

## **Migrate plans mutate, destinations change**

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### **Abstract**

In 2015, Europe's so-called 'migration crisis' hit the headlines. A slew of media reporting followed, some of which was nuanced and delicate, most of which was stereotypical. Narratives emerged of 'migrants' hell bent on exploiting both welfare systems and legal migration procedures, without prior consideration of the realities facing most of the people making the (often precarious) journey. In-depth accounts of the process undergone by these individuals rarely formed part of the picture. In one of the first pieces of research-based examination into the journeys of people considered elements of the migration crisis, this article explores the decision-making processes of (mainly) Syrians and Eritreans recently arrived in three European countries: Germany, Spain and the UK. Applying the threshold approach – a relatively recent conceptual framework, originally developed to better understand the movements of 'regular' labour migrants – this paper investigates the dynamics underpinning people's trajectories towards Europe's centres. A number of factors, already widely established within the broader literature, are identified: financial capital, social networks and the role of smuggling operations. But so too does a less frequently discussed issue: the role of refugees' and migrants' own perceptions and feelings about where to go, when to do it, and how to do it. Ultimately, we find that refugees' journeys are, on the one hand, the product of a profoundly contextual and subjective decision-making process, and on the other, deeply transformative phenomena, guiding as they do perceptions and choices regarding destination and means.

## Introduction

Migration has long been seen as a ‘movement between two fixed points’ (Triulzi and McKenzie 2013), an abstract transition from A to B. With some recent exceptions, the migration literature has tended to overlook, to take for granted, what happens in between – that is, the nature of how individuals move across space (BenEzer and Zetter 2015; Schapendonk 2012). This in itself is quite curious. As Schapendonk (2012, 39) argues, ‘It is not so much beginnings (the A) and endings (the B) that matter, but rather the in-between, the trajectory itself ... The spatial evolution of a trajectory influences the continuation of the same trajectory.’

In other words, the journeys people make, or are planning to make, not only determine the degrees of risk and cost involved in an individual’s migration, but also affect the even more fundamental dynamics of migration decision-making: whether to go, when to do it, where to travel to, how to get there. The analysis presented in this paper adds to this picture, bringing to life several of the ways in which the supposedly marginal process of ‘transit’ can itself be one of the most formative aspects of migration. As will be seen, when people leave without a clear destination in mind – less exceptional than one might expect – it is their experiences on the road, the people they encounter, and the information gathered which all shape where they go next.

This analysis emerges from in-depth look at the journeys made by people who have recently arrived in Europe, which in turn is based on interviews carried out last year with more than 50 Eritrean, Senegalese and Syrian respondents in Germany, Spain and the UK. We see this paper as making two main contributions to the migration literature. First, it provides new empirical evidence on Europe’s recent and ongoing ‘migration crisis’.<sup>i</sup> While there has been a great deal of media reporting on these movements, much of it very rigorous, there has been relatively little research-based evidence published to date. We hope this paper helps address that gap. Second, it makes a theoretical contribution, exploring the extent to which a conceptual approach first published in *Area* in 2011 – an approach designed first and foremost to better understand the decision-making process around *voluntary migration* (van de Velde and van Naerssen 2011) – is also analytically useful for the study of *forced migration*.<sup>ii</sup>

In this contribution, we illustrate the factors which really matter to those undertaking a journey to Europe, and particularly those leaving war-affected or hugely oppressive contexts. After a brief outline of the conceptual and empirical design of the study, we first discuss the nature of ‘destination’ for many people moving through difficult and forced trajectories, before exploring these factors, all the while thinking in terms of the threshold approach. These factors include financing, social networks, smugglers and perceptions of viable futures. Finally, we end with some short conclusions.

## Conceptual and empirical design

To understand how people make decisions about their journeys, we draw on a theoretical framework referred to as the threshold approach, developed by Martin van der Velde and Ton van Naerssen (2011). Its analytical power lies in its holistic focus on the entire migration process and the decisions continually made throughout. Yet, to date, their approach has mainly been applied to studies of what we might refer to as regular or voluntary migration (see the edited volume by van der Velde and van Naerssen 2015). Its relevance to studies of forced migration has, to our knowledge, gone relatively untested.

The approach starts from the premise that international immobility, rather than mobility, is the norm. To put that into context, just 3% of the world's population are presently classified as international migrants. The authors suggest this is because there are a number of 'thresholds' that prevent people from migrating. In many ways, these barriers are as much psychological as physical: as Koikkalainen and Kyle (2015, 12) point out in their compelling paper on 'cognitive migration', there is always a 'process by which our minds migrate before our bodies do'. And that process is neither trivial nor automatic.

In order for someone to cross a border, the *idea* of migration as a viable option must first take root in the mind of an individual. When someone's notions of identity, social belonging and attachment are so concretely anchored to the geographic space in which they grew up, the concept of migrating internationally might never even enter the design of their livelihood trajectory. For migration to become an option, a person must: (1) first stop feeling indifferent towards the idea – violent conflict can do this, as can limited livelihood options in place of origin – and then; (2) accept it as something that might potentially bring a positive change in wellbeing. The framework's architects refer to this process as getting over the *indifference threshold*. It is the first 'stage' of (cognitive) migration.

However, there are still two further thresholds to pass before migration occurs. These are known as the *locational threshold* and the *trajectory threshold*. While the former refers to a decision-making process regarding where to go (destination), the latter is more concerned with how to do it (journey). Again, each represents a mental barrier that must be overcome before cross-border migration occurs. Once a possible destination has been identified, the differences between that and the current place of residence are weighed up; should the 'keep' and 'repel' factors prove more influential than other concerns, it is then completely possible for an individual to come down on the side of staying. Likewise, if a certain route is perceived to be too risky – a judgement conditional on the particular risk disposition of the individual – then immobility may be favoured over mobility. It is not until all three thresholds have been overcome that migration actually occurs. Thus, it is not all that surprising that most people, especially those for whom regular migration is essentially not an option, select immobility (or rather mobility restricted to their more immediate surroundings).

As van der Velde and van Naerssen point out, there can be considerable nonlinearity in the decision-making process. As circumstances change, each threshold may be (re)visited on a continual yet irregular basis. Individuals who at one point in time feel compelled to reach a particular destination may, at another point in time, reorient their strategy to suit a shifting set of livelihood objectives. This is particularly the case for the mostly protracted migrations studied in this paper.

Neither is the relationship between the locational and the trajectory thresholds necessarily sequential. Although it may seem logical for people to first decide on a destination before deliberating on how to reach it, this is not always how things work. As our findings show, people's perceptions and ideas about destinations – that is, their positioning in relation to the locational threshold – are often shaped by how their trajectories play out.

Our focus was on refugees and migrants who had 'completed' (in a crude sense) their journeys to Europe. We carried out qualitative data collection in three countries (Germany, Spain and the UK) covering individuals from three countries of origin: Eritrea, Senegal and Syria. These groups were initially selected in order to (1) capture some of the major flows currently reaching Europe (Eritreans, Syrians) and (2) include different migration groups ranging from asylum-seekers to those that are considered to have mostly economic motivations for migration (Senegalese). While many of those we interviewed were either undocumented or in the process of applying for asylum, this sampling strategy allowed us to analyse themes across a mixture of different trajectories and types of flow.

Interviews were arranged through trusted intermediaries, for example charities or refugee shelters, and were conducted in safe locations either in English or with interpreters. We conducted a total of 52 interviews: 15 with Eritreans, 10 with Senegalese and 27 with Syrians.

Of the 52 Eritreans, Senegalese and Syrians we interviewed, just 24% travelled directly from their departure point to their destination. Most of these were Senegalese who entered Europe with a legal visa. The other 76% had lengthier journeys, crossing a number of countries and often spending months or even years in transit. On average, respondents crossed about four countries; however, this varied considerably by nationality. Velocity or the speed of travel, a concept coined by Joris Schapendonk (2012), also varied greatly, ranging from days to years.

### **Migration plans mutate, destinations change**

As just discussed, in order to consider migration, a potential 'mover' first has to overcome is the indifference threshold. This is the initial 'cognitive migration' stage, where potential migrants play with the idea of migration in their head. Getting over the indifference threshold often involves an accumulation of multiple causes and conditions being in place, although the exact combination is

of course subjective and different for everyone. There is rarely a single cause of migration. The factors that push people over the edge can include a wide range of things. Political and economic insecurity, conflict, violence, human rights abuses and repressive governments affected many of our respondents, forcing them to leave (or rather making them *feel* forced to leave).

Once someone has overcome the indifference threshold, they then face the locational and trajectory thresholds. Destinations often start off fuzzy, forming into something more solid as journeys are 'moved through'. In particular, people who travel over long distances and through long periods of time may not initially have a clear destination in mind (Collyer 2007; Schapendonk 2012). Among our respondents, only *half* had a clear idea of their final destination at the point of departure. For many, the journey can begin with the overriding need to get out. In some cases, the destination is the broad idea of 'Europe'. Many grew up with stories and TV shows about Europe and see it as a place with opportunities, a better life and human rights.

It is not just that ideas about destination start off as unclear. A number of recent studies highlight that, owing to the length and complexity of migration trajectories, migrants' destination can change frequently *en route* (de Clerk 2015; Kuschminder et al. 2015; Schapendonk 2012). So too in our research. We often found that, to begin with, people plan only one country ahead. At this stage, the destination will just be a neighbouring country, and there may not be a clear plan beyond this. For instance, in the case of Eritreans, many will initially not plan further than reaching Sudan. But, as people move through their journeys – as they gather information, meet new people, learn of new opportunities – their destination may change and slowly start to solidify.

There are a number of elements of journeys that shape where people end up. One of these is financial capital available to the individual, which clearly determines where and how the migrant can travel. Social networks are also an influential factor in shaping trajectory and destination choice (see also Cummings et al. 2015). In some cases, smugglers determine migrants' and refugees' destinations. And finally, people want to go to places where they see a viable future for themselves, and such perceptions can change along the way. The next section discusses these factors in more detail.

## **The factors that shape journeys and destinations**

### *Financial capital*

Financial capital determines both the ability to move or move on, as well as the nature of the journey. In the terminology of the threshold approach, cost is a trajectory factor: the cost of a specific trajectory may prevent mobility or push an individual towards another destination. On average, respondents in our sample spent £2,680 on transport, people smugglers, bribes, ransom payments and other costs, but this range varied hugely by nationality, route and means of

transport. Trips through the Central Mediterranean, mostly undertaken by Eritreans, are more expensive (average cost £3,280) than those through the Western Mediterranean, which tend to involve more walking and public transport (average cost £2,620). A journey with a fake visa – a much quicker and safer way to get to Europe – is more expensive: the majority of our sample were in no position to afford this.

However, even along those standard migration routes of recent migration to Europe (e.g. along the Western Balkans), the ability to draw on financial capital can very much shape the nature of the journeys taken. Those with greater financial means, for example, found smugglers to drive them. This not only makes the journey more comfortable, but also increases the likelihood of reaching the intended destination.

The reverse is also true. Running out of money can limit the potential destinations available. One Eritrean respondent we interviewed, Senait, wanted to go to Sweden, but she had only €200 left by the time she had reached Italy. So she instead decided to go to Germany, as the train ticket was within her budget. It also helped that this destination was recommended to her by other Eritreans she met at the train station, as well as around the parks of Rome. Senait never had the intention to go to Germany when she left Eritrea, but was ‘moved’ along the journey by friends and smugglers. Indeed, this kind of ‘trusted information’, which is of course a relative term, can prove remarkably influential in shaping where people go and how they do it. So, we see that the trajectory itself can determine destination. Going back to the threshold approach, as Senait mentally worked through the trajectory and locational thresholds in Rome, new information learned from others and her budget constraints led to a different outcome than previously.

While migration costs varied owing to differences in route and economic means, luck – something perhaps easily written off as marginal to the process of movement (Gladkova and Mazzucato 2015) – also played a part. Migration journeys tend not to be contractually enforceable, and the people we interviewed had an irregular legal status for most of the journey. The vulnerability that underscores many irregular migrants’ journeys – stemming in turn from their undocumented status, desperation, fear and unfamiliarity with new places and rules – provides opportunities for many people along the way to make money, from ‘ordinary’ citizens and bus drivers to border police and armed groups. A total of 36% of respondents, for example, were extorted in some way. This involved anything from a bus driver charging double fares, to Eritreans being held hostage by smuggling networks in Sudan or Libya until the family had paid a ransom payment.

Recent research suggests that kidnapping, hostage-taking and extortion of Eritrean refugees seem to be increasing (Aziz et al. 2015). These kinds of experiences happened to almost half of the Eritreans we interviewed. Aziz et al. (*ibid.*) argue that there is an increasingly blurred line between smuggling and trafficking practices. In Libya and the Sinai, armed militias or violent groups associated with some tribes have ‘capitalised their capacity of using violence in order to exploit migrants in transit’ (*ibid.*, 61). Subsequently, those hiring a smuggler to make a journey may then,

for example, be kept prisoner at a smugglers' camp until additional payments are made, something a number of our respondents also experienced.

Extortion and kidnapping not only increases the costs of migration, but also changes the relative attractiveness of different locations. Human right abuses and negative experiences with locals can make people more determined to move on to a 'better' place. There is more on this below.

### *Social networks*

Echoing earlier studies (e.g. Kuschminder et al. 2015; Schapendonk and van Moppes 2007), we also found that social networks can also play an important role in shaping migration decisions and subsequent movements – so long as individuals can draw on the right contacts at the right time (see Schapendonk, 2015 for a richer account of how social networks are contingent rather than absolute). Social networks help by providing information and financial resources. Interestingly, these social networks do not just consist of family and friends from home. In many cases, we find that people form new relationships with people *en route*, particularly with people with the same ethnic or religious background (see also Schapendonk 2015). Often, these people then became their 'travelling companions' for onward travel.

Crucially, social networks also provide financial capital. In some cases, people are able to move on even without funds, if they can draw friends or 'travelling companions' who are able and willing to pay for them. Cases of solidarity among friends or travelling companions were not uncommon among our respondents, although solidarity was mostly restricted to fellow country(wo)men. Take Dehab, an Eritrean woman who lived and worked in Greece for five years, before moving on after a nine-month stint in prison without trial for not having the right documents. An Eritrean friend who had also been arrested (and then released) had managed to save up quite a bit of money in Greece, and paid for both of them to travel to Italy, and then for Dehab's onward travel to France.

### *The role of smugglers*

Roughly two thirds of irregular migrants coming to Europe use smugglers (Koser and Kuschminder 2015). Given that the majority of our respondents had irregular journeys, we also found that the use of smuggler(s) – for all or part of the journey – was the norm. In fact, only 13% of people in the sample did not use a smuggler (and none of these was Eritrean). Smugglers provide a useful service for which there is a strong demand, offering transportation, logistical support and information on the best route to take. Relationships between irregular migrants and smugglers are complicated. Some describe smugglers as 'helpers', and may even speak of their smugglers in a positive way (see also van Liempt and Sersli 2013).

However, most of our respondents had negative experiences with smugglers, and satisfaction with the services smugglers provided was mostly low. Syrian women, participating in a focus group discussion, elaborated on this. They explained that smugglers '*lie so much about the numbers*',

i.e. when they will travel, how long it will take, how many people will join the trip. Smugglers' treatment of migrants and refugees was frequently inhumane, exploitative and violent, and conditions during travel tended to be poor and dangerous. Common experiences included lack of provision of life jackets or no or little food and water, as well as uncomfortable and unsafe transportation, with a high number of people squeezed onto a boat or truck. In interviews with Eritreans, we also heard cases of smugglers collaborating with other armed groups, as Aziz et al. (2015) also observe. Such experiences shape aspirations and locational objectives. For example, some Eritreans told us that after having been kidnapped in Sudan, they wanted to go to Europe where 'they have human rights'.

Furthermore, people smugglers often play a direct role in shaping migration trajectories and destinations. The process of negotiation between a 'mover' and a smuggler can determine which destination is offered, promoted or available (Robinson and Segrott 2002). Smugglers are in a powerful position, allowing them to determine routes, prices and destination, given the huge demand for these services and the limited bargaining power of those wanting to use them. For example, Mohammed and Amal, a Syrian couple in their 60s, were approached by smugglers at the Syrian–Lebanese border. The '*pushy and aggressive*' smuggler they employed suggested they travel to the UK via Spain, Denmark and Sweden. Being unaware of the Dublin Regulation, they agreed to this route and were shocked when they were sent back to Spain – their first point of entry in Europe. Whether a smuggler determines an individual's destination depends on the nature of their relationship, which could simply be a financial transaction or could be more exploitative, where the client is more dependent on the smuggler's information and service (Wissink et al. 2013). Particularly vulnerable migrants may feel they have no say in the matter.

#### *Perceptions of a viable future*

Plans and destinations are shaped by where people see a viable future. Despite the diversity in our sample in terms of country of origin, education, occupation and social class, 'locational objectives' were overwhelmingly universal: people wanted a place that offers safety and security, employment, schooling and education, and decent living conditions. As such, 'final' destinations are those places where people have a decent chance of achieving at least some of these objectives. This finding holds both for those who we might classify as economic migrants as well as refugees, as also shown in other studies. For instance, a study by Zimmerman (2010) shows that Somalian refugees travelled beyond the closest areas of safety to countries where they believed they could attain a greater quality of life, not just immediate safety.

Perceptions of risk, viability and opportunity change, so people may move on after a while, some even years later. This means people may move to one place initially with the *intention to settle*, but then move on when things do not work out or reality does not meet expectations. It was quite common for the Syrians we interviewed to have moved to a neighbouring country initially and looked for work there, only to move on a few months later when they felt the environment proved



too difficult to make a living. Others faced the same kinds of experiences in Europe. Adama, for example, decided to move on from Italy after he saw that other Senegalese migrants in Milan were either unemployed or selling drugs. He explained to us that this wasn't an option for him personally: Adama wanted a '*clean migration*'.

High costs of living, combined with an inability to earn an income, proved another reason for people to move on. For example, Khalil fled with his family to Lebanon, as he had worked there previously, but explained why they moved on after just over a year: '*Life in Beirut was very expensive. Renting a flat cost at least \$700-1,000 a month; electricity and food were very expensive. We were not supported by the Lebanese government and because of the policy our three kids were not allowed to attend school.*'

Khalil's experience also shows that access to essential services – itself a function of a country's public policy environment – is another major factor that affects destination choice. For example, a number of interviewees cited low living standards, especially those experienced in refugee camps in Ethiopia and Somalia, as a reason to move on. Interviewees shared their experiences about crowded, unsanitary living conditions and lack of access to food and clean water. Respondents also said they feared for their safety in refugee camps in Sudan, citing abductions by the Rashaida tribe (for ransom) and the Eritrean secret service.

Furthermore, negative experiences with authorities or locals may prompt people to move on, as was seen in Dehab's story (already mentioned above), who moved on from Greece after having been imprisoned without trial. Others express shock at the treatment experienced in Europe, and shift their trajectories further in order to reach more 'welcoming' countries. For instance, Abdu came to Italy from Senegal and met a friend who had reached Italy seven years earlier and was still living on the streets. He had been fingerprinted and could not move on. Abdu thought, '*How can they put a person without anything on the street? I was shocked!*'

Coming back to the threshold approach, we see that aspirations concerning access to employment, education, essential services and being able to live a 'decent life' are all 'locational factors' that feature highly in the decision-making process. New experiences along the journey can change both the information available to potential migrants about destinations and trajectories and their aspirations. These new locational and trajectory factors then become part of the cognitive migration stage described by Koikkalainen and Kyle (2015) – their imagining of other destinations. Having had those experiences and facing a new set of locational and trajectory factors, individuals go through the decision-making process again and may end up deciding to move on.

## Conclusion

It has recently been argued, after probably far too long, that an intricate study of refugees' and migrants' journeys are key to better understanding migration as a broader phenomenon (BenEzer and Zetter, 2015). Our research, which involved exploring the recent movements to Europe of Eritreans, Senegalese and Syrians, shows that journeys can indeed be life-changing events. In themselves, journeys affect motivations and shape where people end up. Many leave without a clear destination in mind, and their experiences on the road inform where they go next.

We find that amongst our respondents, these journeys are precarious, lengthy and costly. The length and complexity of trajectories mean destinations and travel plans change frequently *en route*. There are a number of elements of journeys that shape where people end up. One of these is financial capital of the aspiring 'mover', which clearly determines where and how someone can travel. Social networks are an influential factor in shaping trajectory and destination choice. In some cases, smugglers determine destination. And finally, destinations are shaped by where people see a viable future, and this perception – this feeling – can change over time. As such, an individual's initially planned destination may not be their final one.

In this study, we applied the threshold approach: a framework initially developed to better understand the decision-making process of labour migrants. Our research shows quite clearly that the threshold approach also works in a forced migration setting. Refugees and migrants often make decisions about journeys and destinations for similar motivations. What the approach lacks, however, is a discussion of how individuals compare a number of destinations at the same time, implying that aspiring 'movers', regardless of their in/voluntary status always compare their present location to *one* potential destination and the process of getting there. Our research has shown that in practice, refugees and migrants are faced with much more complicated journeys, being confronted with multiple destinations and potential trajectories at the same time and having to consider those simultaneously in the same decision-making process. Future iterations of the threshold approach could make the multiplicity of destinations and trajectory options much more explicit.

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i We acknowledge the normative ideas and assumptions built into the 'European migration crisis' phrasing, as well as the problematic imagery it conjures. We simply use it here as a form of shorthand.

ii Throughout this report, we use 'refugee' and 'migrant' as distinct terms. It is not our intention to conceal the blurred lines between these categories, but rather to emphasise the fact that, within our sample, some people are clearly fleeing conflict and persecution, while others are quite clearly not.