processes within communities, especially within families, which is embedded into the specific social conditions people live in and connected with the life perspectives they have. Migration can thus best be seen as a “balancing process” (Hoerder, 2002), guided by the chances and options people see and the imponderable factors they must grapple with. Social conditions and social structures, such as the labor market, educational system and immigration politics, are highly relevant factors in this balancing process. Information about these conditions is often incomplete, not comprehensive and even erroneous, and adequate information may be unavailable. Balancing processes are therefore processes of judging

of a given situation and future perspectives. These processes are not only driven by rationalities but also by desires, imagination, fantasies and emotional factors, such as suffering and love. To date, emotional aspects in understanding migration have rarely been taken into account in migration research, even if many examples of its relevance can be found in migration studies, especially studies on migrant families. The complexity of migration and the migratory situation, as it is influenced by social structures, individual/collective action and emotions, presents a clear challenge for migration research. It generates questions on methods and methodology as well as various theoretical challenges.

Figuration, the scheme of social relations, and life strategies

Developing the concept of figuration, Norbert Elias sought to overcome theoretical postulates, especially the assumption of a society for which immutability is the norm, developmental models are limited to internal, inner-state processes and predominant is a one-sided perspective on processes of differentiation and integration (Elias, 1996). This critique reflects an approach where social life is largely conceptualized as static and person- or group-centered. Processes, interdependencies and relations between people are have been significantly neglected to date in much sociological thinking. This becomes very clear if we look at migration research, where we even have difficulties with the terminology we can use for description and analysis. Thus, we employ notions such as migration background, long- and short-term migrants, even if we know that this kind of categorization is misleading and does not deepen our understanding of migration processes. The synchronic and the diachronic structure of processes of migration cannot be grasped by this kind of traditional conceptualizing of migration seen from the perspective of a strong nation-state. Even the relatively new term trans-nationalism is not of much help in this regard, because it does not really break with the bipolar perspective on migration as international and internal migration. Instead, Elias introduced the concept of figuration, which places the problem of human relations and interdependencies front and center (Elias, 1996, p. 146). This perspective foregrounds dependencies and insecurities between individuals, factors highly relevant for understanding social relations. Figurations depend on social structures but can also change and develop over time. They are built by social linkages and interdependencies which are based on affective relations; these include personal and collective perspectives as well as perspectives on the state and professional relationships. For Elias, state and profession are units of survival: they ensure that that persons can live in a society, that their basic needs are met, such as for a job, sufficient income, opportunities for education. Figurations are stable due to the existing power balances, but they also change if frictions and conflicts arise that influence and alter the existing power balances.

Elias' concept of figuration posits that the concept of figuration can be used for the analysis of different kinds of social units, such as society or family. But he does not give us an answer to the questions: how are those figurations related to each other? How are figurations from different levels connected, how can they be integrated? For that purpose, the notion of the 'scheme of social relations' as developed by Ernest Jouhy can provide a framework for seeing how different figurations can be integrated and systematically related to each other. For Jouhy, persons can see themselves as limited and unique beings. They are able to set and overcome given limits. Individuals live in different communities offering them values and norms; the communities also constrain individuals to make decisions about norms and values. Communities are a part of societies, located in societal spaces. Societies establish historical, economic, legal and political frameworks. Societies are influenced by the 'world society,' which determines, influences and accelerates the relations and conduct of individuals, social groups and societies (Jouhy, 1996; Mergner, 1999). This scheme of relations points up the sheer complexity of human life. For migration research, this approach is useful for understanding the complexity of migration, analyzing the migration process in a diachronic and synchronic perspective. The diachronic axis sheds light on how a person becomes part of communities and society, and how the relations established there are changed by migration. At the same time, from a synchronic perspective, we can analyze what new social relations are established during the process of migration and how those relations impact on the already existing ones. Combining the scheme of social relations with the concept of figuration, we need to show how figurations were established and then are influenced and changed by social action.

But what imbues social action with a direction? For Jouhy, this is finality, i.e. expectations for the future: every individual reacts, thinks and feels in a context of concrete dispute with their space and time, and does so according to imagined aims (Jouhy, 1996; Mergner, 1999). Ends and interests as well as emotions are shaped and directed by finality (Mergner, 1999, p. 237). As a result, human action cannot be understood by looking at the past. Moreover, finality is, in Jouhy's view, highly relevant for understanding present action. Here Jouhy follows Alfred Adler's concept of a life plan and a lifestyle, structures that develop and are realized beginning with the process of growing up. For all those who successfully develop a sense of community, life plan and lifestyle have a flexibility which assists them in adapting to continuously to new challenges of reality and in finding viable answers to the challenges life creates for individuals. Therefore, life plan and lifestyle are not fixed entities; moreover, they change continuously through processes of learning. Learning occurs on an individual and social basis, and learning means that individuals and collectives, e.g. communities and societies, are able to find adequate answers to deal with the challenges they are confronted with (Mergner, 1999). From the perspective of an individual, the processes of developing a life-plan and lifestyle through pro-

cesses of learning can be characterized as a life strategy. This concept includes both the orientation towards the future as well as the idea of a continual adaptation of the life-plan through individual and social learning.

The concepts of figuration and life strategies and the scheme of social relations are highly useful in understanding individual and social change and development. They place individual and social action at the center of analysis and are based on conceptualizing the individual both as distinct and as an integral part of the social fabric. This is useful for looking at social situations where discontinuity and constant change are characteristics of individual and social life. Migration is an emblematic example in this regard. That can be exemplified by data from an empirical study on migrant families.

Family practices and life strategies of migrant families

In a study on the "Separation of Parents and Children in Transnational Families" (Geisen & Jurt, 2013), we explored the possible motives for the separation of parents and children and the process of decision-making, how the families dealt with the separation and how they sought to analyze the effects of separation; finally, we examined the process of unification in the country of immigration. The Martinez family can illustrate the usefulness of the concepts discussed above. The family lived in Ecuador and the father had a small carpenters' workshop there. Mrs. Martinez stopped studying at the university when pregnant with the third of their four children. Two children went to private kindergarten. After his workshop was burgled twice within a short period, Mr. Martinez was unable to purchase replacement new machines to complete his work orders. He took a job in a small company and earned much less than he had before. The children had to be taken out of the kindergarten. In that situation, the parents decided it would be best to emigrate and work abroad.

When the first chance arose for the father to go to the U.S., his wife did not want him to go and leave her behind with the children. The next chance for migration developed when a brother of Mrs. Martinez came on a visit from Switzerland and suggested to the parents that he could take one of the Martinez family along with him back to Switzerland. Now they decided to make use of the chance, and the mother left the family together with her brother. Her husband followed later and finally they also arranged for the children to come to Switzerland as well. I now will try to show how the concepts of figuration and life strategies as well as the scheme of social relations can better contribute to understanding the Martinez family and their migration.

Figuration

The Martinez family is composed of two parents and four children. The extended family includes the family of the father, especially his own parents. The father's family was living in the country-

side and had a small farm. When the father was young, he was forced by his parents to leave school and to contribute and work at the farm. The father agreed that he should stay away from school for one year and then go back. Since his parents refused to let him return to school after working for one year, he left the family as a teenager. He managed to find different jobs, later became a carpenter and moved from place to place in the country. Finally, he met his wife, they married and had children. The contact with his father's family was loose during that period and was not further intensified later on. Today, the father supports his parents financially by sending them money from Switzerland. The mother grew up in a family together with two other siblings. Her parents had a small business selling shoes. The business was mainly run by her mother. She moved often to other places, especially to the nearby city, for business purposes, and also often stayed there for a few days. We do not know much about what her father did. The family was wealthy and owned property. The brother in the family had a house and a family with two children in the village where they lived, her sister's family was nearby. The mother (Mrs. Martinez) was well educated and started to study business, but had to stop when pregnant with her third child. When the family faced a serious crisis, a brother of the mother offered to take her with him to Switzerland. Mr. and Mrs. Martinez decided to do that. When the mother moved abroad, she gave her newborn child to her sister and her husband took care of the other children. When they decided that the husband should follow his wife to Switzerland, the grandmother took the children in her house, while continuing to maintain her business.

This family figuration can be characterized by a tradition and practice of entrepreneurship and of migration practice. The network of the wider family offers economic, social and cultural resources. Different options exist in that figuration and we can also identify a shift from entrepreneurship as the dominant model of work towards migration. A further important issue in the family figuration is education.

Life strategies

The life strategies of the family members and also of the two families as a whole can be characterized by the elements of education and work/entrepreneurship. Education is seen as a guarantee not only form a basis for livelihood but an foundation for making a better living. In all generations, the families endeavored to provide a good education for their children. This also continued for the next generation. The decision of the parents to send their children to Switzerland was also motivated not only by family reasons, emotionally and to provide them with better care, but also because they wished to provide the children with a better education. Currently two are at a Swiss university and the younger two are about to enter the university as well. Migration can therefore also be seen as a life strategy, developed very early on by the father and later applied to the whole family as well. And it is precisely here, in the context of greater opportuni-

ties for education, where we can see how society is perceived and what options for the future can be identified.

Scheme of social relations

The example of the Martinez family shows that it is important to examine and establish the web of relations of the individuals under study within the families, social groups, the neighborhood and the respective societies they live in and are connected with. With emphasis on migration, it can be shown that the expansion of existing networks, e.g. by becoming engaged in the *sans papiers* movement in Switzerland, contributed much to the well-being of the family. But connections and support given by the employees, based on the most recently established work relations in the country of immigration, also were a key factor. Looking at the connections migrants maintain over long distances to family members, friends and colleagues, we can show how social relations change and what new orientations develop or are strengthened while others are weakened.

Conclusion

The paper has sought to grasp the complexity of migration by using a broader concept of migration as one of changing the centre of one's life. In so doing, migration is freed from its boundaries oriented to the nation-state, rigidly fixed in distinctions like internal and international migration. This is not a mere symbolic matter. The example of the Martinez family serves to illustrate how important it is to follow and reconstruct the learning processes of families and family members in migration practice, where a trans-national migration, even trans-continental, might be the eventual outcome. It was further argued that in order to better grasp the complexity of migration, we need concepts that allow us not only to understand the migration practices but also to locate and situate these practices in the different contexts actually relevant for migrants. Here it was argued that Elias' concept of *figuration*, Jouhy's concept of the *scheme of social relations* and the concept of *life strategies* can contribute to a better understanding. Figuration shows how the relevant persons in a (familial) network are related and connected with each other, what power relations exist and where potential resources can be identified. The concept of figuration situates and locates individuals in a framework where forms of obligation, solidarity and cooperation can be identified. Connected with this, the identification of life strategies helps to identify the direction towards current action is oriented. This is essential for understanding current migrant action, which is the result of a balancing process, fed and guided by individual as well as collective and cooperative aspirations. Without knowing those underlying aspirations, current actions can be misunderstood. Finally, utilizing the notion of a scheme of social relations, a systematic approach has been introduced which helps to identify the impact of the different social levels -

individual, community, society, world society - on migration. Viewed through this prism, not only can changes in current migrations become visible and be better understood, but new dynamics of migration can be identified as well.

Literature

- Elias, N. (1996). *Was ist Soziologie?* Weinheim/München: Juventa.
- Geisen, T. (2005). Migration als Vergesellschaftungsprozess. In T. Geisen (Ed.), *Arbeitsmigration. WanderarbeiterInnen auf dem Weltmarkt für Arbeitskraft* (pp. 19-36). Frankfurt am Main: IKO Verlag.
- Geisen, T. (2009). Migration als Kontext und Prozess. *SuchtMagazin*(4/2009), 4-11.
- Geisen, T., & Jurt, L. (2013). Wie Eltern sich entscheiden, auch ihre Kinder in die neue Heimat zu holen *Forschungseinblicke* (pp. 34-37). Windisch: Fachhochschule Nordwestschweiz.
- Glick Schiller, N., & Wimmer, A. (2002). Methodological nationalism and beyond: nation-state building, migration and the social sciences. *Global Network*, 2(4 (2002)), 301-334.
- Hoerder, D. (2002). Migration als Ausgleichsprozess. Über die Zusammenhänge von Mobilität, Individuum und Gesellschaft. In T. Geisen (Ed.), *Mobilität und Mentalitäten* (pp. 17-38). Frankfurt am Main: IKO.
- Jouhy, E. (1996). *Bleiche Herrschaft - Dunkle Kulturen*. Frankfurt a. M.: IKO-Verlag.
- Mergner, G. (1999). *Lernfähigkeit der Subjekte und gesellschaftliche Anpassungsgewalt*. Hamburg: Argument Verlag.
- Page Moch, L. (1997). Dividing Time: An Analytical Framework for Migration. In J. Lucassen & L. Lucassen (Eds.), *Migration, Migration History, History* (pp. 41-56). Bern: Peter Lang.
- Pries, L. (2008). *Die Transnationalisierung der sozialen Welt*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.
- Weber, M. (1980). *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* (5. ed.). Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck.