

Interactive comment on “Transnational mobility and the spaces of knowledge production: a comparison of different academic fields” by H. Jöns

Anonymous Referee #1

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Migration studies often use conventional, often pure empirical approaches to explain international mobility. The investigation of the international migration of highly skilled is dominated by firm centred approaches that analyse intra-company mobility of managers. The international mobility of scientist comes seldom to the fore. Prestige and working conditions in receiving institutions are common explanations for the international circulation. Joens’s article is a rare exception from this common practice. The article uses a challenging theoretical approach and draws attention to a group of highly skilled that is scarcely thoroughly investigated. In addition to that, she does not only investigate the organisational framework that scientists are employed in and the policy of those organisational bodies, but also takes the nature of their work, their family

background and their motivations into account. Thus, her study of international migration of highly skilled is not confined by work-related explanations, but is open to private reasons as well. Of course, by using actor-network-theory as her main theoretical inspiration, the constitutive elements of academic work are her main focus of investigation.

Only minor remarks need to be made:

Her main research question is divided into three parts in order to show that ‘varying geographies of different research practices’ (82:9f) account for the international scientific exchange. Firstly, she portrays global patterns of the international mobility of scientist to Germany. She focuses on scientists who applied at or were funded by the German Humboldt Foundation within 1981 to 2001. Secondly, she gives account of the motivations to work in Germany. Thirdly, she describes the collaborative outcomes of the scientific exchange. Those sections are followed by the description of empirical results and lead to the introduction of a refined theoretical model for international scientific exchange.

The first section that Joens illustrates her research approach in might profit from a more detailed description, because it is a little short sometimes. Reading her abstract, for example, one is insecure, whether the terms ‘research practices’ and ‘motivation’ are used as substitutes (80: 6f and 11) or whether the term ‘research practices’ works as an umbrella term or whether a new, independent research interest is introduced here.

Furthermore, the conceptional implications of her empirical finding on page 82, lines 10-20 appear a little unrelated to her main research interest that I described above. A more detailed description of the linkage between the investigation of global patterns, motivation and collaborative result, and the actor network approach would be helpful here.

The fourth section describes the motivation of scientists. Joens introduces the most frequent 15 motivations in declining importance. Here, it might be worth reviewing

whether another criteria apart from their quantitative representation would be more suitable here. Using groups of related motives might increase readability and a shortening of text is useful, because the motivation are also represented in a separate figure.

In section 6 Joens interprets her findings in terms of their relevance to the actor network theory. She outlines three dimensions: materiality – immateriality, standardisation and abstraction. In my opinion the term standardisation comprises several meanings, which should be distinguished in more detail. Firstly, it is applied to manufactured instruments. This is seen in opposition to social life worlds, which are merely seen as self referential without general rules. Secondly, standardisation is used to describe the mathematical language, for example, which is used internationally, whereas empirical work appears to be mainly context dependent. Both dichotomies seem to overemphasise the differences between arts and social science and natural sciences. Arts and social sciences appear more place bound and natural sciences are place independent. In my opinion, there is a certain movement towards abstraction in social sciences and arts as well. The dominance of certain theories such as post-structuralism in many countries might be an example for this process. Of course, the development of international discussion on certain universal approaches is rather young, but it gained momentum from 1950s on. Talcott Parson's theory or modernisation theory might be additional examples for those general approaches, which are widely discussed internationally.

Apart from scientific practices, there are additional reasons, why social sciences and arts might be more place bound: Since certain disciplines such as philosophy have a long tradition, they developed during a period when the distribution of knowledge was less internationally organised. But political influences from the environment on different school of thinking (Marxist approaches for example) may also account for a certain level of international exchange or isolation. Varying interest in different fields, which is rooted in a different social structure in different nations (vivid research on demographic change in Europe compared to the US.), might be another point which influences international mobility. In addition, research is also conducted for certain markets. Whereas

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research which aims at social balance or sustainability might be requested by European governments, other states are more interested in supporting new technology in order to rebalance economic differences between the workforce. On the other hand, the division of labour between various subfields and the need for specialisation in any disciplines forces scientists to look for collaborators internationally. This might also be the case for social and natural scientists. In my opinion, language barriers should not be overemphasised, since experts on different field need to learn the necessary language wherever they specialise. Kantian philosophers learn German, mathematics need to acquire the general mathematical terms to communicate. The need for specialisation is different in those fields. Although it is possible to communicate in a similar language in mathematics for example, I'm insecure if the research topics are only identified on the international level. Place bound discourses might partly influence certain fields of discussions in science as well as in arts and social sciences.

Although I feel Joen's distinction along disciplinary lines and scientific is too strong, it might be unwise to change the section on standardisation now. An additional remark in the introduction and conclusion on the limits of the research on scientific practices might be more useful. This could also include an additional remark on her empirical basis: scientists which were related to the Humboldt foundation. Research practices depend on different funding bodies. International research within the European Union, which is one of the main funding bodies now, is highly influenced by political negotiations in terms of the national origin of researchers and of the political targets. This political dimension might be of less importance in Joen's group of scientists. This also leads to more internationally applicable results concerning international mobility of scientists.

In the section on standardisation, however, another point seems to be of major importance. Instruments in experimental science laboratories are hardly mass produced. It might be difficult to call them 'standardised', because the research process and the production of instruments to conduct necessary experiments is go hand in hand.

The larger independence of researchers who use large instruments at CERN or other places from the technical development of those instruments might be described with a standardisation process, but in my opinion this example refers much more to the abstraction process than to a standardisation process.

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