Chapter 25

Expatriation in the Age of Austerity: An Analysis of Capital Mobilization Strategies of Self-Initiated Expatriates

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on Bourdieu’s concept of capital this study deploys a relational perspective to examine capital mobilization strategies of skilled migrants from recession ravaged Western- and impoverished Eastern-European member states when navigating their way through structural constraints that affect their career choices. It is a multilevel approach that allows overcoming the individual (micro) emphasis in the self-initiated expatriation literature, organizational (meso) and contextual (macro) focus in the skilled migration studies. Based on qualitative research involving self-initiated expatriates from the European Union (EU) in Edinburgh the study extends our understanding beyond the narrow discourse of human capital and offers a more holistic picture of skilled migration in the age of austerity. The study also exposes that EU citizenship is not enough to undertake successful career mobility. Finally, it highlights the need of proactive and purposeful policies to retain the brain while not imposing any draconian on free movement of human capital.

INTRODUCTION

Migration has, once again, become a contentious political and academic issue in Europe and UK in particular. Recent migration studies are mainly centred on human capital as a central issue for understanding international career mobility of skilled migrants (Syed, 2008; Zikic, 2015), including organizational assignees (Doherty & Dickmann, 2009) and self-initiated expatriates (Cerdin & Selmer, 2014; Doherty, 2013). Thus, there remains a paucity of work assessing how skilled migrants mobilize other important forms of capital in dealing with structural constraints when undertaking international mobility. This study is concerned with exploring the use of various forms of capital by skilled migrants from
the European Union (EU) when relocating to the UK. It is important to understand the dynamics that underpin migration from recession-ravaged European countries to the UK as these migrants constitute a potential pool of human resources for both home and host countries.

While the study does offer interesting insights into these dynamics in particular in terms of migrants’ agency in shaping their capital as a part of international mobility, it also highlights the need for a more nuanced approach for understanding of capital mobilization of skilled migrants. However, the study seeks to make conceptual as well as empirical contributions to research in HRM, in particular to international migratory literatures i.e. self-initiated expatriation. First, focusing on Bourdieu’s (1986) concept of capital, this study provides a relational framework for explaining the capital mobilization strategies of skilled migrants when relocating to the UK. It is a multilevel approach that allows overcoming the micro-individual emphasis in the self-initiated expatriation literature and macro-contextual focus in the skilled migration studies (Al Ariss & Syed, 2011). It also extends our understanding beyond the narrow discourse of human capital and offers a more holistic picture of skilled migration and international careers. Second, using Bourdieu’s (1986) concept of habitus, it challenges the dominant discourse of disadvantage associated with highly skilled migrants’ careers in the extant international HRM literature (Salaff et al., 2002). It explains how migrants accumulated and deployed different forms of capital to encompass individual, organizational and macro-contextual influences that affect their career choices. Third, based on empirical evidence, it offers a relational perspective for understanding capital deployment by linking various forms of capital (cultural, economic, social and symbolic), challenging the dominant discourse associated with international career mobility in the extant international HRM literature (Andresen et al., 2015), which periodically tend to focus on limited vision of personal intellectual capital (i.e. an individual’s knowledge, skills). Finally, it highlights the need of proactive and purposeful policies on state level to retain the talent (i.e. brain-retain) while not imposing any draconian on free movement of human capital.

BACKGROUND

Financial turmoil and huge government deficits (Peet, 2011) are the two fundamental tendencies that have forced the neoliberal states of Europe to impose societal punishment in the form of fiscal austerity (Taylor-Gooby & Stoker, 2011). Such fiscal retrenchment has provoked social- and economic-distress (Clarke & Newman, 2012), which led to self-initiated expatriation across Europe (Ötker-Robe & Podpiera, 2013). A burgeoning concern in the public debate, therefore, is driven by the fear that these migrants are fiscal burden because they drain public resources by drawing on the generous social transfers introduced in Europe to prevent social exclusion (see Drinkwater & Robinson, 2013; Dustmann & Frattini, 2014). Politicians also support such beliefs and urge policy makers to restrict welfare access for such migrants (Boeri, 2010). The UK government have recently announced a 12 billion Pound cut in welfare to tackle the tenuous fiscal imbalance. The move equally aims to cope with the abysmal migration inflow from the EU that has targeted the UK’s exchequer as an easy scapegoat.

This in turn has urged the scholars to increase their investigations into the economic consequences of migratory inflows. Paradoxically, the empirical evidence however, submits that migrants add value to the country economy (Dustmann & Frattini, 2014) by working longer hours, paying consistent taxes, and bringing skills which UK may lack (Liebig & Mo, 2013) concurrently they make much less use of