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# **Problematizing the interplay between employment relations, migration and mobility**

## **Abstract**

**Purpose:** The paper aims to introduce the special issue by problematising labour agency, precariousness, and labour fragmentation as defining themes of the interplay between employment relations, migration and mobility.

**Design/methodology/approach:** Drawing from discussions about the impact of globalisation on changes in features of work and employment, and bringing together theory and research on employment relations and labour migration; the paper discusses the relational spatial and temporal nature of agency; the diverse features of worker experiences of precariousness, and the resulting fragmentation in labour solidarity.

**Findings:** Labour agency, precariousness and labour fragmentation intersect to create the axis of dynamics of hardship and abuse that dominate work experiences of migrant workers in the global labour market. Globalisation has a pervasive impact in articulating and perpetuating systemic processes of closure, entrapment and containment, which are triggered by migration and legitimised by dynamics of employment relations.

**Originality/value:** The paper contributes to current discussions about the interplay between migration, mobility and employment relations and sets out future directions of research to enhance our understanding the role of employment relations to perpetuate, legitimise and normalise dynamics of globalisation that promote the migrant division of labour and create contradictory labour demands and displacements in the global labour market.

**Keywords:** employment relations, globalisation, migration, mobility, precariousness, labour fragmentation, labour agency.

# **Problematizing the interplay between employment relations, migration and mobility**

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## **Introduction**

The last decade has seen a significant increase in international migration and mobility of workers (Mitchell et al., 2011; Binci, 2012); for instance, in 2010, the United Nations estimated the total number of international migrants to be 214 million (an increase of 20% from the 178 million in 2000), and there are suggestions that "more people live outside their country of origin today than at any time in history" (Henning and Hovy, 2011:980). Given the prevalence of both intra and inter-regional migration and mobility, some scholars (cf. Halfacree, 2012:209) have described the present period as an "era of mobilities", which has had significant implications for the supply and demand of labour.

This has been attributed to globalisation and there is renewed interest in the study of migration and mobility as central to dynamics of exchange of commodities, capital and work across national borders said to be facilitated by globalisation (Manning, 2005; McGovern, 2007; Gutierrez Rodriguez, 2007:60; Zientara, 2011). These dynamics have influenced the way employment relations are structured, articulated and experienced in local and global workplaces, which hints to a multidimensional impact of globalisation on employment relations (Lansbury et al., 2003).

More importantly, the interconnectedness, multiplexity and hybridisation of social life at spatial and organisational levels attributed to globalisation (Amin, 1997: 129) are directly related to the increasingly changing nature of the employment relationship and the contradictory dynamics it generates. On the one hand, the metaphor of the 'borderless world' would seem to suggest that workers benefit from the opportunities available everywhere and all workers have to do is migrate toward those opportunities. On the other hand, labour market rigidities and realities of inequalities, mobility restrictions, and deskilling are reported as central to migrant workers' experiences, where complex dynamics intersect inter alia language, gender, ethnicity, immigration policies, employment legislation, and cultural assimilation

(Peixoto, 2001; Raghuram and Kofman, 2004; Kofman and Raghuram, 2006; Moorhouse and Cunningham, 2010; Brücker and Jahn, 2011; Lendaro and Imdorf, this issue). In that respect, globalisation has destabilised the status quo between capital and labour (McDonald, 1997) and in both cases, migration (of capital and of labour) has been central to re-shaping employment relations. This has been highlighted in discussions (cf. Martínez Lucio and MacKenzie, 2004; Ewing, 2006; Fitzgerald and Hardy, 2011; Thomas, 2011) that problematise regulation in the current global context; dynamics of union inclusion and exclusion; international labour standards; and more specifically, the possibility of a global framework for industrial relations.

At the local level, distinct changes are identified in the relative power of capital and labour, where work regulations within and outside countries and regions, have created new dynamics and interactions that shape employment relations. Some scholars (cf. Kalleberg, 2009) argue that precariousness and job insecurity are the main components of the globalised employment relationship. In the context of this discussion, migration has surfaced as an important element that intersects with new forms of formal and informal employment.

However, despite the growing body of literature on migration; there is limited work (cf. Holgate, 2005; Lillie and Greer, 2007; McGovern, 2007; MacKenzie and Forde, 2009; Martínez Lucio and Connolly, 2011; Thompson et al., 2012) that explores the interplay between migration and employment relations (including IR and HRM). Work has been mostly produced in economics, sociology, and geography, and to a lesser extent in employee relations. Consequently, key issues that result from the interaction between management and migrant workers have been marginalised because perspectives frequently used to discuss the relationship between globalisation and labour do not problematise the role of employers as “crucial labour market actors” (MacKenzie and Forde, 2009:143).

More generally, there has been limited unpicking of the contradictions that emerge from the reliance on migrant labour alongside dynamics and arrangements at societal and institutional levels that restrict migrant labour. Whilst it has been argued (cf. Binci, 2012) that migration and geographical mobility can

have a positive “transformative effect” on both workers as well as their employing organisations; there is also an identified ‘fear’ of migrant workers (Nyberg-Sørensen et al., 2002:7). This has led to what has been termed as an ‘international migration crisis’ (Weiner, 1995; McGovern, 2007), which some authors (cf. Nyberg-Sørensen et al., 2002) have attributed to political volatility. For instance, Europe has moved from viewing migration as a phenomenon that contributes to economic growth to seeing the increase in foreign nationals in the workforce as intolerable; demanding from their respective governments the introduction of restrictive employment legislation and the establishment of mechanisms to manage migrant workers economically, politically and socially (Thomas, 2009; De Giorgi, 2010).

In attempting to ground the discussion of these contradictions, we problematise three defining themes of the interplay between migration, mobility and employment relations: labour agency, precariousness, and labour fragmentation. The interplay between structural, functional and operational dimensions associated with the management of the employment relationship is complex, contextual and dynamic (Nienhüser and Warhurst, 2012:216). These characteristics are directly linked to migration patterns resulting from globalisation of markets; for instance, multinational corporations (MNCs) face the complexities associated with managing home, host and third country nationals. In addition, contexts are fundamental to the increasing migration of capital and the resulting structural and institutional features and their impact on work systems. At the individual level, the extent, variability and scope of migration patterns suggest that issues such as permanency and temporality are increasingly diverse and dynamic (Scurry et al., *forthcoming*, Rodriguez et al., *forthcoming*). Individuals engage in uneven mobility that contests traditional notions of worker agency, work patterns, career paths, employment relations and the psychological contract, posing challenges to the way organisations interact with and manage the uncertainty associated with markets and its impact on the global(ised) workforce (Bonache et al., 2007; O’Reilly et al., 2011; Point and Dickmann, 2012).

Using the previous ideas as a point of departure, this paper sets to discuss three main themes that problematise the interplay between employment relations, migration and mobility, highlighting its multi-directionality, and bringing together the relational spatial and temporal nature of agency; the diverse

features of worker experiences of precariousness, and the resulting fragmentation in labour solidarity. The paper is organised in five sections. After this introduction, three subsequent sections discuss the themes we identified; namely, labour agency, precariousness, and labour fragmentation. The last two sections conclude and identify directions for future research.

### **Labour agency or the rise of the global(ised) worker**

Despite the importance attributed to globalisation in shaping labour markets and actors within them, individual labour agency has mostly been obscured by a focus on organised labour agency, which has seen often-neglected groups, voices and places remain under-researched (Lier, 2007:16; Coe and Jordhus-Lier, 2011). Nevertheless, evidence of individual agency (i.e., self-initiated expatriation that seeks opportunities in the global labour market through international migration) would suggest that workers have developed a form of global consciousness, with implications that need to be problematised.

In the context of globalisation, individual worker agency is related to engagement with the global labour market even from a localised positioning (Lambert, 2010). This positioning speaks of the intersectional nature of global production networks, where gender, class, race, ethnicity and age play fundamental roles in the way restructuring strategies allow migrant workers to participate in global markets (Anthias and Lazaridis, 2000; Marchand and Runyan, 2011; McPhee, this issue).

Localised positioning highlights that labour markets have “an intrinsically local or spatially constituted level of operation and regulation, that the creation and destruction of jobs, the process of employment, unemployment and wage setting, and the institutional and social regulation of these processes, are, to some extent at least, geographically constituted” (Martin and Morrison, 2003:3). Coe and Jordhus-Lier (2011) have argued that individual agency is spatial, temporal and relational, so international mobility might be a cross-generational self-perpetuating strategy used by specific migrant groups to overcome structural immobility in certain host countries, and secure sustainable employment (Fuller and Martin, 2012; Pereira, this issue). Whilst this implies that workers are not passive actors in dynamics articulated

by states, governments and labour markets intermediaries; mobility and migration as forms of agency to engage with global production networks are determined by hierarchies of workers, and dynamics of inclusion and exclusion that define the global division of labour (Wills et al., 2009, 2010).

These dynamics of inclusion and exclusion are fluid and both workers and employers engage in practices to circumvent them, so it could be argued that migrant workers' agentic efforts also contribute to the creation of a segmented labour market, both globally and locally (McPhee, this issue). For example, in their discussion of the mobility strategies of Polish migrants to evade work permit regimes in the Dutch-German border, Pijpers and van der Velde (2007) note that some of the hiring practices and dynamics of employment these migrants engage in could be classed as 'modern slavery'. Similar realities are found elsewhere (cf. Briones, 2009; Lima and Martins, Jr, this issue; MCPhee, this issue), with migrant workers experiencing stereotypical recruitment, post-migration exploitation and victimisation, at times at the hand of their own ethnic networks, which involve them in abusive employment relationships.

Amid circumstances where agency is exerted to command spatiality (where to go) and temporality (when to go); work-related choices (what to do) seem restricted as they are either imposed, legitimised or ignored by employment regimes and relations, hence migrant workers find themselves with limited individual agency. In her work reporting on the experiences of Filipina domestic workers in Paris and Hong Kong, Briones (2009) argues that agency and rights are not sufficient and capability is needed to mediate victimisation because it "can turn the "slave" into "the worker" and empower "the worker" from turning into a "slave"" (p. 4). In this respect, the role of governments and policy makers is fundamental; given the hierarchical arrangements of migrant regimes, migrant workers are unlikely to enact full agentic efforts to interact equitably with the global labour market. Furthermore, in a market-driven economy, employment relations can be used to legitimise regimes that help organisations outperform their competitors on the basis of exploitative cost-reducing strategies that limit and undermine migrant worker agency. This needs to be problematised in the context of the positive tone of the rhetoric about 'freedom of movement' and 'global workers'.

## **The globalisation of precariousness**

Precariousness has emerged as a central feature of global(ised) work (Anderson, 2010). Whilst the interaction between labour and market could suggest that workers have leveraged power; context-specific constraints on employment relations raise tensions associated with the way migration and mobility are regulated, and the underlying assumptions employers and the market make about migrant workers. Several issues are relevant to sustaining precariousness and these operate at different macro, meso and micro levels in the construction of the experience of migrant workers: restrictions on migration and citizenship; poor work conditions, deskilling and abuse, and lack of adaptation and culture-related stereotypes.

Amid the alleged "triumph of capitalism [...] over national and local autonomy and identity" (Amin, 1997: 123), a salient and contradictory feature is the strict way in which nationality and citizenship are defined in order to delimit and enforce immigration policies (Cohen, 2006) and how they impact mobility and rights of migrant labour. More importantly, assumptions made about workers are a central element of the interplay between employment relations and migration; migrants often cannot escape stereotypes of 'precarious workers' and as a consequence experience imposed employment relations that generate patterns of inequality and abuse (Anderson, 2010). In some cases migrants subscribe and conform to managerial assumptions and stereotypes that see them subjected to performing "appropriate" representations of themselves (McDowell et al., 2007).

Another important point in this discussion is the relationship between dynamics at the macro-country level and at the micro-individual level. Despite global macro-economic restructuring aimed at increasing the exchange of goods and communication through an integrated global production and financial system (Guarnizo and Smith, 1998; Robinson, 2012); the actual physical movement of workers remains severely restricted due to a variety of reasons: migration legislation, employment legislation, and high levels of negative externalities, such as hostile public opinion and anti-immigrant prejudice (Tacoli and Okali, 2001; Boeri and Brücker, 2005; McGovern 2007; Kaya and Karakoç, 2012). This has led to an increase in the number of undocumented workers who become vulnerable to unethical employers and human



smugglers. According to Pai (2004), the UK has seen an increase in migrant workers who are 'forced' to engage in "3-D jobs". An example of these dirty, dangerous and degrading jobs could be seen in the case of the twenty undocumented Chinese cockle-pickers who drowned in Morecombe Bay on the Lancashire coast of the UK in February 2004.

Gutierrez Rodriguez (2007:64) has stated that many documented and undocumented migrants are employed under precarious working conditions that are difficult to control and regulate. In some cases, migrant workers can be seen to become complicit in the precariousness of their circumstances; for instance, workers with irregular immigration status would perceive they do not have protection against an employer's arbitrary demands and unfair practices, and would seek to maintain the informality of their employment relationship in order to remain in the labour market. In this respect, the relationship between workers' rights and nationality (cf. Parla, 2011) remains an unresolved challenge for employment relations.

Discussions about the new migrant division of labour (May et al., 2007; McDowell et al., 2012) find support in the overrepresentation of migrant workers in dangerous industries and in hazardous and low-skilled jobs, occupations and tasks (Datta et al., 2007; Benach et al., 2010). This division has become a key feature of post-industrial economies and has seen the development of a precarious proletariat ("the precariat") (Standing, 2011) characterised by the normalisation of precariousness. An example of this is found in the globalisation of the service and care chain, which sees migrant workers overrepresented in the services, health and welfare sectors. As a result, care work alongside domestic work in private households has become the largest employment sector for migrants entering the European Union (Williams and Gavanas, 2008; Yeates, 2009; van Hooren, 2012). A combination of work intensification, wage cheapening and informality creates a distinct tier of employment for these workers (Anthias and Lazaridis 2000; Batt et al., 2009; Dyer et al., 2011, Lendaro and Imdorf, this issue).

In addition to complex working conditions, migrants' lives are also enacted within a wider regime of precariousness that extends to residential segregation, social exclusion and ethnic enclaves (Castles and

Miller, 1998; Batnitzky and McDowell, 2012). This has an impact on both their employment prospects as well as their overall ability to engage with, and develop competencies required to manage different dimensions of the employment relationship. Whilst it is assumed that global migrants are always moving to a better place to seek improvement – through employment, opportunity, income, and living conditions; the extent of these improvements must be relativised because even if the level of pay is superior than in their home country, employment usually remains precarious for the standards of the host country (Lima and Martins, Jr, this issue). In addition, in many cases, different forms of subjectification result in migrant workers experiencing downward social mobility, where they exist at the fringes of the working class in the host country (McDowell, 2008:500) and are unable to attain the level of social importance they could have attained in their home country.

The previous hints at the variability of precariousness (Thompson et al., 2012), which can also be identified in differences in the way difference materialises between low-skilled and highly-skilled migrants, or between migrants who move to countries with strong similarities with their home country, and those who move to environments that are significantly different (i.e., linguistically, ethnically or religiously). Harvey (this issue) problematises this when exploring the challenges faced by British migrants in Canada, where language and ethnic similarities help to homogenise these migrants in relation to the local population yet precariousness emerges in the form of challenges associated to other dimensions of the employment relationship, such as the certification of professional qualifications. In the end, precariousness takes many forms that range from vulnerability to disadvantage, to abuse.

### **Labour Fragmentation**

The development of global production networks has raised questions in relation to how unions can respond to increasing dynamics of transnationalism. Some scholars (cf. Martínez Lucio and Perrett, 2009) have argued that understanding of the issues has been very static. There is relevance in continuing to unpick the impact of globalisation on transnational trade unionism given its implications for national bargaining systems and dynamics of solidarity. In subjecting processes, structures and institutional arrangements to the economic imperatives of the market, globalisation challenges industrial

relations at the national level and enhances incoherences between national bargaining systems whilst at the same time fragmenting the founding principle of commonality associated with trade unionism (Traxler et al., 2008).

Research (Anderson et al., 2007; Fitzgerald and Hardy, 2010) has highlighted the willingness of migrant workers to join trade unions in host countries and the fundamental role unions play in supporting migrant workers and building bridges between them and indigenous workers. However, some scholars (Cumbers et al., 2008) have argued that different positions within capital accumulation processes make it difficult to promote transnational labour rights. Certainly, the focus of unions on the collective would be problematic given the diverse cultural background of workers and their differentiated status in the labour market. In particular, the intersection between skill and class is relevant. A large proportion of migrants work in low-skilled occupations, and their status as migrants positions them outside of the native working class in many host countries (McDowell, 2008; Piper, 2010).

The case of CEE8 workers in the EU exemplifies this: even after accession to the EU in 2004, these workers have faced limitations due to the establishment of transitional agreements, which restrict their work prospects in many EU countries and reinforce their downgraded status as secondary European citizens who are part of the periphery of cheap labour (Dølvik and Visser, 2009; Anderson, 2011:56). It has been argued (Ciupijus, 2011) that whilst these workers have improved mobility rights, their labour market mobility remains precarious. In that sense, migrant workers face unionisation differently so approaching organising using logics of collective interest and identity overlooks the problem of the 'outsider within'. In other cases, migrant workers' vulnerability and legal insecurities associated with their immigrant status makes them unlikely to engage in trade unionism because they fear the repercussions of their political agency and also because their disadvantaged position in the labour market is largely created in opposition to native workers from the host country.

Going back to the founding principle of commonality, the debate about inclusion/exclusion raises important questions for transnational trade unionism. Hyman (1999:96) has argued that "the boundaries

of union inclusion are also frontiers of exclusion. The perceived common interests of the members of a particular union (or confederation) are defined in part in contradistinction to those of workers outside". Therefore, despite recognising that national responses to the effects of globalisation are not enough to deal with issues pertaining to organised labour (Taylor, 1999), there is no clear avenue to harmonise the interests of local and migrant workers so the globalisation of solidarity remains a theoretical and practical challenge for employment relations.

Global social movement unionism as a form of 'grassroots globalisation' (Routledge, 2003) or 'movement of movements' (Cox & Nilsen, 2007) has been theorised to address labour resistance to globalisation. However, this discussion is contentious at both conceptual and practical levels. On the one hand, an over-reliance on theories of the new social movements generates a perspective that is largely de-classed and de-politicized, which hinders comprehensive understanding of new oppositional union identities (Upchurch and Mathers, 2011). On the other hand, it overlooks hierarchical politics of inclusion (Martínez Lucio and Connolly, 2012) and migrant workers' individualism that makes them difficult to unionise (McGovern, 2007:228).

In addition, internal politics of trade unions play a role in the perceived openness of unions to migrant worker membership. Trade union leaders are said to fear that allowing large numbers of migrant workers into their membership may put a downward pressure on wages and undermine their bargaining power. Whilst this could ultimately divide the working classes upon which union strength is founded, and despite being in direct conflict with the notion of (international) worker solidarity which underpins the ideological foundations of unionism (McGovern, 2007); this hesitance could be explained by the historical stance by trade unions to support restrictions on immigration and worker mobility (Milkman, 2006).

## **Conclusion**

In the presentation of globalisation as normal and natural (Herod, 2009), its pervasive consequences are also normalised. Experiences of migrant workers exemplify this normalisation and hint at the articulation

of mobility regimes that link a perceived sense of individual agency, precariousness in employment, and fragmented solidarity as defining features in the relationship between migration, mobility and employment relations. The International Labour Organisation (2004:22) has noted that “despite the positive experiences of migrant workers, a significant number face undue hardships and abuse in the form of low wages, poor working conditions, virtual absence of social protection, denial of freedom of association and workers' rights, discrimination and xenophobia, as well as social exclusion”.

In this paper, we have discussed labour agency, precariousness and labour fragmentation as the three central points that intersect to create the axis of dynamics of hardship and abuse. In that sense, we have highlighted the pervasive impact of globalisation in articulating and perpetuating systemic processes of closure, entrapment and containment (Shamir, 2005) which are triggered by migration and legitimised by dynamics of employment relations. Whilst workers are said to be more agentic than ever and exercise this agency by engaging in migration and mobility, the reality is one where transnationalism is strictly regulated, requiring a “license to move” (Shamir, 2005:201) which is fenced by migration and border security regimes and enforced through employment legislation.

Questions remain about the role of employment relations in the increased precariousness of migrant experiences at global and national levels. Migrant workers are trapped by structural implications of precariousness and whilst current global rhetoric promotes a model that benefits serial movers, consequences need to be unpicked further. Tensions arise in relation to how or whether employment relations should be (re)theorised considering the impact of supranational level regulations and the reconfiguration of ‘rules’ at the national level. Finally, the idea of migration and mobility as inherently linked to precarious and vulnerable employment needs to be problematised in the employment relations literature given the focus of management discussion on MNCs.

This Special Issue attempts to explore some of the agency and precariousness issues associated with the migration or mobility of specific groups of workers throughout the globe, in particular Brazil, Canada, France, Ireland and Portugal. It highlights the impact that these issues have on the employment

relationship, which is essential in order to understand changes driven by workers' decision to become internationally mobile. Following the call by Ram et al. (2001:240) papers in this Special Issue move beyond culturalist and structuralist accounts and adopt an embeddedness perspective that examines the relationship between sectoral, spatial and demographic environments within the fluid interaction of social, economic and geographical contexts. In taking this opportunity, the Special Issue highlights some contentious areas: different forms of precariousness and challenges faced by both low-skilled and highly-skilled migrants, and the possibility to identify differences and similarities in employment experiences of migrants engaging in intra- and inter-regional migration.

### **Directions for future research**

Based on the discussions developed in this paper, and the approach used by contributions to this Special Issue, we identify three future directions for research to advance discussions about the interplay between employment relations, migration and mobility. The first one pertains to unpicking the impact of migration on employment regimes. Many countries face the prospect of having to address ongoing or emerging economic and demographic challenges, with foreseeable solutions linked to increases in labour migration. This raises questions about the suitability of traditional employment regimes to deal with an increasingly diverse workforce. The way competitiveness at macro and meso-organisational levels translates into specific management and employment regimes that rely on labour migration remains a fundamental point of scrutiny to advance our understanding changes in our understandings of employment relations as a field.

A second direction for future research pertains to the ongoing transformation in migrant worker profiles. Research has identified the emergence of new groups of migrant workers (Nyberg-Sørensen et al 2002:10); for example, young single women and female family breadwinners. These changes, alongside their implications in terms of patterns of migration and mobility, present a number of employment relations issues which have yet to be explored comprehensively by the academic community and considered practically by policy makers and organisations operating in the global market.

Finally, the field of migration studies has so far shown similarities with employment relations in that much of the research in the field has been dominated by the policy concerns of those with political power (McGovern, 2007). Given the pervasive impact of globalisation on the migrant division of labour, and its role in creating contradictory labour demands and displacements, a final direction for future research is the problematisation of how those demands, displacements, and opportunities interplay to create and sustain particular employment regimes, and unpick their implications for the study and research of the relationship between employment relations, migration and mobility.

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