De-migranticizing as methodology: rethinking migration studies through immobility and liminality

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Abstract

De-migranticization is becoming a core strategy for overcoming the fetishization of migrants in migration studies. However, this shift in perspectives raises questions about what categories to use instead. This paper contributes to these debates by considering the potential of studying immobility as a tool for de-migranticization. It looks at immobility through the lens of liminality: as a transitory phase, as a transformative stage and as one which enables epistemological subversion. In doing so, it goes beyond other border spanning terms to offer methodological insights into using immobility and liminality to de-migranticize. The paper suggests that these qualities of reading immobility through theories of liminality has implications for when, where and how to study migration. The empirical case draws on 165 semi-structured interviews with distance education students from Zimbabwe, Namibia and Nigeria studying at the University of South Africa (UNISA).

Keywords De-migranticizing, Immobility, Migration, Liminality, International education

Introduction

This paper explores how research can be de-migranticized in practice. It uses the study of immobility as a category through which to undertake demigranticization. In doing so, it contributes to recent migration research which has argued for redrawing the boundaries between migrants and non-migrants. For instance, Dahinden (2016) calls for de-migranticizing migration studies by recognising that mobility is not exceptional and the fetishization of migration is a discursive effect of methodological nationalism. Anderson (2019), on the other hand, critiques the ways in which even people who have no migration background are constructed as 'migrants' through racialised and classed processes– known as migranticization. Together both have contributed to problematising the distinction between migrants and non-migrants and highlighted the social importance of migration among non-migrants (Dahinden & Anderson, 2021). The literature on de-migranticization rightly and roundly criticises the over-emphasis on migrants as a category but this raises questions of what categories and concepts to use instead

(Raghuram, 2021a), and how to actually undertake a study that avoids migrants as a category (Raghuram, 2021b). Towards this, it points to the liminality of categories such as immobility and how this liminality opens up questions about when, where and how to study migration.

While there is a huge volume of literature on migration and mobility (Cresswell, 2006; Urry, 2007), that on immobility is much more limited (Mata-Codesal, 2018; Schewel, 2019). This is partly because migration has been problematised in public and policy discourses (Anderson, 2019) and migration researchers have responded to this by focusing on migrants and the conditions that make for their movement. Immobility often slips below the radar. Where it receives attention, the focus is on the immobilisation of those who wanted to move, often vulnerable and marginalized migrants who are travelling to destinations in the global North but are stopped on their way (Palillo, 2020). However, more recently there are increasing calls to understand immobility and why it might be a more preferable option than (international) mobility for some people (Mata-Codesal, 2015; Wyngaarden et al., 2022) but also the risks of such immobility in the context of climate change, for instance (Zickgraf, 2021). This attention is important because only about one in every 30 people in the world has ever migrated (IOM, 2020).

The fetishization of migration is particularly acute in research on Africa, a continent that is primarily viewed through the lens of exit in migration literature, especially international migration. The hegemonic narratives about Africans wanting to move out of the continent has led to policies of containment, eviction and prevention of migration from Africa to Europe (Carling & Hernández-Carretero, 2011; Cassarino, 2018) and much analysis on migration from and through Africa. To counter this policy and discursive dominance of Africa as a continent of out-migration, researchers are beginning to highlight how a large number of people in Africa do not leave their countries or the continent at all (McAuliffe & Kitimbo, 2018) as they prefer to stay where they live, work and have their families, relatives, and friends[1]. This literature emphasises that immobility can be a choice and not only an outcome of migration control, but in doing so, it points to the ways in which immobility can be laced with mobility and migration. It thus contributes to the nascent literature on people who choose immobility in Africa (Schewel, 2015; Schewel & Fransen, 2022). This paper adds to this emerging body of knowledge by theorising immobility as a liminal category, which does not see either immobility or migration as pure and fixed categories. It draws on three aspects of liminality, the spatio-temporal or the where-when, the transformative, or the how and the epistemologically subversive or why. It offers a conceptual and methodological intervention inspired by interviews conducted during the International Distance Education and African Students (IDEAS) project (2016–2019). The project focused on international distance education students at the University of South Africa (UNISA). It instigated a more conceptual discussion of immobility and liminality which we present here, using our empirical research to spotlight some of the theoretical insights.

The paper highlights the transience and instability of migration categories and the potential of immobility to further understandings of migration. By applying the notion of liminality to immobility among international distance education students, we

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[1] Because international migration dominates some of these discourses, our paper also seeks to 'deconstruct' this fetish. There is of course a large literature that focuses on the relation between internal and international migration and the different discursive emphases of these literatures (Hickey & Yeoh, 2016).

demonstrate how researching those who are not currently migrants can generate important insights into migration as a category. Secondly, the paper provides an example of how to move beyond migration as a topic in migration studies and outlines what this means for de-migranticization as method. It does so by, simultaneously de-fetishizing immobility as a stable and singular category, instead doing what the lens of liminality does best– show the instability of the categories between which liminality is produced. We argue that this contributes to de-migranticization because de-migranticization, after all, challenges conventional analytical perspectives. However, the nascent de-migranticization literature is yet to explore in detail how to move beyond migrants as a central category. Finally, it proposes that de-migranticization needs to be understood as a methodological endeavour - and not only epistemological; it needs to address questions about when, where and how migration is studied.

De-migranticization, immobility and liminality: framing the intervention

De-migranticization and mobility

De-migranticization is the most recent effort to problematise migrants as a– more or less -bounded empirical group through which to study societies. The plea to stop treating migrants as an exceptional category and instead read them through other lenses, categories and meaningful junctures has been an ongoing request for some time (Hui, 2016; Raghuram, 2013) but this appeal has crystallised now into a growing literature on de-migranticization. Dahinden (2016) asks us to not just explore how migrants as a category are constructed and fetishized but to step past it. She encourages migration research to escape the categories that have, in effect, contained migration debates.

The mobilities paradigm, which argues for the recognition of mobilities as an ontological condition has also aimed to stop the exceptionalisation of mobility and migration. Thus, Tim Cresswell, one of the foremost proponents of the mobility perspective argued for the need to shift from a sedentarist metaphysics towards a nomadic one (2006). By focusing on the flows and connections that make up all social relations, the mobilities perspective, in effect, suggests that everyone and everything is produced through mobilities. These may be physical mobility of objects, virtual mobilities that transcend space and time, imaginative mobilities that are based on the movement and knowledge of images, communicative mobilities including through social messaging or corporeal mobility, which is based on human migration and movement. The mobilities turn thus normalised flows and emphasised the interconnectedness of different types of movement in shaping mobility and migration (Urry, 2007). For instance, the migration of people is shaped by a range of other mobilities.

Hui (2016) takes an important step in bringing the two bodies of work– mobilities and migration– together. She suggests the need to situate migrants within mobility studies by looking at the intermeshing mobilities that make for 'sometimes migrants'. These are people who dip in and out of mobility for short periods but where migration is not always the narrative through which the people she researched can be understood. She concludes that 'migration is not the only frame that helps to make sense of change, adaptation, social roles, power or inequality. Neither are the social systems and diverse mobilities that affect these processes solely oriented towards 'migration'' (p. 78). One way of reducing the fetishization of migrants is to show the constitutive role of migration and mobilities in contemporary societies (Hui, 2016). For instance, in an attempt to sidestep

migrant exceptionalism but still holding on to questions of power and ethics, Raghuram (2021b) points to both the situatedness and the mobilities that underpin skills, how they are constituted through mobilities and how they then influence skilled migration. Here, she argues for looking at the geographies of skills and its role in the geographies of skilled migration. Crucial to this endeavour is an attempt to move beyond the alterity that a migrant lens produces, to divert away from the issue of migration and to thus reduce the epistemological difference between migrant and non-migrant on which so much of migration studies is based. However, what is still missing is an exploration of immobilities as a tool for stepping past this migrant exceptionalism - to invert migration studies by looking at the unspoken foundational category of immobility which underpins migration research.

Immobilities

Migration researchers have helped to conceptualise the variety of ways in which people engage with immobility (Mata-Codesal 2015, 2018). They focus on the factors that influence whether people move such as legal status, social position, nationality, gender and age, for instance. These influence the likelihood of being able to move but also the outcomes (Setrana, 2021). The decision whether to move or not is thus based on careful weighing up of the options that people have and how mobility can impact their livelihoods and opportunities for better futures at different points in their lives (Gray, 2011; Stockdale & Haartsen, 2018).

This literature has often seen immobility as an outcome of the lack of resources to be mobile (Breines et al., 2019), as both a cause and a consequence of social inequalities (Faist, 2014). It is a form of social exclusion as those who are poorer may not have the qualifications, the money for travel or the social networks that enable mobility. Immobility is also an outcome of restrictive migration regimes and infrastructures (Barcus & Werner, 2017) which privilege elite mobility. Elites can often have relatively friction-less mobility and use mobility as a form of capital (Murphy-Lejeune, 2002). Those who are poorer or less skilled, on the other hand, may be caught up in the many infrastructures of control that are adopted to contain, constrain and limit mobility. Concerned with the inequalities and injustices produced by the infrastructures that immobilise some migrants, the im/mobility turn has pointed to the importance of spaces of containment that emerge as immobilising migrants becomes a strategy of power (Ferreira et al., 2022; Papatzani et al., 2022; Sachseder et al., 2022).

Forced immobility and involuntary mobility are particularly important for migration studies because the field of study is invested in migrant journeys and the experiences of those who have successfully completed them (Rodriguez-Pena, 2022). As a result, much of the literature in migration studies focuses on those who want to move but are stopped, i.e. involuntary immobility (Carling, 2002); there is little knowledge about why and how people choose to not move– those who are voluntarily immobile (de Haas, 2021; Schewel, 2019). While involuntary immobility is important to study, given the social inequalities that lead to and result from it, de-migranticization does require an alternative lens.

For mobility scholars, mobility and immobility exist on a spectrum– there can be more or less mobility. Immobility is contingent on other factors and is an assemblage, produced at particular points through the infrastructures of immobility (Breines et al.,

2019). Other flows may be necessary to replace the mobility of people and to enable people to successfully choose to not move. What is still missing in this small and growing body of work is an interrogation of the variability within immobility. Immobility largely remains a black box. Focusing on migration as a desired outcome for all, we would argue, is not enough to de-migranticize. The value and complexities of staying put also has to be part of the narrative. However, we do not want to simply posit migration as the opposite of immobility, and thereby contain it within a binary schema. We therefore use the notion of 'liminality' to highlight the complexity of immobility and hence, by definition, of migration too.

Deploying liminality to unpack immobility

The term 'liminality' was originally coined by van Gennep (2013; original in 1909) to describe thresholds and in-between spaces, times, statuses and situations. Liminality is particularly useful for migration research because liminality can be seen as a *spatio-temporal phenomenon*. It can be a phase in life trajectories, an in-between time, such as while waiting to hear about asylum applications. In such cases liminality is marked as a temporal dimension because it is a time when decisions are awaited and where one is at the threshold of being admitted, but could as easily be turned back. This in-betweenness also applies to other migrants who are in short or long forms transit, such as in refugee camps (Noussia & Lyons, 2009). It is a time of unknowingness when one is suspended between here and there, and between a past people may want to leave behind and a possible future which is brighter. It can be a time through which people try to survive by creating habitable spaces and a sense of belonging (Perez Murcia, 2019). For Turner, 'the passage from one status to another is often accompanied by a parallel passage in space, from one geographical place to another' (1982).

However, liminality not only refers to space-time but draws on a rich vein of post-colonial thought which stretches the meaning and use of liminality as a *transformative* concept and an analytical device through which difference can be articulated. In post-colonial theory (Bhabha, 1994), liminality is a way of thinking through cultural hybridity where the qualities of the two sides are manifest, how migrants learn about and become acculturated to the ways of the destination country (Kirk et al., 2017; Mitra & Evansluong, 2019) while still retaining links with, and socialities of their origin countries.

However, liminality also suggests indeterminacy, not only of the transitory phase, but of the two concepts on either side, which it bridges. For instance, when we talk about liminality between core and periphery, we do not only talk about an in-between space, but we point to how liminality unsettles how the core and the periphery are defined. It questions the purity of the two sides and unsettles, for instance, any binary conception of migration and immobility. It undoes both the ontological security of binary categories and the implicit teleology that drives migration studies– from immobility to mobility and back to immobility. Instead, it places such actions in a state of suspense where the outcomes are not, and cannot be known.

Here liminality is transformative because it is a time when new subjectivities are produced. For Bhabha, these "in-between' liminal spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood—singular or communal—that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself' (p. 2). This transformative potential can be subversive, containing within it

the seeds for interrogating the limits and contradictions of existing categories and structures. What does the recognition of the liminality of categories mean for understanding when, where and how and how to study migration?

Finally, liminality can also be used in epistemologically subversive ways, to make us question the ways we frame our questions and research. This epistemological quality is absent in other terms that are used to talk about the fluidity of migration and mobility. Thus, the International Relations theorist Maria Mälksoo (2012) argues that liminality does not only focus on the in-between but rather draws 'home the old truth of the connection between the ways we look and the things we thus see'(p. 485). It thus serves epistemological and ontological functions, emphasising categorical instability and the need for new framings that help us to comprehend this. Similarly, in migration studies too liminality has the possibility of undoing concrete classifications. That is why liminality can be useful for demigranticizing migration studies. In the next section, we explore current research on immobilities and liminalities as they refer to students before beginning to answer this question.

Internationalisation, student immobilities and liminalities

The relationship between (im)mobility and higher education has transformed over the past decades. Internationalisation of higher education has become a core strategy in countries like Australia and the UK (Robertson, 2011), as they bolster national earnings and falling revenue within the sector through the high fees that international students are charged. This has been accompanied by marketing of higher education with enticing post-study visas. At the same time, the age cohort of the students– often younger, aspirational and looking to expand their horizons and with fewer family responsibilities– makes this marketing relatively successful. All of this has contributed to increased student migration (Min & Falvey, 2018). The sharp growth in international student mobility in the increasingly globalised education system has meant that aspirations for international student mobility are often assumed to be 'universal' (King & Sondhi, 2018) and immobility among students has been seen as an outcome of the inability to afford or to access international higher education (Waters & Leung, 2013). Students who can afford to move are seen to be able to access the 'mobility capital' (Murphy-Lejeune, 2002) that embodied 'international experience' affords and to reproduce privilege (Courtois, 2018). For instance, Schewel and Fransen (2022) suggest that it is the educated middle class who aspire to migrate.

However, students too may choose to not move. There is a spectrum of student mobility/immobility; from students who study on campus in universities near where they live (Watkins & Smith, 2018) to those who travel abroad to study (Riaño et al., 2018). Many students also engage in international education without crossing borders, by studying at branch campuses (Wilkins, 2020) or through international distance education (Mittelmeier et al., 2022). The infrastructures of international distance education enable students to remain in their own place and study[2]. Despite insights that international study is not always valued more highly than local study (Ammigan & Jones, 2018), there is very little research on students who choose immobility (Raghuram et al., 2023), rather than

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[2] Student immobilities emerged as a topic during the COVID-19 pandemic (Gomes & Forbes-Mewett, 2021; Raghuram & Sondhi, 2022) and has generated new insights into the conditions that have restricted students' migration (Hari et al., 2021; Iorio & Silva, 2022) but here too, the focus is on the problems of immobility.

those who are simply unable to move due to lack of financial or other forms of capital. The appeal and advantages of immobility have rarely been considered.

Liminality offers a way of conceptualising students' multiple and creative forms of agency as it relates to mobility and education. Higher education is one way of arranging and managing this liminality among young people as it structures their time, aspirations and life-views (Field & Morgan-Klein, 2010). However, older students often opt for distance education because their educational aspirations have to fit around their family and work responsibilities. Thus, mobility and higher education aspirations have to be adjusted in a context which largely favours immobility. International distance education provides opportunities to achieve the desire for internationally recognised higher education credentials while still continuing to live out their current lives (Mittelmeier et al., 2021). As a result, across Africa, international distance education has become increasingly common in countries like Somalia, Zimbabwe, Ethiopia and Ghana (Omer et al., 2015; Tagoe, 2012; Woldeyes & Sehoole, 2015). Focusing on international distance education students in Africa who are not currently migrants, this paper explores immobility as a liminal phase.

Researching migration among immobile students

The IDEAS project (October 2016– June 2019) was a collaboration between the UNISA and the Open University in the UK. The study focused on students in Namibia, Zimbabwe and Nigeria which meant that they were located in countries with significant migration pasts. Each of these countries has its own histories and contemporary patterns of international and internal migration, mobilities and immobilities. A large number of people have migrated from Zimbabwe over the past decades due to political and economic instability (Chikanda, 2019). Nigeria has the largest population in Africa and is the main country of origin for international migration to countries across Africa as well as many parts of the world, such as Turkey, the European Union and North America (Adeyanju & Olatunji, 2021; Crawley & Jones, 2021).

We conducted student interviews with 77 women and 88 men from Zimbabwe, Nigeria, Namibia and South Africa. These students were studying at UNISA, which is the main provider of distance education in Africa. In 2020, UNISA had more than 389,876 students, out of which more than 25,000 were African international students (UNISA, 2022). The purposive sample of 165 students was selected for interviews based on the following demographics. Overall, about 55% of respondents were men and two-thirds were in the age range 18–24 years. The rest were 25–34 years, which is probably indicative of higher education in Africa and of distance education overall.

The decision to focus on Nigeria, Zimbabwe, and Namibia in this study was made based on careful deliberation and specific factors. Zimbabwe has the largest number of international students registered at UNISA. The strong historical, colonial and postcolonial relationship between Namibia and South Africa presented an intriguing opportunity to examine the perspectives of International Distance Education (IDE) in a neighbouring nation. Outside of SADC, Nigeria had the highest number of students registered at UNISA.

Interviews with international distance education students were conducted via Skype-to-phone and lasted between 30 and 90 min (for detailed discussions of the methods see Cin et al., 2021) following three separate interview guides covering social media use,

social and academic adjustment (Mittelmeier et al., 2019) and migration to explore different aspects of their experiences. Students who participated in this research did *not* migrate to study but we asked them questions about migration in order to explore both previous migration experience and future migration plans (Mittelmeier et al., 2022).[3] There were also students who had migrated internally, to neighbouring countries and some had also travelled further afield too. This diverse range of perspectives gave us interesting insights into the variability within 'immobility' during the current phase of study. Students' responses were not always based on their own migration experiences but on that of others.

The interviews were recorded, transcribed and coded inductively and deductively in NVivo. The list of codes was based on themes found in existing literature as well as topics and trends emerging in the data. The thematic analysis revealed that international distance education intersected with migration in multiple ways, which we turn to next.[4] The next three sections read immobility as liminal - as a spatio-temporal phase, as transformative but also how it can operate as epistemologically subversive.

Immobility as a transitory phase: a spatio-temporal reading

In this section, we use the example of students for whom distance education facilitated a transition between immobility and mobility. We do so to point to immobility as a liminal spatio-temporal category and to highlight the potential for thinking differently about when and where migration can be studied Some students already had intentions to migrate when they began their studies. For them, international distance education was an opportunity to get a degree from a South African higher education institution that could serve as a preparatory step for internal or international migration. The opportunities emerging from studying at a university abroad were portrayed as very different from the prospects arising from local university degrees, mainly because of South Africa's reputation as the most 'developed' country on the continent (Odhiambo, 2015).

As the students were still studying at the time of research, they did not necessarily have specific plans for their future migration. Some reflected on migration as something that could happen in the future and if such opportunities were to emerge, either for further study or employment elsewhere, many were in theory open to moving. A male student, Farai,[5] who was living in a medium-sized city in Zimbabwe was eager to explore opportunities elsewhere if it was related to his interest in law:

> *Believe me, you may hear the following morning that I'm in the UK! < Laughter >I might want to go back to Harare where I think there are lots of people with lots of opportunities, lots of companies and the like. If an opportunity presents itself and it is abroad in a place like Botswana, I don't mind going there.*

For Farai, migration was a possibility but subsidiary to his interest in pursuing his career so that his plans are probably best studied through the spaces, places and networks through which law careers are made (Raghuram, 2021b). He also spoke of national and international destinations in almost equivalent ways, rupturing the often-held boundary

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[3] All the interviews presented here were conducted by a UK-based researcher and one of the co-authors of this paper.

[4] For an analysis of the variables that appear to influence the aspiration to migrate within our quantitative study see (Mittelmeier et al., 2022).

[5] We have used pseudonyms for the individuals and removed other sensitive information to ensure that research participants remain unidentifiable.

between internal and international migration strategies. Finally, we read from his interview that immobility is a fluid category that already contains within it a trajectory towards mobility, which points to the difficulty of capturing migration thoughts and aspirations (Carling, 2019).

For others, this trajectory towards mobility required specific use of the period of immobility. Some Nigerian students were worried that degrees from Nigerian universities could be considered fake and therefore would not be acceptable in other countries (Peterside et al., 2020). Authenticity of a UNISA degree offered both human and mobility capital and hence the ability to make use of this transitory phase in ways that most advance the possibilities of mobility. Thus, Odi, a male student in Nigeria, said that the degree from UNISA would 'be well-accepted in another international environment, especially the UK, the US, in Canada and other economies.' A degree from a reputable institution could also lead to opportunities for international migration: 'I believe that it will give me the capacity to work in other countries' (Odi). Over the past decades increasingly complex policy instruments have been implemented to regulate international migration (de Haas et al., 2016) and international student mobility for higher education has emerged as one way for young adults to navigate these restrictions (Adesina, 2018; Adeyanju & Olatunji, 2021). International distance education could be a means to gain access to international degrees from home without migration. This can subsequently increase opportunities for regular international migration, either for further education or for employment.

International migration was possible for many of the people who participated in this research, even without the UNISA degree, but primarily to neighbouring countries. A degree from UNISA could help them to go further afield as Betty from Zimbabwe explained: 'If I could get greener pastures outside Zimbabwe or even outside Africa I would love to if I may be given the chance. I have got that vision, I think it's my stepping-stone, the degree can open other avenues for me.'

The degree, however, did not necessarily enable immediate international migration and the length of the transitory phase of immobility was not clear cut. For some, it was only one out of many steps to support their career development which would eventually lead to international migration. Hennie, a male student from Namibia, laid out how his degree would help him migrate in the longer term:

> *After I pass my degree, I will be able to obtain the CFA, I think it's Chartered Financial Analyst, to be able to become one and then to work myself up in my work to better positions. So first I will stay with the same company and see the promotion availability and so on. But I'm also interested in moving to the UK. I have a lot of friends and family live there.*

Besides, international distance education was one part of the immobility phase; gaining relevant further qualifications or work experience were others. These mattered because spatial mobility was simply a route to social mobility. The majority of these students would only migrate if they were certain that they would get 'good' jobs (Nunes and Arthur, 2013), and a higher education degree from a reputable and international institution degree was crucial for achieving legal international migration (Arthur & Flynn, 2013). Their degrees would place them in better positions to find well-paid employment in future destinations. Without such degrees, migration was not appealing because

irregular migration would require them to take on low-skilled and low-paid jobs and face a range of hardships in other countries. International distance education served a similar purpose as other forms of overseas study in being the first step to further migration (Waters, 2018). Migration, then, was an important factor in some students' lives, even if they had never migrated.

Betty's focus on education as a means to enhance future prospects illustrates how immobility can serve as a strategic phase, laying the groundwork for potential mobility. Education, in this context, is a form of 'staying put' where people can accumulate social and cultural capital, which could later facilitate geographical mobility. This perspective aligns with the broader understanding that immobility and mobility are not dichotomous but exist on a continuum, with education acting as a bridge between the two.

Immobility as transformative: changing subjectivities

The transitory phase of immobility can also be transformative. International distance education can, just like international student migration, be a time when students 'learn to migrate' (Findlay et al., 2017). Such learning can be seen in relation to experiences of new places as in international student migration or expansion of knowledges, networks and aspirations as in the case of distance education. Exposure to international study (Gunter & Raghuram, 2018) influenced how some of them viewed migration. Odi, for example, had become more open to considering opportunities elsewhere because of his studies at UNISA:

> I believe what I've been reading has opened a lot of insight into information that I need to know. Having gone through the study materials and gone through the processes, I think I will have a better interaction with people from other cultures and be able to get on with any other person from any culture. In a way, it has made me feel more confident and hopeful that going abroad will be a rewarding experience.

Distance education can expand horizons and help students to develop as a person. However, in doing so, the immobile phase has also sparked mobility aspirations.

To further illuminate these dynamics, we delve deeper into the narratives of interviewees like Hennie and Gertrude. Hennie's reflections on his educational and career aspirations reveal a deliberate consideration of mobility, where his current immobility is a strategic pause in anticipation of future movement. Gertrude's story, while introduced in the context of 'immobility as a purposive strategy' below, also enriches the understanding of how staying put can be a means to achieve social mobility, thus challenging conventional associations of mobility solely with geographical movement.

These mobility aspirations are not only outwards but also inwards. Emmanuel from Nigeria aspired to use his degree to go abroad for the purpose of widening his horizons but only to then return to Nigeria:

> I didn't go initially because of the financials, but now I can sponsor myself so after the degree [from UNISA] I hope to get an MBA. Hopefully I'll be able to afford something in the UK. So, while the degree goes on, I'm putting things in place to make sure my company flourishes and be able to sustain my long-term goals. In the end, I want to be in Nigeria because that's my country, and I also understand that in my country there's a lot that needs to be done so in terms of influence, and I think

> *I'll be able to achieve more locally in the country. So, moving around is just for the*
> *exposure, then come back and build stuff at home.*

Emmanuel anticipated that the degree would transform his opportunities to go abroad for studies and that the subsequent degree would ensure that his return migration would be successful. The opportunities migration may generate are not necessarily tied to the destination but are often about the transformation it will produce at home (Carrión-Flores, 2018). Immobility can be followed by a period of forwards and backwards mobility and then immobility.

Immobility strategies– which are aimed at staying put - can themselves, paradoxically, be transformative and produce new migration aspirations. The student's subjectivity and aspirations are being reconstituted during the immobile period. Analytically, what is interesting is not whether the aspirations were fulfilled or not; rather, what is important is that their relationship to the idea of mobility and immobility alters through international study. This highlights that migration does not have to be researched when and where there are explicit aspirations, during journeys, or after the fact. Instead, widening the scope for *how* migration is studied means that there is potential to expand research into other spaces where migration is not evident.

Immobility as purposive strategy: epistemological subversion

The starting question of much migration research is related to why people migrate. It has become increasingly evident that there are no simple answers to this, and that the question reveals a gap in understanding between migrants and migration researchers. Rather than posing this question to migrants, turning the question inwards to think about why we study migration offers an opportunity to expand our understanding of the epistemological framings of migration research.

While our findings indicate that some interviewees had not actively contemplated emigration, it is essential to distinguish between the absence of migration as a intentional decision and immobility that arises from unexamined life circumstances. For individuals who have not considered leaving their home country, immobility may not stem from a deliberate strategy against migration. Instead, it can be influenced by satisfaction with current conditions, familial or community ties, or a lack of perceived necessity for mobility. This nuanced understanding of immobility challenges the notion of it being a purposive strategy or a consequence of obstacles to mobility. It highlights the complexity of migration decisions, where the absence of action (not migrating) is influenced by a myriad of personal, social, and economic factors, rather than a clear-cut strategic choice.

For many of the students who participated in this research, international distance education was a strategic choice, often informed by their social positions and individual circumstances. For example, Gertrude a woman in Zimbabwe, had been working as a librarian for several years and was about to complete her studies for a management degree at UNISA. She had visited several neighbouring countries in the past, but when asked if she had any aspirations to live outside of Zimbabwe, she responded: 'I love my country! I only go there [abroad] to visit and then come back, I don't want to live there.' She chose UNISA because it allowed her to study without having to go for residential classes, which was referred to as the 'block release', and required part-time students to study on campus for extended periods. She thus wanted to avoid spatial mobility. However, her study plans were an attempt to gain social mobility as she hoped to use her

qualifications to gain promotions. Gertrude had started her job at a lower level in her organisation and gradually climbed the ranks into her current position, but further progression depended on getting a qualification. For her, an international distance education degree was a more appealing alternative than going abroad or studying at the local campus. Many students recognised the value of staying put but also that they could buy into the architectures of economic and social power by engaging in internationalisation at a distance (Mittelmeier et al., 2022).

The distance education students were not completely detached from mobility or migration. International distance education, which is caught up in other mobilities– of teaching materials, of examination papers, of fees and so on– enabled student immobility (Breines et al., 2019; Gunter et al., 2020) in a context where *corporeal* immobility mattered. Students were invested in staying put. This is an active rejection of mobility, even if only temporarily. The students were, however, arguably also imbricated in mobility, as an option that they want to evade. They were not migrants, but some still spoke of migration through the language of avoidance and were implicated in migration stories through this 'negative affect'.

For others, migration, mobility and immobility were things that they had simply not considered. In analysing our interviewees' immobility, it is important to appreciate the varied experiences and goals shaping their current situations. Farai's account, for instance, does not overtly express a migration desire but hints at a readiness for future mobility, depending on changing personal situations. This subtlety highlights the dynamic relationship between immobility and the possibility of future movement, suggesting that immobility can be a transitional state, influenced by shifting aspirations. In an interview with a male student from Zimbabwe the researcher was attempting to get a sense of this person's migration plans.

> **Researcher** *We're also interested in migration so I'm curious about your movements; you said that you grew up in an urban area but now you moved to a rural area for work. I'm also curious if you have any thoughts about going to other countries?*

> **Student** *I've not considered leaving Zimbabwe and maybe this can be explained by I am I'm turning 43 this year and my family is, I've got three kids and a wife, I don't find it necessary to leave Zimbabwe at any time now. Unless there is something drastic that has happened.*

> **Researcher** *OK, but in general–.*

> **Student** *It's not within my plans.*

> **Researcher** *OK. That's interesting too because many people want to dream about going abroad so it's interesting to hear that some people don't think about it.*

> **Student** *Ah no, I have never considered it.*

A female student in Zimbabwe expressed a similar lack of interest in migration.

Researcher: *And in terms of the future, are you planning to stay there or are you considering other options?*

Student *Um... I do intend to stay here, you mentioned before family and everything is here on the ground, so it is my intention to stay, but you never know, sometimes those opportunities you can't refuse come up. But for now, without any of those knocking at my door, I'm definitely not wanting to go anywhere.*

Researcher *And if you were to go anywhere, where would you go?*

Student *Oh! < Chuckles > That's a difficult question, I actually don't know, I haven't even thought about it? That's how little my intentions to leave are, I haven't... I've never thought of where I would go if I was to leave.*

Rather than being a subject that is 'trapped' in the global South by stringent migration regimes, as research on involuntary immobility has highlighted (Carling, 2002), these respondents chose to live in their home countries (See also Breines, 2021; Hirsch & Maylea, 2016),

Given the non-status of migration as an important or stable category for this group of interviewees, it can be the researcher's questioning that leads to reflection on migration. We create this as a category through our involvement. For instance, Evans, a man from Zimbabwe, said:

Currently I am comfortable being here in Zimbabwe. Unless if somehow I get something which is better in South Africa. But I've established myself here. I might go if the opportunities arise in South Africa and finish my studies there, but it's not something that is in my head.

He was comfortably living in Zimbabwe and his reflection about potentially going to South Africa was an outcome of the questions we asked him, in which he suggested that it could become an option in the future. In effect, it is our questioning that leads to migration becoming an object of consideration. Otherwise, it was not central to Evans's thinking at that point. These students did not see migration as important to their lives. Hui (2016) argues, while migration may be relevant as a sociological category, it is not always important in the social world which we are trying to study. De-migranticization involves recognising the limits of the analytical categories we use and being mindful about the imposition that adopting a migration lens can involve.

These examples are epistemologically provocative as they suggest choices that people are making which lie far outside the foci of most migration research. They can be seen to go against the epistemological norms that migration researchers usually adhere to and thus show signs of epistemic friction (Medina, 2020). These frictions with our

established genres and sense-making activities can be used to subvert the migrant focus which de-migranticization scholars criticise. They disrupt dominant discourses and sense-making in migration studies by moving migration out of its current place. Dislocating where migration can be studied offers new directions for interpretation, analysis and representation, which can be used for rethinking migration studies. This requires some methodological steps, as we will outline below.

Rethinking migration through immobility– methodological de-migranticisation

In this study, the complexities of higher education provided via distance education across international borders enabled us to approach mobility and immobility through an alternative lens. International distance education is not an obvious topic through which to study migration. Migration has often been studied among people because of their skin colour, accent or other features which suggest that they have migration histories. Migration can be a taxonomy based on migration regulations or seen as a legacy arising out of migrant histories and one or the other usually form the basis of migration research. However, each of these presupposes particular characteristics– legal, somatic or cultural and imposes these suppositions and framings on those who one is studying.

Starting with (distance education) students loosens these boundaries. We began with a set of practices around study and how it is arranged. We were particularly attentive to how migration appears in their stories in unexpected circumstances and where it does not necessarily appear through otherness (Schapendonk et al., 2021). Migration was not omnipresent but emerged as a future opportunity through their study experiences, suggesting that migration needs to be considered among those who do not yet have such aspirations but may develop them in the future.

Transitory phase

One consequence of researching migration anytime and anywhere, as we did in this research project, is that we saw how study can create aspirations for social mobility which may be delivered through migration. Their commitment was to social mobility and not migration. However, education can influence the aspirations and the possibilities for social mobility, and therefore create a sense of possibilities of migration. Students who were purportedly immobile and, crucially, have already engaged in forms of internationalisation in situ can also have aspirations to migrate, but may also be committed to not moving. For some of the students, international education at a distance was not instead of migration, but a deliberate step to facilitate their mobility through skilled categories, rather than the less skilled categories through which they would have moved otherwise. They used immobility to slowly accrue the capital required to be mobile. The study of migration aspirations among in-situ internationalisation students suggests that immobility, or a delayed mobility, can also be part of a migration strategy. This was revealed as a consequence of being attentive to migration potential amongst a supposedly immobile group. Amongst this group, immobility is therefore strategic and tangible whereas their migration lies possibly years ahead pending their qualifications and suitable circumstances. This requires stretching out the research over longer periods of time to see how these aspirations were either fulfilled, altered or rebutted, something we were unable to do within the space of a project due to the short duration of the project.

Distance education students study part time and acquire qualifications after years of study. Their horizons of aspirations are therefore stretched over time. These students' migration aspirations are not necessarily easy to identify but rely on exploration of people's broader perspectives on life and how they will achieve their goals. It is only then that we can recognise when migration is part of their plans. Besides, perspectives on migration and immobility may transform as people gain new knowledge and understanding of their own opportunities. Researching immobility, then, requires the study of transformations either over a period of time, in settings *where* it is possible to recognise change, or to develop strategies to identify such transformations in people's lives. It requires recognition of the liminality of migration and that its presence flows and ebbs in people's lives. It also highlights how social transformations are experienced in quotidian ways and not just through major societal changes. The causes of migration are embedded in everyday practices that do not always lead to migration. Being attentive towards those practices, like study, can unveil mobility aspirations because study can be transformative in terms of how people think about where they can, should and want to be.

Moreover, in our research, international distance education degrees have an accelerator function as immobility is not representing someone left behind– the residual and repressed. Strategic periods of immobility can lead to a resurgence of mobility. This acceleration and deceleration are temporal inhabitations of liminal space-time. These are ways of inhabiting the spectrum between mobility and immobility, suggesting that the two need to be considered in conjunction with each other; they are always in a dynamic relation. Crucially, acceleration and deceleration highlight the importance of *when* researchers classify people as migrants and how their migration aspirations or experiences become more central than the other dimensions that shape their lives.

Transformative immobility

Identifying emerging aspirations requires research designs that focus on the spaces and times which are meaningful to the student and *how* ideas of mobility may germinate. We can therefore turn the attention to apparently immobile people to understand mobility, which suggests that migration research does not have to place migrants at the centre. The potential to study migration, then, goes beyond the time-space of mobility and is rather a matter of adopting a methodological approach to migration which is not limited to certain people, times and places. We suggest that this is one answer to *how* to de-migranticize migration research.

Recognising the liminality of migration and mobility also influences the *how* of migration research. Migration is often seen as moving away from a place which otherwise contains them, a boundary which is to be transcended. Push-pull theories, for instance, ascribe a negative connotation to the place which migrants leave as it is marked by social, economic or political deficit (Van Hear et al., 2018). However, moving beyond that negative ascription by recognising people who choose not to move, re-ascribes these places, not just through the longing for a home that has been left behind as in diaspora studies, but as a place that is simply inhabited in quotidian ways. Moreover, we echo Ahmed's (1999) analysis of home in writings on migration where she argued against

> the very reduction of home to being, as if being could be without desire for something other. Such a narrative of home assumes the possibility of a space which is pure, which is uncontaminated by movement, desire or difference, in order to call for a

> *politics in which movement is always and already a movement away from home (p. 339, italics in original).*

Similarly, our case studies destabilise home as a space of stasis or purity and immobility as a position of fixity by showing how it always carries elements of mobility, whether through suspension of movement or through avoiding it. Immobility already contains complex associations with forms of mobility. Immobile people provide essential insights into migration, suggesting that mobilities and migration could be studied among any group– mobile or immobile, but carries the risk of imposing mobility narratives on immobile people and reducing their status to migrants, even if they did not want to be associated with migration.

Epistemological subversion

De-migranticization, therefore, involves stepping aside and diverting away from migration and mobility as core characteristics of differentiation between people. Migration and migrants continue to be construed as the main sources of data for analysing migration-related questions, but why this approach remains dominant is not self-evident. There is potential value in subverting the epistemological approach that underpins the majority of studies in migration: Focusing on everyday practices and their inherent mobility and immobility potentials is more likely to lead to an understanding of the liminality of migration, mobility and immobility, and for recognition of the temporal uncertainties and spatial multiplicity that migration always involves. Mobility can appear as an absent category, through rebuttal or refusal, or as something to be avoided, even if only temporarily. It means that migration and mobility can be studied anytime as it is omnipresent in people's lives (even if only through negative affect). It can therefore also be studied anywhere, in both locations and times which are not explicitly related to migration temporally or spatially.

Crucially, liminal readings of immobility can also lead to why questions. Why are we researching migration in this way and why are people responding as they do? What are the epistemological frameworks which lead to particular lines of questioning and how can that be subverted in order to demigranticize? In essence, liminal readings of immobility have the potential to turn the lens on the enquirer and not just those who are being researched.

Conclusion

This paper has contributed to debates on de-migranticization (Dahinden, 2016) by pointing to the liminality of immobility as a category. While most research has tried to demigranticize migration studies through questioning mobility, this paper has looked at some of the complexities of immobility and how it too is imbricated in mobility stories. However, in doing so we do not posit mobility/migration and immobility as binaries but as liminal categories. We have shown how a focus on immobility can be used to research migration in contexts where there are not necessarily any migrants present. In doing so, the paper makes three conceptual advances.

First, it highlights the importance of examining immobility as a constitutive category in de-migranticizing migration studies. It does so, not by fixing on immobility but by opening it up to multiple readings: immobility as a spatio-temporal phase, as a transformative and productive of new subjectivities through the international distance education

experience, and as a purposive strategy that can operate as epistemologically subversive in migration studies. Applying liminality to migration categories, we suggest, offers new opportunities for conceptualising migration.

Secondly, we adopted international distance education as the lens through which to study immobility. This enabled us to explore student experiences of immobility and provided us with an empirically meaningful category to sidestep the fetishization of migration and mobility. Examining mobility and immobility through higher education shows that the two categories are not stable, fixed states, but are temporary conditions that always have potential to be something else. Crucially, this group engages with internationalisation through education and cannot therefore be understood through stasis; they are after all dependent on and invested in the forms of human capital that internationalisation of higher education offers.

Thirdly, we highlight that de-migranticization is a methodological issue, and not only an epistemological endeavour. The examination of migration through the lens of non-migrants has allowed this paper to move complicated the narrative of migrants versus non-migrants (Ahmed, 1999), by outlining the complexity of the category - immobile. Thus, we have highlighted how the examination of migration among non-migrants can bring together migratory and non-migratory behaviour (de Haas, 2021). The practicalities of exploring this empirically, however, requires research designs that considers the methodological suggestions about *when, where* and *how* to undertake research as we have set out above. These are initial steps towards a de-migranticized methodology.

Migration theory has used liminality as a space-time which migrants inhabit as they wait for decisions (Noussia & Lyons, 2009), pass between different migration statuses or transition into a post-migrant status (Mitra & Evansluong, 2019), but liminality has not been extended to migration categories themselves. Seeing mobility-immobility through the lens of liminality underscores that it is not an either/or category, but rather mobility and immobility are part of trajectories where the outcomes cannot be known in advance. They are snapshots in time, but they are also complex contingent categories which contain elements of the other category. Studying immobility also highlights how periods of immobility can be transformative in the mobility-immobility spectrum. Finally, thinking about immobility through the lens of liminality also offers a way of being epistemologically subversive. The intersections between increasingly multipolar higher education practices and immobility are emerging as a rich source for researching migration, and, as this paper has shown, a de-migranticized approach can shed light on aspects of migration that have received little attention because of their apparent disconnectedness from migration. Prevailing conceptualisations of the spatio-temporal relationship between mobility and immobility are ripe for reconsideration and the shift away from studying migration through migrants provides an opportunity to break down binaries of migrants versus non-migrants and migration versus immobility. This, we suggest, helps expand the remit of migration studies to include social contexts that have previously not been considered in terms of migration.

Declarations

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