

Leaving Spain: a qualitative study of migration reasons of Spanish in Germany, Switzerland and the United Kingdom

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Abstract

The new wave of labour migration from southern European countries to northern Europe has attracted considerable media and policy attention. This paper aims to contribute to a better understanding of these emerging patterns by examining the causes and reasons for migration of Spanish nationals who have left the country since the onset of the crisis. Our qualitative approach is based on 48 semi-structured interviews to men and women, with different educational backgrounds, currently living in Britain, Germany and Switzerland. Theoretically, we assume that migration processes are the result of complex decision making procedures in which a whole set of economic, social and institutional factors lies behind the individual decision to migrate. Against this background, we broadly consider whether economic motives –unemployment, job insecurity or better job prospects abroad- have played a dominant role in the decision to migrate among Spanish nationals or whether social networks were more important factors driving these migrations. We also analyse whether -and how- migration motives can be differentiated regarding gender and educational backgrounds and how migration decisions are imbedded in the meso-level and structured by the macro-level.

1. Introduction

The uneven effects of the financial and economic crisis have changed intra-European migration, giving shape to new patterns and forms of mobility. The substantial decline in East-West mobility and the rise of return and circular migration have coincided with a second wave of labour migration from southern to northern Europe, since countries such as Spain, Portugal and Greece have been affected most severely by the recession and austerity (Benton and Petrovic, 2013). The latest available data show that outflows of nationals from Mediterranean countries have been increasing as a consequence of high unemployment and job insecurity, especially among the younger cohorts, and the worsening of living conditions (OCDE, 2015). For instance, in the UK, the National Insurance number allocations to Greek, Italian and Spanish nationals has tripled between 2009 and 2014, while Portuguese have more than doubled during the same period (Department for Work and Pensions). Germany, another major destination, has also seen a remarkable increase in the inflows of southern Europeans to the point that the number of entries has more than doubled in the last five years, accounting for 9 per cent of the total arrivals and about 15 per cent from EU countries (Statistisches Bundesamt).

Although the new trends of South-North mobility have attracted considerable media and policy attention, little is known about such migration processes. Early research on intra-European migration documented heterogeneous flows and very different profiles among EU migrants, including traditional low and medium-skilled workers, highly educated professionals, lifestyle migrants and students (Recchi and Favell, 2009; Favell, 2011, Verwiebe et al., 2014). Recent qualitative studies, mostly focused on the highly skilled migration, have observed some elements of path dependency in the features and dynamics of migration flows from southern Europe. It is also been suggested that

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specific pull factors have gained prominence as drivers of migration, particularly those related to the institutional and political environment (Bygnes 2015; Triandafyllidou and Gropas, 2014; Triandafyllidou and Isaakyan, 2015). In the current scenario, this paper attempts to contribute to a better understanding of these emerging patterns by exploring the experiences and trajectories of Spanish nationals who have left the country since the onset of the crisis. The qualitative approach of this study is based on 48 semi-structured interviews to men and women with different educational backgrounds. Our work is not seeking to encompass as many aspects of the phenomenon as possible –for example, student and academic mobility, seasonal migration or the so-called Euro-communing. Rather, we investigate migration processes with a more permanent nature and compare the causes and motives for migration of Spanish nationals who have migrated to Britain, Germany and Switzerland in recent years. Methodologically, the choice of these countries proceeds of the assumption that the EU -including Switzerland, with a special status- conform a unique migration space shaped by the principle of freedom of movement and the European citizenship (Recchi, 2015). Two criteria have guided the qualitative strategy for case selection. Firstly, these three countries have been preferred destinations of the recent wave of labour migration and host to a significant part of the Spanish population living abroad. Secondly, all three countries are very different contexts of reception in terms of migration history, structural and institutional characteristics, including labour market structures and welfare policies. Our theoretical framework assumes that migration processes are the result of complex decision making procedures in which a whole set of economic, social and institutional factors lies behind the individual decision to migrate. Against this background, we broadly consider whether economic motives –unemployment, job insecurity or better job prospects abroad- have played a dominant role in the decision to migrate among Spanish nationals abroad in the context of crisis or whether social networks were more important factors driving these migrations. We also analyse whether and how migration motives can be differentiated regarding gender and educational qualifications and how migration decisions are imbedded in the meso-level –social networks, family structures and family ties- and structured by the macro-level.

2. Theoretical framework

Reasons for migration have been at the heart of the scholarly debate on international migration. Against a background of theoretical fragmentation, neoclassical economic theories have been dominant in explaining the initiation of migration. Generally speaking, migrants are viewed as rational actors who decide to move to another country in response to a set of push and pull factors. Within the individualistic framework, the decision-making process involves cost-benefit calculations in order to maximize the socio-economic status of individuals (Borjas, 1999). These assumptions have been called into question from the new economics of migration, which places migration within a broader community context by focusing on the family/household as the relevant decision-making unit. Thus, individuals act collectively to maximize income, minimize risks, and loosen constraints associated with market failures (Stark y Bloom, 1985). From a meso-level perspective, others authors point the importance of networks that connect migrants and non-migrants through ties of kinship, friendship, and shared origin. Social networks are commonly seen as an important determinant of migration decisions to the extent that they make migration easier by reducing the costs and risks of moving (Faist, 2010). Finally, more recent approaches have stressed the role of cultural and institutional factors in shaping motives for migration, which would be closely

linked to new forms of international mobility based on transnational and cosmopolitan life styles (Favell, 2011; Recchi, 2015). In our study, we consider that migration is not based solely on economic motivations or exclusively on interaction with social networks, but instead has its origin in a complex set of reasons which may differ according to differences in socio-structural characteristics of individuals.

3. Data and methods

Our study follows a qualitative approach based on the semi-structured interview as research tool for data collection. Our sample consist of 48 men and women, aged between 20 and 40 years with different educational backgrounds, who have emigrated since 2008 onwards and were living in Britain, Germany and Switzerland at the time of fieldwork. Gender, education and destination country were considered relevant analytical variables for segmenting the sample and ensure some degree of heterogeneity. The socio-demographic composition of the sample largely corresponds to the referred research design: an equal number of men and women with a median age of 29 years. As a rule, highly educated emigrants had completed a graduate or postgraduate degree. A small number had higher vocational education. Among the low and medium educated, the majority of the participants had completed secondary education. Madrid and Catalonia were the main regions of origin, along with Andalusia and Galicia. In the receiving countries, the length of residence of participants was about 3.7 years on average and most were living in large cities and metropolitan areas. Most were employed in the upper end of the labour market when they were interviewed, in different sectors in engineering, health services and education. Among the less skilled, employment patterns were more diverse although almost all were in the lower segments of the occupational structure –for example, waiters, cooks and carriers.

Fieldwork was carried out in two different phases: the first phase lasted from January to April 2015 and the second one from September to November 2015. Given the geographical dispersion of participants, most of interviews were conducted via Skype, although 25% of them were face to face. Our findings reveal no significant differences between respective modes of interview in terms of quality and depth of information collected (Deaking and Wakefeld, 2014). The recruitment strategy combined the use of snow-ball method, with different starting points, formal and informal networks. The interview guide framed the conversation with the participants. We first questioned interviewees generally about their biographical characteristics. Then, we asked them about their migration projects –motivations, reasons for destination choice, expectations and plans- and strategies. The incorporation to the host country and future plans –return migration or migration to a third country- were also questioned. The textual data are being analyzed on the basis of qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2000). This method allows to describe systematically the meaning of qualitative data by assigning successive parts of material to the categories of a coding frame linked to our theoretical framework and research questions (Schreier, 2014).

4. Expected results

The coding and analysis of the large amount of textual data is being undertaken at this stage. Against the background of the theoretical framework relating motives for migration, several research questions have been formulated in the first section. In this line, we expect a) a high relevance of economic migration motives in the current context of crisis, particularly unemployment and precariousness, among low and medium

skilled migrants; b) but also among skilled women and young workers with short labour market trajectories. In addition, c) among high skilled male migrants, better job opportunities and career developed are significant reasons for moving abroad, particularly among those working those working in internationalized sectors

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