# Aspiration, desire and drivers of migration

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**Abstract:** Introducing a special journal issue by the same title, this article provides a foundation for seven other articles with a theoretical mission to better understand the forces and frictions through which migration comes about and is experienced. The collection seeks to contribute to migration theory by considering crosscutting themes related to the concepts of *aspiration, desire* and *drivers of migration*. This introductory article locates the three concepts within the development of migration scholarship. First, we show how a reappraisal of theory is grounded in influential developments in migration scholarship, such as the transnational turn, feminist approaches and, more recently, a growing theoretical interest in emotions and temporalities. Second, we examine the ways in which 'aspiration' and 'desire' have figured in migration theory. Sometimes treated as synonyms, the terms both belong to a broader semantic field of potentiality, yet connect with different theoretical approaches. Third, we address the rise of 'drivers of migration' as an analytical concept, noting how it seems to be replacing 'causes' and 'determinants' in the literature.

**Keywords**: aspiration, desire, drivers of migration, potentiality

## Introduction

Imagined, desired, resisted, experienced, managed, and represented, migration is a multifaceted reality. The various ways of engaging with migration intersect with traditional concerns of migration theory – why people migrate, where they choose to go and how migration flows wax or wane. Scholarly engagements with migration also address perennial social-scientific themes, such as the interplay between agency and structure and the merits of models based on rational choice. The real-world dynamics of migration encompass all these facets with substantial complexity and immediacy

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in terms of their effects in people's lives. But the study of migration too often remains fragmented and compartmentalised in predictable ways: between quantitative and qualitative research, different geographical contexts, forms or types of migration and theoretical influences. In this special issue and introduction, we seek to contribute to understanding migration by taking a step back and considering crosscutting themes through analysing the concepts of aspiration, desire and drivers of migration.

**Table 1. Overview of articles in the special issue**

| Author(s) | Title | Empirical foundations or illustrations | Theoretical thrust |
|---|---|---|---|
| *Nicholas Van Hear, Oliver Bakewell and Katy Long* | Push-pull plus: re-considering the drivers of migration | Afghan migration to Iran and Pakistan; Somali migration to southern Africa | Generating a framework labelled 'push-pull plus' that is founded on the distinction between four types of drivers of migration |
| *Jørgen Carling and Kerilyn Schewel* | Revisiting aspiration and ability in international migration | Diverse case studies: global country-level data | Examining extensions and implications of the aspiration/ability model of migration and identifying 'two-step' approaches' as an analytical class in migration theory |
| *Francis Collins* | Desire as a theory for migration studies: temporality, assemblage and becoming in the narratives of migrants | Migration from South East Asia to South Korea | Exploiting the analytical potential of 'desire' to examine the temporalities, assemblages and transformative potential of migration experience |
| *Marta Bivand Erdal and Ceri Oeppen* | Forced to leave? The discursive and analytical significance of describing migration as forced and voluntary | Afghan and Pakistani migration to Europe | Unsettling the forced–voluntary dichotomy through analysing stages of the migration process: leaving, journeying, arriving, settling and returning |
| *Elisabeth Scheibelhofer* | Shifting migration aspirations in second modernity | Austrian migrants in the United States | Using the concept of 'second modernity' to contextualise the changing meaning and content of aspirations within migratory projects |
| *Peidong Yang* | Desiring 'foreign talent': lack and Lacan in anti-immigrant sentiments in Singapore | High-skilled immigration to Singapore, especially from China | Drawing on the notion of desire in Lacanian psychoanalysis to examine immigration policy and discourse |
| *Frank Meyer* | Navigating aspirations and expectations: adolescents' considerations of outmigration from | Outmigration of adolescents from rural eastern Germany | Locating adolescents' migratory decision-making between a contested field of expectations |

| | rural eastern Germany | | and personal attempts of becoming. |
|---|---|---|---|

This article introduces a special journal issue by the same title. In addition to this one, it brings together seven articles, each with a theoretical mission to understand the forces and frictions through which migration comes about and is experienced. In lieu of conventional synopses, we provide an overview of the articles in Table 1 and weave references to each article into our discussion of this special issue's overarching themes.

The articles were written against the backdrop of momentous developments in international migration dynamics and discourses. They include what has been called the 'long summer of migration' in 2015 when over one million people sought refuge in Europe, the United Nations Summit for Refugees and Migrants in 2016 and prominent debates about immigration in the campaigns that led to the Brexit vote in the United Kingdom and the election of Donald Trump as president of the United States.

The notion that migration is an inexorable reality of the twenty-first century has fuelled these developments. It is particularly evident in the resurgence of populism and nationalist anxiety in Europe and North America and the reinvigorated focus on borders and exclusion that is manifesting in its wake. Images of lines of migrants trudging vast distances, border walls designed to halt flows of newcomers, ships filled to capacity crossing dangerous waters and bodies of those who died seeking safe passage portray migration in a way that suggests people are impelled to move and that only the most drastic state actions will alter that. Similarly, political rhetoric around managed economic migration continues to propose that regardless of whether migrants are entrepreneurs, workers or students, more or less skilled or affluent, they will identify and assess which locations will provide the greatest benefit for them and their families. *Homo economicus* haunts pronouncements about migration policy, whether in discussing opening borders and attracting desirable migrants or reducing and discouraging the arrival of people. The notion that individualised rational action underpins migration choices has become unquestionable.

Critical migration scholars know very well that such imagery and ideology reveal little of migration's complexity and the manner in which it is embedded in social relations, imaginations of the world, economic settings and opportunities and political controls. Yet, scholars have also collectively struggled to condense these more complex accounts in a way that might alter popular and political conceptions of why and how migration occurs. In some instances, the unquestioning uptake of economic rationality and forced nature of migration have perpetuated the theoretical underpinnings of common misunderstandings. In the space of economic migration, for example, de Haas (2011:20) suggests that while it is unrealistic to assume that 'people are free from constraints, enjoy full access to information, and make migration decisions

with the aim of maximizing their utility', these ideas have not been fundamentally challenged in migration studies. There is a great risk here, not only in reproducing stereotypes of migrants as individual and collective subjects, but also in bolstering repressive approaches to policing movement. As the contributors to the collection 'New Keywords: Migration and Borders' put it, 'migration knowledge' can 'often result in unexamined discourses, architectures, and practices that in turn render knowledge of migration as an object of governmentality' (Casas-Cortes *et al.* 2015:63). Migration scholarship cannot, in other words, only be seen as a scientific endeavour, but must rather critically engage with its own place in the politics of mobility.

This special issue aims to break new ground in the conceptualisation and examination of the motive forces that generate and impede migration. Its collective view is that while the shortcomings of orthodox theories of migration have been identified for several decades (Adam 1984, Goss and Lindquist 1995, Halfacree and Boyle 1993, Silvey 2004), we have not established alternative conceptualisations that might advance accounts of migration beyond a reliance only on economic rationality and completely involuntary displacement. Migration theory needs to account for the multiplex componentry of migration, the way it is situated in imaginative geographies, emotional valences, social relations and obligations and politics and power relations, as well as in economic imperatives and the brute realities of displacement. The seven articles in this special issue do exactly that. They take established and underutilised theoretical perspectives and conceptual vocabulary and propose alternative ways of framing migration that speak to a wide variety of movements and their implications.

Our core concepts – aspiration, desire and drivers of migration – do not comprise an equally weighted triad. Aspiration and desire are synonyms in common parlance, and they are, matters of individual cognition and emotion. Drivers of migration, by contrast, is an analytical category that reflects particular understandings of how the world works. Yet, the friction between the three concepts arises from their connectedness: they all relate to how migration is initiated, experienced and represented. Later in this article, we examine the three concepts in greater detail, structuring the discussion by starting with aspiration and desire, relating them to the broader semantic field to which they both belong. Subsequently, we turn to the notion of drivers. First, however, we account for the key theoretical developments upon which we build.

## Foundations for a reappraisal of migration theory

Clearly, migration scholarship has advanced significantly since the heyday of gravity models and migration laws. Students and scholars are now confronted with an array of theoretical lenses through which to view various aspects of migratory processes

and understand the politics generated in the mobility and encounter that migration brings. While it has been rare for scholars to offer new theoretical perspectives on what generates and sustains migration, important developments in its study over the last three decades offer a foundation for our own intervention in this special issue. They include the focus on transnationalism; feminist critiques and analyses of gender in migration; emotions and migration; the timing of migration; and efforts to explore the infrastructures that support migration processes. Each development has made it possible for scholars to expand the different features of migration that we include in our analysis and to examine the implications of migration beyond what they mean for individual migrants and the societies they leave from and arrive in.

Perhaps the most notable intervention into migration scholarship over the last three decades has been the proposition that we need to examine the transnational dimensions of moving in the world. Established in the 1990s by anthropologists exploring ethnic community formation and politics in the United States (Basch *et al.* 1994, Rouse 1991), transnationalism has become a marker of all kinds of cross-border initiatives that are involved in migratory and other social, cultural and economic processes (Collins 2009). As a theoretical optic, a transnational approach has allowed analysis of migration to get beyond looking at migrants within either 'sending' or 'receiving' nation states as distinct geographical entities. Moreover, the idea that migration can be understood as a single linear movement from origin to destination is disrupted within transnationalism. This requires scholars to acknowledge the different ways migrants are embedded in transnational social fields (Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004), move through transnational channels (Findlay and Li 1998) and utilise transnationally stretched resources for political, social and economic life (Smith 2001). The transnational approach is fundamental to reconfiguring our understanding of the drivers of migration because it emphasises how processes of migration, incorporation into new contexts and the establishment and maintenance of connections to homeland and other locales occur simultaneously and mutually inform each other. All of the articles in this special issue can be seen in this light. They address the generation and sustenance of migration as something that is distributed across borders, in transnational social and economic linkages (Carling and Schewel this issue, Collins this issue, Erdal and Oeppen this issue, Van Hear *et al.* this issue) or within migration's imaginative dimensions as they are constituted across borders (Meyer this issue, Scheibelhofer this issue, Yang this issue). In each perspective, the figure of the migrant as an autonomous agent located in one place is disrupted by an emphasis on migrants as situated in social fields that cross borders and play a role in enabling and shaping migration processes and outcomes.

The 1990s also brought the feminist critique of long-standing emphasis on men as primary agents in migration, a greater focus on the gendered dimensions of

migration and discussion of how migration is entangled in myriad social, cultural and emotionally laden power relations (Pratt and Yeoh 2003, Silvey 2004, Silvey 2006). The contributions of feminist approaches to migration studies have been wide-ranging (see Espín and Dottolo 2015, Kofman and Raghuram 2015, Oishi 2005), though of most significance for our discussion is the attention given to subjectivity and identity. Critically, unlike much earlier work in migration studies, feminist scholars have highlighted the constructedness of identities and subjectivities in migration as well as their on-going transformation. Hence, the migrant cannot be understood as only a calculating autonomous self, but rather 'constituted through a range of intersecting, sometimes competing, forces and processes, and as playing agentic roles in these processes' (Silvey 2004:499). Such a perspective surfaces in the reconsideration of migration as an on-going process of subjective becoming (Collins this issue), in how the aspirations of migration are situated in relation to social norms and expectations (Carling and Schewel this issue) and in the manner that migration must be negotiated vis-à-vis gendered roles of care and obligation (Scheibelhofer this issue). Methodologically, too, feminist interventions have been pivotal in establishing the value of migrants' stories about themselves (Lawson 2000). This material has broadened our understanding of migration so as to acknowledge the less determinate features of moving and its embeddedness in power relations and politics (see Collins this issue, Meyer this issue, Scheibelhofer this issue).

Rethinking the drivers of migration to foreground notions of aspiration and desire requires relinquishing the primacy of economic rationality that has long held an almost sacred place in theories of migration. It means recognising that even economic narratives of movement are socially constructed and can only be read in relation to the subjectivities of migrants, their states of feeling and the circulation of affect within and across borders. Accordingly, we expand here on important interventions in examining the emotional componentry of migration. Scholarship on emotions in human mobility provides insight into how emotions are involved in people's plans to migrate, their interactions with people met through the migratory process, attachments to homelands and a sense of belonging in new environments (Boccagni and Baldassar 2015, Svašek 2010). As Tazreiter (2015:100) notes, emotion in migration may relate to 'bodily experience – pleasure or pain resulting from a tangible interaction' or be 'about a thought, a memory, a feeling in response to an image, a text, and a symbol'. Both expressions of emotion are dealt with in this special issue. Some article authors situate migration in relation to particular feelings about the places they are in (Collins this issue, Meyer this issue); others refer to the imaginative dimension of migration and either explicitly (Yang this issue) or implicitly (Carling and Schewel this issue) draw attention to the emotional valences that run through his. Moreover, we argue that drawing attention to emotions is critical to humanising migration, thus

allowing our scholarship to blur boundaries between different types of migration (Erdal and Oeppen this issue) and to see the subjectivity and identity of migrants as always in formation rather than predetermined by place of origin and mode of arrival.

A fourth development offering insight into rethinking the drivers of migration involves recent efforts by scholars to take time more seriously as a constitutive feature of migration (Collins and Shubin 2015, Cwerner 2001, Griffiths *et al.* 2013, McCormack and Schwanen 2011, Robertson 2014, Shubin 2015). In orthodox accounts of migration, time is often interpreted as linear and relatively compartmentalised, able to be broken up into durations of pre-migration, migration and then either settlement or return. The result has been an emphasis on what are perceived to be 'normal' temporal practices and, within a focus on the drivers of migration, an ability to codify standardised patterns of *when* migration occurs. One consequence is the presumption that individual migrants have complete agency over their migration decisions and can foresee future trajectories and assemble their present migration strategies accordingly. Such a view operates through excluding uncertain and surprising experiences of time that scholars monitoring individual narratives of migration regularly observe. It also bolsters a view that migrant 'decision-making' occurs at a singular moment in time, or at least within a relatively defined period before departure that involves the gathering and assessment of available information in an objective fashion. The authors in this special issue collectively present migration in a way that is much more temporally distributed: aspiration as socially situated but also future-oriented (Carling and Schewel this issue); the on-going-ness of migratory processes (Erdal and Oeppen this issue); opening and blockages that can start but also end migratory pathways (Collins this issue); and even the more structural account of mediating drivers as part of maintaining and shaping migratory flows (Van Hear *et al.* this issue)

Lastly, we draw on renewed focus on the migration industry that has emerged through increasing emphasis on processes of intermediation and the connections and infrastructures that generate and enable migration (Hindman and Oppenheim 2014, Lindquist *et al.* 2012, Xiang 2007, 2012, Xiang and Lindquist 2014). This body of work, particularly that which focuses on migration agents and brokers, helps illustrate how migration is entangled in the actions of mediating actors who not only make mobilities happen, but also seek to actively shape its contours and outcomes. Like earlier studies of transnationalism that lay down a conceptual foundation for this scholarship, a focus on the infrastructures of migration demonstrates that analysis of migration must rather address 'the systematically interlinked technologies, institutions, and actors that facilitate and condition mobility' (Xiang and Lindquist 2014:124). Such infrastructures do not operate independently, as Van Hear *et al.* (this issue) demonstrate, but rather can 'cluster in complexes' that have effects exceeding

the sum of their separate components. Indeed, if we include the gamut of infrastructures that Xiang and Lindquist (2014) identify – commercial, regulatory, technological, humanitarian, social – then we can conceive of the wide-scale economic, social and political drivers of migration as well as how they get articulated in individual bodies' will and capacity to migrate.

Each of these theoretical and methodological developments in migration studies has been crucial to displacing the view of migrants as autonomous, male, rational calculating subjects. They have also demonstrated the entanglement of migration in broader social and political processes as well as its implications for migrants' identities and subjectivities and the lived experiences of the places they traverse and reside in. Yet, despite such advancements, these approaches have not, even when taken together, established an alternative agenda for understanding the motive forces involved in migration. Recent emphasis on the infrastructures of migration has come closest to doing this, but it has done so principally by decentring the migrant in analyses and instead emphasising the role of mediating actors. This is an extraordinary contribution, though it fails to answer how we can explore the forces of migration for migrants or prospective migrants themselves. It is to this question that we now turn, further unpacking our own priority to aspiration, desire and drivers of migration.

## Aspiration and desire

'Aspiration' and 'desire' are common terms in migration scholarship, although neither has been the subject of much explicit theorising and too often both are accepted as shorthand for 'what migrants want'. While they have some semantic overlapping, they also open up distinct conceptual possibilities for migration theory. But exploring these distinctions requires an initial reflection on how the two words have been applied to migration. If we consider migration as a question of human subjects' actual or potential mobility, then aspiration and desire are, in simple terms, relevant to three types of relations:

- A subject's relation to migration possibilities
- A subject's relation to potential transformations in the context of migration
- An other's relation to mobile or potentially mobile subjects.

The last point's 'other' could take various forms, including a state, as in Yang's (this issue) analysis of Singapore's desire for foreign talent. The defining element of this relation is its converse of the first two points: those who migrate can also be objects of desire or aspiration. This special issue's articles demonstrate how the three types of relation intersect and blur. As Collins (this issue) shows, desire's use as a label for individual preference can also be more fundamentally replaced by alternative

ontologies that emphasise the processual character of mobility and its intersections with imagination and subjective transformation. Despite these complexities, the notion of three types of relation can help structure reflection on aspiration, desire and migration.

A subject's relation to migration possibilities is often conceptualised as 'migration aspirations'. In fact, this is probably the most established term for describing the conviction that leaving would be better than staying (Alpes 2014, Carling 2002, Castles *et al.* 2014, Creighton 2013, Crivello 2015, de Haas 2010). Other terms, including migration 'desires', 'wishes' and 'preferences', are used less consistently and in nearly synonymous ways, suggesting that they may be subsumed under 'migration aspirations' as a generic term (cf Carling and Schewel this issue). The term thus leads a dual existence: as an umbrella category and, at times, as a more specific manifestation of thoughts and feelings about potential mobility.

Carling and Schewel (this issue) extensively discuss the generic version of migration aspirations as a constitutive element of what they call two-step approaches to analysing migration – that is, the disaggregation of migration processes into the formation and realisation of migration aspirations. They also examine the theoretical implications of differently phrased survey questions about migration aspirations. If we leave this generic usage aside and consider 'aspiration' in its specific form, how do the nuances of this concept help us understand the appeal of migration? Unlike alternative terms, such as 'intention', 'plan' and 'wish', 'aspiration' marks an intersection of personal, collective and normative dimensions. As Ray (2006:209) puts it, aspirations are the 'social grounding of individual desire'. But whereas Ray sees desire as an inherently individualistic contrast to the social, Collins (this issue) explicitly foregrounds desire 'as a social force'. Inspired by the work of Deleuze and Guttari (1983), he argues that a subject's interest in migration only exists within a particular social context and is only possible because of desires invested in that social formation.

## The social grounding of aspiration and desire

One aspect of the social grounding of aspiration and desire is that individual attitudes towards migration cannot be amicably divorced from those that are manifest in the social context. An aspiration to migrate reflects the transformative potential of migration and implies that this imagined transformation is not only viewed positively by the prospective migrant, but is also institutionally embedded. Though analytical vocabularies differ, this observation is well established in analyses of so-called cultures of migration (Horváth 2008, Timmerman *et al.* 2014).

The notion of migration aspirations reflects not only socially sanctioned behaviour, but also social mechanisms of diffusion: people may observe the migratory

achievements of their peers, come to see migration as a realistic prospect and develop migration aspirations (Kandel and Massey 2002). In this way, migration becomes part of what Ray (2006) refers to as the 'aspirations window' of individuals. This logic of emulative aspirations can be reinforced, or even overshadowed, by the cultural virtue of being someone who aspires. Two contrasting studies of aspirations in another sphere – education – illustrate this point. Frye (2012) shows how, among teenage girls in Malawi, expressions of educational aspirations serve primarily as assertions of identity. The girls seem to embrace an aspiration-centred cultural model that connects them from a 'mundane reality to a transcendent potentiality' (Frye 2012:1599). This cultural model is actively promoted by donors and policymakers, and resonates with neoliberal educational policies that are also pursued in the global North. In a study among working-class teenage boys in South London, Stahl (2014) shows how the 'aspiration agenda' clashed with the boys' valuation of egalitarianism and ordinariness and took the form of an 'affront' rather than a resource. Though their outcomes are opposite, the two studies demonstrate the value of examining individual assertions and experiences in the context of aspirational norms.

Educational aspirations feature in policy discourses as something to be bolstered. Migration aspirations, by contrast, have been politicised in greatly disparate and differentiated ways. In the 1980s and 1990s, the dominant mood in countries of origin shifted from condemnation to celebration of emigrants, and the migrant-as-role-model became an officially sanctioned driver of migration aspirations. This shift was epitomised by Philippine President Corazon Aquino's famed and controversial address to Filipina domestic workers in Hong Kong, in which she referred to them as the new 'heroes' of the Philippine economy (Carling 2005, Chang 2016). While the message was delivered to people who had already migrated, it disseminated the idea that becoming a migrant means being a hero. This focus on the heroes of migration also stipulates 'a desire realizable only outside of the nation, yet recognizable only within its borders' (Rafael 1997: 271), a relation that generates a sense of lack in national and local life by comparison to the ineffable possibilities of foreignness. This resonates with Yang's (this issue) contrasting Lacanian take on the Singaporean state's desire for 'foreign talent', expressed as a sense of lack when it comes to the role of young people, particularly in Singapore's aspirations for global success. The bolstering of aspirations and desire must thus be viewed not only in terms of their focus, but also their implications for other people, places and possible futures.

Another version of mobility celebration has evolved in higher education and research. Institutions and authorities encourage and endorse international academic mobility as intrinsically virtuous. Some have described the efforts as mobility fetishism (Robertson 2010, Sidhu *et al.* 2016). Even if mobile academics are motivated by concrete, individual gains from mobility, as Leung (2013) and (Bauder *et al.* 2016)

have shown, the normative policy context matters: aspiring to be internationally mobile as an academic is generally considered virtuous.

For academics in the global South, however, aspirations for international mobility are often met with brain drain concerns. This distinction illustrates how the virtuousness of migration aspirations depends on the who, the where and the how of hypothetical mobility. Meyer (this issue) describes how young adults in rural eastern Germany are encouraged to develop their human capital through mobility, but implored to return and exploit this capital 'at home'. Aspiration and desire can, in other words, be applied simultaneously to young people's prospects for transformation through outmigration and their home region's efforts to retain them.

As Meyer shows, authorities in depopulating regions can seek to subdue young people's migration aspirations by invoking local patriotism but, ultimately, may prove powerless. In international migration governance, by contrast, states have a range of tools – from visas and fences to fines and detention – for curbing unwanted migration. Still, 'aspirations management' is becoming an increasingly important part of international migration governance. Countries that face unauthorised migration inflows are investing heavily in campaigns that essentially aim to quash migration aspirations (Schans and Optekamp 2016). The most well known, perhaps, are Australia's so-called Overseas Public Information Campaigns, which target potential asylum seekers, aiming to portray 'home' as safe and financially stable while rendering irregular migration to Australia as dangerous and futile (Watkins 2017).

Such campaigns specifically set out to discourage irregular migration; they address aspirations to migrate without attending to aspirations more broadly. But it is pertinent to both migration management and migration theory to ask what it is that people aspire to when they aspire to migrate. Perhaps the concept of aspirations is more relevant to those ultimate objectives? Bakewell once argued that 'people do not *aspire* to migrate; they aspire to *something* which migration might help them achieve'.[1] This claim reflects the distinction between migration as a means to an end and migration as an end in its own right (Carling 2014). If we follow Bakewell's assertion and consider migration as something instrumental – a means to an end – then the nature of the underlying aspirations is pivotal to migration theory. This also brings the focus on aspiration slightly closer to post-structural conceptualisations of desire that emphasise the way that specific expressions of desire, such as an interest in or will to migrate, are necessarily social determinations of more free-floating desires for individual becoming (Holland 1999). The significant relation to study, then, is not between subjects and migration possibilities, but rather between subjects and their potential transformation through migration.

The distinction between aspiration and desire *for migration* versus migration and desires pursued *through migration* does not preclude an integrated analysis of both.

As Carling and Talleraas (2016) show, 'life aspirations' and 'migration aspirations' can play distinct roles in a coherent framework of connections between root causes and migration outcomes. And as in-depth ethnographic research can show, it is striking how these two aspects of aspiration or desire are inseparably woven together. Sooudi (2014:2-3) makes this explicit in her study of Japanese in New York, whereby she examines 'migration and the narrative and representational practices surrounding it as forms of aspirational self-making'. The notion of aspirational self-making resonates with Scheibelhofer's (this issue) examination of the changing meaning and content of aspirations within migratory projects. Scheibelhofer points to insights that may be gleaned from researching 'the opportunities migrants have to realise their personal potential by trying out life elsewhere'.

Addressing desire also demands attention for dimensions of migration that can be overlooked when aspiration is taken to refer to plans, ideas, strategies and goals. Indeed, desire indexes not only these cognitive dimensions, but also foregrounds embodied, affective and material components of becoming and its relation to migration possibilities and enactments (Papadopoulos and Tsianos 2007). If migration takes place in relation to imaginative geographies of the world, then it also works through affective responses to the possibilities of different places, the stories of others and the opportunities and constraints that people face in their lives (Hindman and Oppenheim 2014). Desire is expressed in the actions people take in these circumstances. Yet, that does not mean that the outcomes of migration are predictable, either for migrants or for nation states seeking to manage flows to maximise economic or other outcomes. Collins (this issue) addresses exactly this concern by developing a theoretical account of desire that foregrounds the processual and contingent character of migration, the way it can be both enabled and blocked in encounters individuals have and the uncertain transformations in subjectivity that emerge through becoming a migrant.

**The semantic field of potentiality in migration**

Aspiration and desire are part of a semantic field which relates the present or actual with the future or potential. Migration has been coupled with a range of terms within this field, including 'hope', 'risk' and 'waiting'. We identified 15 such words, listed in Table 2. This list is hardly exhaustive, but the terms provide the contours of a thematic sphere in migration research that is not bound together by a unified approach or theoretical foundation. Each term on the list merits a full conceptual discussion, which is, in many cases, provided by the selected references. What is feasible here is to reflect of the field, as a whole, and the elements that differentiate the concepts.

Nearly all 15 words are used widely and often casually, without particular theoretical intentions. At the same time, they give pause, inviting us to consider the nuances and implications of their meaning and the consequent implications for applying them to the study of migration. A case in point, Kleist (2016) recently explored the analytical potential of 'hope', as we did for 'aspiration' and 'desire'. Since all 15 terms reflect some form of relation between the present or actual and the future or potential, they can be related to the temporalities of migration. The temporal turn is, as we noted, one of the developments that holds potential for new directions in migration theory.

**Table 2. Selected terms applied to analysis of potentiality in migration**

| Term | Selected references |
| --- | --- |
| *Aspiration* | Carling and Schewel this issue, Meyer this issue, Scheibelhofer this issue |
| *Desire* | Collins this issue, Hindman and Oppenheim 2014, Papadopoulos and Tsianos 2007 |
| *Dream* | Cairns et al. 2017 |
| *Expectation* | Benson 2016, De Jong 2000, Meyer this issue |
| *Hope* | Kleist 2016, Kleist and Thorsen 2016, Mar 2005 |
| *Imaginaries* | Fortier 2012, Salazar 2014 |
| *Imagining* | Koikkalainen and Kyle 2016, Thompson 2016, Vigh 2009 |
| *Intention* | De Jong et al. 1986 |
| *Limbo* | Brun and Fabos 2015, Richter 2016 |
| *Prospects* | Czaika 2015 |
| *Risk* | Hernandez-Carretero and Carling 2012, Williams and Baláž 2012 |
| *Stuckness* | Khan 2013, Stock 2012 |
| *Uncertainty* | Horst and Grabska 2015, Williams and Baláž 2012 |
| *Waiting* | Conlon 2011, Kwon 2015, Turner 2015 |
| *Yearning* | Bal 2014, Burman 2010 |

While the temporal is a unifying element in this semantic field, the emotional rather breaks it up. The 15 terms differ greatly in emotional potency and hue. These differences underlie interactions between different aspects of potentiality. For instance, Hernández-Carretero (2016) shows how migration uncertainties differ through the mediating effect of hope. Her informants embrace the hope-filled uncertainty of emigration, but resent the hopeless uncertainties of return. The terms also differ in the way they represent temporalities and potentialities as something embodied. Desire stands out in this respect, speaking to the material and imaginative generation of migration at the level of the body. Finally, Table 2's terms diverge in their representations of agency and constraint. At one extreme, 'stuckness' implies an externally imposed inability to realise potentials; at the other, 'intention' foregrounds individual capacity to act, even when outcomes are uncertain. Within this diverse semantic field of potentiality, aspiration and desire appear to be adjoining. However, the preceding discussion has demonstrated the value of exploring nuances in meaning, connotation and theoretical implication.

## Drivers of migration

Going from aspiration and desire to drivers of migration implies a shift in perspective. While the first two terms require identifying with actors, the latter reflects analysis by an outside observer. Such analyses are a long-held feature of migration scholarship and theorising, present as far back as Ravenstein's (1885) laws and foregrounded in Lee's (1966) model of migration. As migration issues have risen on policy agendas, academics have also faced demand for knowledge about the factors that shape migration flows and, by extension, might be influenced by policy measures.

While the search for explanatory factors is long-standing, there has been a shift in dominant vocabularies. In particular, 'drivers' of migration has quite recently gained prominence alongside 'determinants' and 'causes'. Figure 1 illustrates this development through tracking citations of the words in publications from 1990 to 2016. Since the annual number of social-scientific publications on migration has grown more than tenfold during this period, the graph shows the relative incidence of the three key terms. Since the 1990s, 'determinants' has become less commonly used, 'causes' occurs with more or less constant frequency and 'drivers' has rapidly become a dominant theoretical concept after debuting in the early 2000s. Van Hear, Bakewell and Long (this issue) are, to our knowledge, the first to provide a comprehensive discussion of 'drivers of migration' as a theoretical concept.
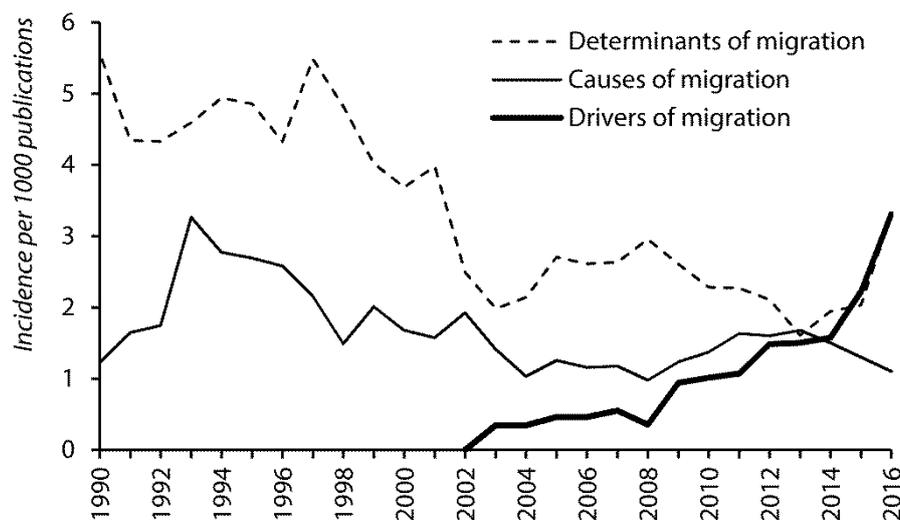
**Figure 1. Frequency of selected analytical terms in academic publications on migration**

Notes: Numbers refer to publications that use the respective term in their title, abstract or keywords. The denominator is the total number of publications that refer to migration. All numbers are restricted to publications in the social sciences. Graphs are based on sliding averages. Source: Scopus.

The emergence of 'drivers' in the migration literature has been boosted by the growing interest in environmental influences on migration, especially in light of climate change (Black *et al.* 2011, Etzold *et al.* 2014, Raleigh 2011). It has become obvious that environmental change could plausibly shape migration in significant ways. But given the complex interactions with socioeconomic diversity, it seemed overly crude to claim that climate change is a determinant of migration. The concept of drivers provided an analytical alternative. In the introduction to a seminal special issue on environmental change and migration, Black *et al.* (2011) proposed five drivers of migration: economic, political, demographic, social and environmental. This framework, they wrote, 'seeks to focus attention away from the idea that environmental change directly causes migration, towards an understanding of the broader drivers of migration, and how these are susceptible in different and inter-linked ways to environmental change' (Black *et al.* 2011:S10).

The effects of environmental change highlight more general points about the difficulty of assigning causal status to particular influences on migration. The vocabulary of drivers might therefore also have been bolstered by a more general anxiety about claims to causality in migration research. Compared to 'determinants' and 'causes' of migration, 'drivers' carries less intimidating ontological commitments.

While 'causes' of migration appear to be losing ground in academic publications, it is significant that the particular notion of 'root causes' is being revived in policy circles. In response to the migration and refugee crisis of 2015, European

governments, in particular, stressed the need to address migration challenges by 'tackling the root causes', and sought to direct international development cooperation accordingly. However, the merits of such a strategy are highly questionable (Carling and Talleraas 2016, Clemens 2014). This is partly because of the mediating role of aspirations, which tend to rise with socioeconomic development. The shift from 'causes' to 'drivers' allows for analyses that are more attuned to the complex dynamics that shape migration.

Where Black *et al.* (2011) proposed a pentagon of thematically classified drivers, Van Hear *et al.* (this issue) raise the level of abstraction and differentiate instead between predisposing, proximate, precipitating and mediating drivers. They courageously label the proposed framework 'push-pull plus' in recognition of the analytical contributions made by migration theorists a half-century ago. This tribute contrasts with the dominant trend in the migration literature, which is rather to invoke push-pull only as a crude counterpart that implicitly props up the author's own analytical sophistication.

## Forging connections and looking forward

The juxtaposition of three key concepts in this special issue raises the question of how they are connected. In particular, do aspirations and desire represent drivers of migration? Van Hear *et al.* (this issue) take this question head-on, arguing that while others see aspirations and desire playing such a role, the term 'driver' should 'be reserved for the more external material forces that influence mobility'. In this view, drivers cannot alone explain migration; rather, they facilitate or constrain individual agency. Several other articles in this special issue also relate aspirations or desire to a structure-agency framework, at least implicitly. But, as we have highlighted here, theoretically sound analyses of aspiration or desire situate expressions of these concepts in wider structures or social formations, rather taking them as reflections of atomistic and autonomous examples of individual preference.

Individually, the articles in this special issue demonstrate different ways scholars of migration can approach ideas of aspiration, desire and drivers of migration to address a range of empirical questions. For example, what drivers operate in labour, asylum, educational, settler, irregular and other kinds of migration? How are they combined and what effects do they have? What sorts of aspirations and desires are expressed in these movements, and how does a focus on desire and aspiration help us explore the future in migration and migrant lives? How are different actors – families, states, migrants, intermediaries – involved in the circulation of aspiration and desire and the instigation and mediation of migration? What are the cultural circuits

involved in shaping migration and crafting imaginaries of migrants as desirable or undesirable subjects?

Through their focus on aspiration, desire and drivers of migration, the articles in this special issue together make several important contributions to advancing scholarly understandings of migration. First, the articles demonstrate the conceptual promise of re-engaging drivers of migration in ways that neither reify individual decision-making nor totally displace the individual migrant in favour of social networks or transnational communities. Second, the articles build on long-standing criticisms of binaries in migration by teasing apart distinctions between internal and international migration, migrants and non-migrants and the linear timing of decision-movement-outcome. Third, by recognising the openness of aspiration and desire in migration, the special issue also responds to and builds on the social sciences' renewed interest in, generally speaking, the future.

## Notes

1 Oliver Bakewell's contribution to discussions at the explorative workshop 'Aspirations and Capabilities in Migration Processes', co-organised by the International Migration Institute (IMI) and the Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO), Oxford, 10-11 January 2013.

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