Soc. Geogr. Discuss., 3, S110–S113, 2007
www.soc-geogr-discuss.net/3/S110/2007/

Social
Geography
Discussions

Interactive comment on "Un-restricted agents? International migration of the highly skilled revisited" *by* H. Pethe

Anonymous Referee #2

Received and published: 12 July 2007

The international migration of highly skilled labour is an interesting and contemporary issue that is highly relevant to social geography. In addition, the discussion paper's focus on the agency of skilled migrants relative to enabling structures is of interest to this journal's readership. My overall impression of the paper is that it contains promising ideas, but these could be further developed. In my view, the central focus of the paper should be restructured, its arguments should be strengthened and the presentation should be tightened. My comments below outline possible strategies for revision, although the author may choose to address these concerns in other ways.

Central Focus of the Paper Contrary to the claim made in the abstract and the conclusion, the paper does not really offer an empirical case study of the German Greencard "scheme". Rather than presenting the detailed methods, analysis and results of an

empirical study, the paper draws on a few examples related to the German Greencard. Based on my reading of the paper, it attempts to make a conceptual point about the treatment of agency by the literature on skilled migration. For this paper to be an empirical case study, it should present much more material and greater detail in regard to data, its acquisition, analysis and interpretation on the German Greencards. I would suggest re-focussing the paper on either the empirical material of the case study or the conceptual argument. It seems to me that the latter option would be the more feasible to implement. However, for a conceptual paper to make a significant contribution to the field, much more developed and nuanced arguments would be necessary.

Arguments The role of agency and its relationship to 'structure' is not as strongly developed as it could be. While Pethe suggests in the context of the internal labour market of transnational companies that "the movement of highly skilled personnel is interlinked with the international flow of capital" (p. 215, lines 10-11), this appreciation of structure is getting lost later in the paper. While it may be correct that individual migrants have greater flexibility in making decisions, these decisions are still enabled (and constrained) by prevalent structures. The German Greencard may, in fact, be a good example: I would see this program as a response to the structural changes resulting from developments associated with global capitalism. What may appear as 'agency' in the sense of greater decision-making capacity on the side of migrants, could also reflect a structural flexibilization of the international labour force. This view of the flexibilization of labour is consistent with recent neoliberal developments, which economic geographers have pointed out. In my eyes, the paper would benefit from engaging with these structural processes. In addition, beyond this structure-agency dichotomy, recent perspectives of agency, informed by Foucault, have made interesting contributions to the migration literature (e.g. Tyner 2004).

It may be worthwhile to look outside the particular literature on skilled labour migration for further guidance on the role of agency in labour migration. For example, agency has been in the centre of research on less-skilled labour migration. Perhaps the treat-

ment of agency by Waldinger (e.g. 1986, 1996), Portes and Bach (1985) and others could inform the discussion of the skilled labour market segment. For example, social networks (p. 219-220) seem to be an important aspect of agency related to migration in both low-skill and highly-skilled occupations.

Furthermore, it is not always clear to me whether the paper examines empirical patterns of migration or approaches to the study of migration. At several points the paper seems to conflate or, at least, establish a functional relationship between the empirical patterns and approaches (e.g. 218, line 9-13). Along these lines, I'm not sure if the association between periods and distinctive research approaches (i.e. 1960s, 1980s, brain drain, brain circulation, etc.) is necessary and productive in the context of what the author is trying to achieve. Why not focus on the manner in which the different approaches theorize agency and structure in the context of skilled migration? If the period defines this structure-agency relationship, then the reader would like to know exactly in which manner this occurs. In this way, this discussion could inform a conceptual argument of the role of agency in the migration literature.

Moreover, the geographical aspects of the issue could also be developed further. The Conclusion makes reference to "distinct geographies," although these were, in my view, not discussed sufficiently in remainder of the text. In a similar vein, the issue of scale (geographical scale, presumably) could be discussed more effectively in the section titled "Scale of Agency."

Presentation Some statements are unclear or should be supported by sources. For example, in which way does the international migration of highly skilled labour produce "positive effects on the nation state" (p. 212, line 24)? It would also be helpful if some statements (e.g. about the origin of skilled migrants on p. 223, line 6-9) were supported by sources. The review of the literature should probably focus on the gaps which the paper will later address and/or bridge - not on gaps that are not addressed (e.g. p. 216, line 19-20). Finally, the paper in its current form does not meet the journal's standards in terms of flow, style, grammar and spelling. For example, words seem to be missing

(e.g. p. 224, line 17-19), spelling is inconsistent (e.g. Jöns or Joens?), etc. Careful copyediting would fix these problems.

In my view, the paper requires significant reorganization and rethinking to make a contribution to the existing literature. I hope my comments will help the author to achieve this aim.

References Portes, Alejandro and Robert Bach. 1985. Latin Journey: Cuban and Mexican Immigrants in the United States. Berkley: University of California Press.

Tyner, James. 2004. Made in the Philippines: Gendered discourses and the making of migrants. London: Routledge.

Waldinger, Roger. 1986. Through the Eye of the Needle: Immigrants and Enterprise in New York's Garment Trades. New York: New York University Press.

Waldinger, Roger. 1996. Still the Promised City? African-American and New Immigrants in Postindustrial New York. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Interactive comment on Soc. Geogr. Discuss., 3, 211, 2007.