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New Middle-Class Labor Migrants

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Abstract

Migration researchers have tended to focus on social extremes: either highly skilled elites, on the one hand, or low-wage workers on the other. Less attention has been directed toward “ordinary” middle-class professional movers, and there have been no reviews of this literature to date. The chapter addresses this gap and identifies five important themes to guide future class-orientated migration research. First, the complex relationship between migration, social mobility, place, and middle-class membership is examined. Second, age is shown to be an important consideration in middle-class migration decision-making. Third, the cultural versus economic basis of the mobile middle-class is explored, and the role of lifestyle factors in shaping migration is critically examined. Fourth, middle-class migration decisions are connected to gendered household strategies, with the preponderance of dual-career couples now taking migration decision-making well beyond the individual career path. Finally, the social and communal emplacement of middle-class migrants is considered as an important but neglected dimension of research. Overall, it is clear that the class-based analysis of migration is an important yet neglected field of study, and this is especially true for middle-class movers.

Keywords Labor - Middle class - Middling - Migrant - Mobility - Transnational

Introduction

Who cares about the middle classes? They are not, or at least do not at first glance appear to be, a ‘social problem’ (and) they do not appear to have spectacular amounts of power or influence. (Butler and Savage [1995](#): vii)

Traditionally, scholars have been attracted away from the mostly messy middle ground of class analysis toward the wealthy and powerful, on the one hand, and/or the poor and dispossessed on the other (Butler and Savage [1995](#)). Migration, for instance, is commonly viewed at, and represented by, its socioeconomic poles. On the one extreme, the presence of a highly skilled professional elite has been researched (Beaverstock [2002](#)) and the existence of a “transnational capitalist class” theorized (Sklair [2001](#)). On the other extreme, there are low-wage (though not necessarily low-skilled) agricultural, manufacturing, and service workers who constitute a “secondary” labor force (Castles and Kosack [1973](#); Wills et al. [2010](#)). The two extremes often exist side by side, most spectacularly within those world/global cities that are at the apex of the globalized economy. In fact, many have

argued that these locations are where social polarization is most pronounced, with migration a key component part (Sassen [1991](#)). However, it is clear – from students, to workers, to retirees – that middle-class migration is both highly significant and incredibly diverse. In short, migration scholars should care about the middle classes. To this end, the chapter that follows focuses in particular on middle-class labor migrants. The principal aim is to broaden the field of view with respect to migration studies away from the “elite” versus the “low-wage” extremes.

In an important contribution to the field of middle-class migration research, Conradson and Latham ([2005a](#): 229) note:

What is striking about many of the people involved...is their middling status position in their countries of origin. They are often, but not always, well educated. They may come from wealthy families, but more often than not they appear to be simply middle class. In terms of the societies they come from and those they are travelling to, they are very much of the middle. But the fact is that surprisingly little is known about these kinds of migrants.

In terms of benchmark national and international statistics, the data is patchy and/or dated. Recently, the US Bureau for Labor Statistics ([2016](#)) calculated that around one-third (32.2%) of foreign-born workers in the USA are employed within “management, professional, and related occupations.” International OECD figures, though dated, show a similar significance with respect to middle-class foreign workers. In the UK, for example, university graduates make up around four in ten (41.5%) foreign-born migrants, and around six in ten (59.8%) foreign-born migrants are employed within middle-class occupations. Corresponding figures for other selected OECD countries (Australia, France, Germany, Italy) are a little lower, though they still indicate significant middle-class migratory streams whether based on educational (see [Table 1](#)) or occupational (see [Table 2](#)) markers. **Table 1**

Proportion of foreign-born residents who are tertiary educated, by selected OECD country

| Selected OECD country | Number native-born | Number foreign-born | % foreign-born | Number of foreign-born tertiary educated | % foreign-born tertiary educated |
|-----------------------|--------------------|---------------------|----------------|--|----------------------------------|
| Australia | 6,158,380 | 1,997,481 | 32.4 | 650,548 | 32.6 |
| France | 20,554,573 | 2,071,134 | 10.1 | 547,474 | 26.4 |
| Germany | 29,541,273 | 3,954,425 | 13.4 | 739,558 | 18.7 |
| Italy | 19,935,648 | 1,058,084 | 5.3 | 154,977 | 14.6 |

| | senior officials, and managers” | , senior officials, and managers” | | s” | nd associations” | and associations” | | | ss” occupation |
|-----------|---------------------------------|-----------------------------------|---------|------|------------------|-------------------|---------|------|----------------|
| Australia | 211,761 | 10.6% | 396,268 | 19.8 | 232,663 | 11.6 | 238,743 | 12.0 | 54.0 |
| France | 184,181 | 8.9% | 267,539 | 12.9 | 288,107 | 13.9 | 171,320 | 8.3 | 44.0 |

| | | | | | | | | | |
|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|-----------------------|---------------------------------|------------------|---------------------------------|------------------|---------------------------------|------------------|------------------|
| G e r m a n y | 5 1 , 3 6 0 | 1 . 3 % | 3 5 0 , 6 7 2 | 8 . 9 | 5 2 3 , 0 3 0 | 1 3 . 2 | 2 8 4 , 6 3 8 | 7 . 2 | 3 0 . 6 |
| I t a l y | 9 5 , 0 3 1 | 1 0 . 0 % | 8 8 , 5 8 4 | 8 . 4 | 1 4 5 , 3 0 8 | 1 3 . 7 | 6 3 , 8 5 9 | 6 . 0 | 3 7 . 1 |
| U K | 3 7 9 , 8 8 5 | 1 6 . 3 % | 4 1 1 , 5 3 9 | 1 7 . 7 | 3 0 3 , 5 7 6 | 1 3 . 0 | 2 9 8 , 0 9 4 | 1 2 . 8 | 5 9 . 8 |

Source: OECD.Stat/Demography and Population/Migration Statistics/Database on Immigrants in OECD Countries (DIOC)/Immigrants by Occupation. Available at: https://stats.oecd.org/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=DIOC_OCCUPATION

NB. Occupations are recorded in the OECD database according to the International Standard Classification of Occupations (ISCO-88, cf. ILO 1990). There are 11 categories used in the OECD DIOC database: legislators, senior officials, and managers; professionals; technicians and associate professionals; clerks; service workers and shop and market sale workers; skilled agriculture and fisheries workers; craft and related trades workers; plant and machine operators and assemblers; elementary occupations; armed forces; unknown. The first four of these categories were used as surrogates for “middle-class” occupations. The Database on Immigrants in OECD Countries (DIOC) is mainly drawn from the 2000 round of censuses

Thus, many international migrants are not part of a prestigious and privileged elite and are not able to move around freely and unconstrained by national bureaucracies. At the same time, they are also not dependent upon precarious low-wage work to survive. They do, put simply, occupy a “middling” status (Conradson and Latham [2005a](#)). Arguably, the most studied group of international middle-class migrants are academics and researchers whose mobility is often understood as part of a broader process of transnational knowledge acquisition and exchange.

Exactly how middling migrants are constituted and who is represented by this category is a difficult question. Relatively few authors have attempted to delimit or define the middle-class as a migrant group (though see Scott [2006](#)). More broadly, there is the thorny question of defining the middle class per se, irrespective of immigration. To this end, van Hear ([2014](#)) observes that, in migration studies, class has been underemployed by scholars (for exceptions, see Cederberg [2017](#); Wu and Liu [2014](#); Bonjour and Chauvin [2018](#); Rye [2019](#)). It has been eclipsed by studies focused on gender, ethnicity, race, religion, generation, etc. This lack of coverage is worrying, though not entirely

surprising. Class is a difficult, and highly politicized, concept to employ, and the “middle-class” category can be especially difficult to pin down. As Butler ([1995](#): 26) laments: “Traditionally (academics) have found it much easier to examine the working-class or the ‘ruling class’ than the more messy and fragmented middle-class.”

Goldthorpe’s ([1982](#)) concept of the “service class” is important here as it marks an attempt to distinguish between routine nonmanual white-collar workers (little different from manual workers) and the more powerful members of the (professional and managerial) middle class. The latter are distinguished by the trust that employers place in them and the associated roles they perform and responsibilities they hold within the contemporary workplace. The service class is characterized by relative stability and homogeneity. There is also, however, the work of Savage et al. ([1992](#)) which suggests that the middle class is changing and becoming increasingly fragmented and that the “service class” concept needs to be replaced by a more nuanced framework in order to capture the subtleties and fluidity of the new middle classes (see also Butler and Savage [1995](#)).

Marxists perspectives would suggest, though, that capitalist societies will eventually tend toward polarization, with most people falling downward from the middle class into the proletariat, though a few will be co-opted upward into the capitalist class. This polarization thesis implies that the “middle class” is not in fact a stand-alone class category, but an extension (over a temporary time period) of a two-class system. Scholars argue over the degree to which contemporary society is polarizing, with some important contributions cautioning against the inevitability of an hourglass society (Hamnett [1994](#); Samers [2002](#)). Correspondingly, the bifurcation of immigration flows is identified as a phenomenon by some, though many others continue to emphasize the importance of middle-class mobility. This is especially true in countries where a strong welfare state insulates citizens from the extremes of neoliberal capitalism. In the EU context, for example, Verweibe ([2008](#): 1) observes that “recent European migration seems to be, above all, a middle-class phenomenon.”

If there is debate within the developed world over the degree of social polarization and the loss of the middle class, there is relative agreement that globally the number of people identified as, or defined as, middle class is rising. Two countries feature prominently in this trend: China and India. Batnitzky et al. ([2008](#): 54), for instance, state that since the mid-1980s, the middle class in India has more than tripled to an estimated 300 million, with some predictions suggesting that by 2040 half the country will be middle class. Similarly, Blau ([2016](#)) cites McKinsey research showing how there are now around 225 million middle-class households in China, up from just 5 million in 2000. Thus, the world is accommodating ever more middle-class citizens, and so one might expect this to feed through into studies of class and international migration.

Spatial and Social Mobility

One of the principal motives behind middle-class labor migration is to cement or increase one’s socioeconomic status and/or income. There is an expectation among migrants that moving across international borders will lead to secure middle-class group membership, at very least, and possibly even to class advancement (either for migrants themselves or for subsequent generations). The relationship between spatial and social mobility, however, is complex, and there are instances where middle-class migrants experience, what they hope will only be a temporary, decline in their status and/or income. This is usually the result of not being able to transfer assets or “capital” (capital exists in three main forms according to Bourdieu ([1984](#)): economic (i.e., money and property); cultural (institutionalized via educational qualifications and often convertible into economic capital);

and social (i.e., social connections, ties, and obligations)) across international borders. As Cederberg (2017: 149) observes: “It is well established that international migration involves not only geographical but also social mobility, as migrants achieve an improved socioeconomic position through increased economic opportunities, or experience downwards mobility as a result of not being able to transfer their economic, social or educational resources to the receiving country context.”

In an extensive US study, Clark (2003: xiv) notes that “the allure of continuing upward social mobility often leads to migration” and goes on to find that there has been significant progress in this respect both in terms of a growing middle-class immigrant population and in terms of a “home-grown” second-generation immigrant middle class. Overall, Clark estimates there to be four million foreign-born and ethnic native-born middle-class household in the USA, making up 12.3% of all middle-class households (Clark 2003: 221). Thus, even if labor migrants do not move internationally as members of the middle class, their aim is often for themselves, or their children, to become middle class with international migration central to this aspiration.

There are certain occupations where international mobility has become highly prized and an expected part of any fast-track career. This is true, for example, among those in the highly paid financial service sector where certain world/global city destinations such as New York and London are essential locales to gain experience of and in (Beaverstock 2002). It is also true in academia where it is now the case that: “progression in science careers places a high premium on mobility” (Ackers and Gill 2008: 62). Essentially, then, certain professions now have career paths that extend beyond nation-state borders, and upward mobility can be facilitated by a willingness to acquire experience outside of one’s home country.

For some, class status may no longer be defined exclusively within nation-state borders but may be transnational in constitution. Indeed, mobility itself is a key element of establishing and augmenting one’s class position and brings with it various routes toward capital accumulation (see, e.g., Ong 1999). Cederberg (2017: 163), for instance, emphasizes “the importance of developing a transnational framework for understanding class processes.” It may be, for example, that leading peripatetic lives with families often spread between nation-states is part of a class strategy. Or, it may be that moving according to an international career path, similarly, leads to capital accumulation. Either way, it is clear that class can no longer be understood purely within a nation-state framework and that transnational capital acquisition is a key element to understanding the contemporary relationship between spatial and social mobility (see also Rye 2019).

Ong (1999: 19), in a study of the transnational Chinese, observes figures such as “the multiple passport holder; the multicultural manager with ‘flexible capital’; the ‘astronaut’ shuttling across borders on business; ‘parachute kids’ who can be dropped off in another country by parents on the trans-Pacific business commute; and so on.” These examples of transnational flexibility have become something to strive for in certain social circles because of their role in underpinning social mobility. Perhaps most famously, there is the value now placed on Western education, in Asia in particular, as a grounding for subsequent professional employment and middle-class membership. This produces individuals “both technically adaptable to a variety of forms, functions, skills and situations and culturally adaptable to a variety of countries in Asia and the West” (Ong 1999: 170). Building on the work of Ong, Waters (2006) has shown how Western education enables the Hong Kong middle classes to accumulate valuable forms of “cultural capital.” Overseas credentials then get converted into economic capital, particularly when graduates return to work in Hong Kong. In other words, transnational home and school environments create a distinct middle-class “habitus” that then enables a migrant to enter middle-class professional employment on leaving university. There is, then, a clear link between certain forms of childhood and early adult international

education and subsequent middle-class labor migration, though this appears particularly prominent for Asian (especially Chinese) transnational families.

The notion that class is transnationally produced/reproduced, via capital acquisition away from one's home country, not only applies to those on the watershed between education and professional employment, it also applies to those forging international careers. Jöns ([2011](#)), for instance, talks about how international academics amass different forms of capital by virtue of their foreign sojourns, including prestige (symbolic capital); education and knowledge (embodied cultural capital); books and research infrastructure (objectified cultural capital); academic credentials and qualifications (institutionalized cultural capital); a network of relationships (social capital); and economic capital that is directly convertible into money. Similarly, in a recent study in Wrocław, Jaskułowski ([2017](#): 262) argues that experiences in the city among Indian middle-class migrants are used "for increasing social status and gaining new experiences that may be understood not only in terms of individualization processes but also in the context of building cultural capital." Or put another way, Indian migrants see their stay in Wrocław in instrumental terms and as part of a longer-term goal of securing and perhaps even increasing their socioeconomic status. Wrocław is not necessarily the final destination and is seen by many as an entry point on a longer journey of transnational middle-class production/reproduction.

In the literature on middle-class spatial and social mobility, it is clear that certain cities and regions occupy a particularly important place in terms of providing migrants with opportunities for advancement. The key concept in this respect is the "escalator" city/region. The origins of this can be traced back to the work of Watson ([1964](#)) and his concept of "social spiralism." Essentially, social spiralism is about achieving professional success, and the fact that this success may be blocked in certain places but available elsewhere. In other words, to get on professionally would-be and aspirant members of the middle class may have to move away from their place of origin. The "escalator" concept explicitly seeks to identify where "social spiralism" is occurring, and it is clear that world/global city destinations are key.

Most "escalator" research to date has been carried out on London and the surrounding southeast region (starting with Fielding [1992](#); Savage et al. [1992](#): Chap. 8). The area has been shown to facilitate a higher rate of upward social mobility than any other in the UK, especially among the young. Indicative of this, it has seen net in-migration of young adults, their promotion, and then net out-migration of older adults who are choosing to step off the escalator once their middle-class status is secured.

Clearly, the phenomenon of social spiralism and the escalator concept that emerged from this have the potential to apply globally: to a host of cities/regions and to international as well as internal middle-class labor migration. Looking beyond London and the southeast, for example, Fielding ([2012](#): 107) has argued that a range of world/global cities: "act as 'engines' of promotion into middle and upper-class jobs." Similarly, Findlay et al. ([2009](#): 876) stress that the escalator effect relates to international migrants too: "The increasingly global reach of major city regions such as London may well have enhanced the opportunities for upward mobility both for internal and international migrants with highly transferable and sought-after skills."

The link between spatial and social mobility is not always straightforward. It is not simply a case that getting the right education or moving to the right city/region will establish middle-class membership and possibly initiate upward mobility. The "transnational" and "cultural capital" explanations of middle-class family production/reproduction and the "social spiralist" and "escalator" effects are evident for some migrants but not for all. Moreover, and as noted above, migration may sometimes result in downward social mobility, with middle-class labor migrants prepared to work in low-wage jobs over the short to medium term in the hope of an eventual increase in socioeconomic status either for themselves or their children. This is particularly true, it

seems, for those middle-class labor migrants moving from peripheral to core areas of the world economy.

Chiswick ([1978](#)) observed a temporary earnings dip for immigrants on entering the US labor market but also noted that over the long-term earnings drew level with and then eventually surpassed the native-born. This study is important because it demonstrates that migration may well lead to *both* downward and upward mobility depending upon the time period one examines. Ryan ([2015](#)), for example, has recently examined Polish workers in the UK, and her findings show that they may experience an initial de-skilling but that this is then followed by upward mobility. Such observations are important because a number of recent studies have observed what one might call “brain waste,” i.e., university educated, middle-class migrants working in low-wage jobs, below the skill level to which they are qualified.

The “brain-waste” phenomenon appears to be most prominent where middle-class migrants cross a development gap and move from peripheral to core economies. Parreñas ([2000](#)), for example, has identified Filipino workers with tertiary qualifications employed in domestic care work and as nursing assistants, getting much lower rates of pay than their qualifications would imply. She uses the term “contradictory class mobility” to highlight the position of these largely skilled female migrants who raise their income via domestic work in Western countries but also experience downward social mobility by virtue of doing low-status work. Similarly, Kelly and Lusia ([2006](#)) have examined Filipino migrants in Canada and also note an overall pattern of de-skilling. India has a growing middle-class, and Rutten and Verstappen ([2014](#): 1217) note the plight of middling migrants from Gujarat to London who “dreamed of going to the West to earn money and improve their prospects at home but ended up in low-status, semi-skilled jobs to cover their expenses, living in small guesthouses crammed with newly arrived migrants.” Others have observed a similar trend among the mobile Indian middle classes (Batnizky et al. [2008](#); Qureshi et al. [2013](#)). Overall, then, it seems that there are considerable uncertainties with respect to the spatial mobility/social mobility relationship and that this translates into considerable ambivalence with regard to middle-class migrants’ decisions to move abroad. Moreover, this is true mainly for those moving across a development divide. Thus, while international labor migration is now seen as an essential element in what is an increasingly transnational process of middle-class production/reproduction (see, e.g., Mapril [2014](#)), there is great uncertainty as to whether the decision to migrate will pay off.

The task for scholars then, in light of the “brain-waste” phenomenon, is to identify reasons for middle-class migrants working at a level below that to which they are accustomed. Language skills are undoubtedly a key factor to explaining how well labor migrants do within the host country (Chiswick and Miller [2002](#)). Nevertheless, lack of language skills does not mean inevitable brain waste. Chiswick and Taengnoi ([2007](#)), for instance, found that professional immigrants in the USA without English language skills were still able to enter certain occupations (such as computing and engineering), though others were less accessible. There also appear to be social and geographical nuances with respect to which middle-class migrants progress as expected and which are blocked from entering professional occupations. Haley and Taengnoi ([2011](#)), for example, found that professional migrants from the English-speaking developed world did better in the USA in terms of earnings. Underpinning this, they found that educational and professional experiences and qualifications from these countries were more transferable. Also in the USA, Mattoo et al. ([2008](#)) found that educated migrants from Latin American and Eastern European were more likely to end up in unskilled jobs than migrants from Asia and certain industrial countries. A key aspect of this, they observed, was the recognition of qualifications. Elsewhere, evidence from Canada points toward middle-class refugees struggling to gain suitable professional-level employment due to structural labor market barriers (Krahn et al. [2000](#)).

Some middle-class migrants, however, appear willing to accept brain waste as a temporary step toward eventual upward social mobility. Based on research in Scotland, Piętka et al. ([2013](#)) observe how eastern European migrants often work below the level to which they are qualified but gain in terms of human capital: particularly language skills and self-confidence. Also in the UK, Batnitzky et al. ([2008](#)), in a study of Indian migrants in London, identify how certain forms of relatively low-status Western employment may be seen as “glamorous” (p51) back home. In addition, they argue that downward occupational mobility following migration is negotiated by migrants through conspicuous consumption patterns (TVs, iPhones, etc.) and what might appear to be brain waste actually underpins middle-class status back in India. Migration, then, can be a transnational strategy tied to different class outcomes in the sending (positive) and receiving (negative) societies. Or, put another way, relatively routine low-wage service employment in core economies can underpin the production and reproduction of a middle-class identity in less economically developed home countries.

Waldinger and Lichter ([2003](#): 9) usefully advance the idea of a “dual frame of reference” in relation to the acceptance, and even embrace, by migrants of apparently dead-end work. They argue that: “The stigmatized status of bottom-level work impinges differently on immigrants, who operate with a dual frame of reference, judging conditions ‘here’ by the standards ‘back home’.” Thus, if staying at home equates to class immobility, or even downward mobility, then it may well be worth moving abroad, even if there is brain waste. Middle-class migrants accept low-wage work because of the value of this work back home (e.g., via remittances) and/or because they see it as part of an international career path, a stepping-stone, that will eventually lead onto professional employment. In terms of the latter, Parutis ([2014](#)) identifies definite class advantage for eastern European migrants subject to brain waste in the UK. Provided they possess appropriate linguistic skills, migrants appear to progress from “any job” to a “better job” in search of an eventual “dream job.” Thus, it is the stepping-stone role of certain jobs and migrants’ short-stay horizons while in these jobs that can render brain-waste acceptable.

Finally, there are instances where middle-class migrants work for a long period of time below the skill level to which they are qualified but find this acceptable because of the hopes and class aspirations they have for their children. Lopez Rodriguez’s ([2010](#)) research on Polish mothers, for example, suggests that children’s opportunities are important motivations for migration. In a similar vein, Cederberg ([2017](#)) argues that: “The prospect of upwards mobility for migrants’ children can help mitigate the experience of downwards mobility for the migrants themselves, confirming the importance of taking a family-wide and inter-generational perspective on social mobility” (p159).

Age and Migration

There is a very strong correlation between age and migration, as evidenced in the “model migration schedule” (Barcus and Halfacree [2017](#): 152). This shows how people in their late teens and twenties are highly mobile, more so than other age groups. These are ages when people often move to university and then for career forging and family forming reasons. Most obviously, and as we saw above, “escalator” cities/regions attract large numbers of young workers seeking to cement and augment their socioeconomic status. In many respects, then, migration both for education and work functions as a rite of passage into adulthood and can also function as a rite of passage into the middle classes.

For those who are part of the transnational elite, migration at a young age may go all the way back to prestigious international schooling. For many more members of the middle class, it is international

experience while at university that helps to underpin subsequent mobility (see, e.g., Findlay et al. [2017](#)). Those with international experience when in education may well be more likely to make a foreign move when working. Indeed, the normalization of the international through school and university, and the transnational employment trajectories that often develop from this, may actually underpin important forms of capital acquisition that are key to middle- and upper-class membership. For young people outside of the transnational elite, and not on a highly skilled career path, international migration in early adulthood is well documented though it often relates to experience-seeking and self-development as much as economic opportunity. The lack of family ties and career commitment when young opens up possibilities for international experience. Work is important, but, crucially, it is used to pay for opportunities to experience other countries and cultures. Middle-class migration, then, needs to be understood as a phenomenon that involves individuals, especially when young, who might be termed “lifestyle” as much as labor migrants. Indeed, the period after education ends gives many young people, especially members of the middle classes, the chance to experience life abroad as a rite of passage into adulthood.

Clarke’s ([2005](#)) study of working holiday makers in Australia and Conradson and Latham’s ([2005b](#)) study of New Zealanders in London both capture this hybridized form of labor-lifestyle migration that has become reasonably common among the young middle class of the developed world (see also: Ryan and Mulholland [2014](#); Scott [2006](#); Wilson et al. [2009](#)). For these individuals, labor market experiences may well be important, but immediate financial and career considerations are not always the main concern: with international cultural experience key. This experience may transfer into forms of capital that convey class distinction and advantage, but this is not usually a major strategic aim from the outset.

Conradson and Latham ([2005b](#): 292) talk this type of mobility as a process of “societal individualization” which “places an enormous emphasis on the cultivation and nurture of the individual self” (see also Conradson and Latham [2005c](#)). Some, however, have questioned how free migrants actually are in their aim of self-realization. Kennedy ([2010](#): 480), for instance, argues that instrumental needs (i.e., a lack of opportunities at home versus employment available within the host country) are often dominant even among young skilled migrants who may appear at first glance to have a desire for adventure and cultural curiosity. Crucially, Kennedy does not dismiss cultural/lifestyle explanations for middle-class migration among the young, and he simply cautions against an overemphasis on this. The debate, then, is not about whether middle-class people work abroad when young, it is about how important employment and economic considerations are relative to cultural and lifestyle priorities.

Culture and Migration

The above leads us onto a broader discussion among scholars around what people look for in a place when they move there. Put simply, there is a debate about the primacy of economic opportunity (i.e., a job, a career path, a wider professional *milieu*, etc.) in locational decision-making versus the role of social and cultural factors in determining where members of the middle classes end up living. Some scholars argue that a city/region must have a particular economic prowess in order to draw in graduates and professionals from the outside. Others, however, maintain that the middle classes make locational decisions based often on who already lives in an area and/or on that area’s cultural capital.

An economic versus sociocultural dichotomy is unhelpful, however, in explaining middle-class migration. In reality, both facets help us to understand why people choose particular places to live

above others. The key point is that economic explanations may well have more or less power for some, while sociocultural explanations may well have more or less power for others. Hannerz ([1996](#): 129–132), for example, in his analysis of the ‘transnational city’, identifies a group of “expressive specialists” alongside a “transnational managerial” category. His analysis underlines both the diversity of middle-class arrivals to the contemporary global city and also the fact that within this diversity, economic, social, cultural, and other factors are weighted differently by different groups and lifestyle types. The value of Hannerz’s insight is that it teaches us, even for cities at the apex of the global economy, to look beyond the classic corporate career path mover to consider the full diversity of middle-class migration (see, e.g., Scott [2006](#)).

Perhaps the most famous framework advocating for sociocultural factors to be considered in, and indeed central to, middle-class migration is that advanced by Richard Florida focusing on the mobility patterns of the “creative class” (Florida [2002](#), [2005](#); Mellander et al. [2013](#)). The creative class are “people who are paid principally to do creative work for a living...the scientists, engineers, artists, musicians, designers and knowledge-based professionals” (Florida [2002](#), xiii). According to Florida, cities compete against each other, and one part of gaining competitive advantage rests in the people you are able to attract. Specifically, cities must try to attract the “creative class,” and this is not just about having the requisite economic base. Instead, the creative class, especially immediately after graduating, are footloose and prefer certain types of places and spaces. Thus, if cities want to increase their competitiveness, they need to attract both firms and workers, and attraction is about more than just economics. To hackney a famous slogan: it’s not just the economy, stupid.

Florida’s arguments require one to believe that (1) there is a creative class; (2) the creative class is mobile; (3) the creative class are a key driver in economic development; (4) the creative class prefer certain types of place and thus concentrates within these; (5) the preferences of the creative class can be explained by “soft” factors (culture, leisure, environment, openness); and (6) overall cities/regions that are most successful will be endowed with the three Ts: technology, talent, and tolerance. Each of these assertions is open to contestation and indeed has been questioned in a sizeable sceptical literature.

While there is no space here to rehearse all the criticisms directed toward Florida’s thesis, it is worth identifying key relevant critiques. Most notably, scholars point out that:

the idea that there are large numbers of ‘footloose’ creative individuals who are highly mobile and can chose freely between locations and who will be influenced by some vague notion of city attractiveness, rather than economic opportunity, seems barely credible. There might be some individuals for whom this condition is true but not so many that cities could use this as the basis of their economic development strategies. (Borén and Young [2013](#): 208)

Across a range of studies, there is considerable skepticism that place-based sociocultural factors can draw in the middle classes. As Storper and Scott ([2009](#)) argue, it is difficult to imagine how improving a city/region’s attractiveness will draw in large numbers of people in the desired occupations in the absence of economic opportunities. Similarly, Murphy and Redmond ([2009](#)) found that members of the creative class were attracted to a city (Dublin) mainly on the basis of employment availability, family, and birthplace and that “soft” factors did not play an important role in decision-making. They concluded: “the validity of the creative class thesis for stimulating regional economic growth must be viewed with a high degree of caution” (p. 82). However, and to rebut these criticisms somewhat, one can surely accept that *both* economic and sociocultural factors might come into play in the locational decision-making of the middle classes and that they might come into play differently for different individuals.

Another criticism of Florida’s work is that: “the migration dynamics of the creative class are little understood” (Borén and Young [2013](#): 196). This criticism is valid, in particular, with respect to international migration. There are very few examples of Florida’s thesis being applied to the study of

middle-class movers across international borders. A notable exception is Boyle's ([2006](#)) research on the Scottish creative class in Dublin. Boyle found that the city's sociocultural appeal was mainly for younger people before family formation but, even then, that the vast majority of Scottish expatriates moved to Dublin because of the city's career opportunities. Put another way, Florida's thesis did explain international migration of the Scottish middle classes to Dublin to a degree, but its role was at best a partial one.

Where does the above leave us, then, in understanding the migration patterns and preferences of the global middle classes? To be sure, Florida's "creative class" thesis is a convincing one. It has, though, been subject to a great deal of criticism. At worst, Florida leads us away from considering only a narrow group of international career path migrants to think about a more diverse mobile middle class. At best (and more controversially), Florida's thesis actually explains the geography of significant swathes of middle-class migration and helps us to understand why certain cities may attract significant numbers of international middle-class migrants.

Household Migration

Middle-class migration has, by some, been understood as a process involving largely male career path migrants making decisions to move that are often quite separate from the broader household unit. Kofman ([2000](#), [2004](#)) is critical of this narrow perspective and makes the case for a family-oriented and gendered migration framework looking beyond the individual economic motives of the male career path migrant. Similarly, Hardill ([2002](#)) is clear that middle-class membership is increasingly contingent upon dual careers and thus involves household level decision-making. Developing this point, Raghuram ([2004](#)), based on research with migrant doctors, argues that the nature of family migration and decision-making changes when migrants are skilled. In short, dual-career households are likely, and so choices over when and where to move can become very complex.

Overall, then, and especially within the past two decades, scholars have come to recognize that studies of middle-class mobility require gendered perspectives that acknowledge the role of women as workers, wives, and mothers in the migratory process. It is no longer sufficient to examine a single (usually male) career path and to use this as a basis for understanding migration. As Ackers and Gill ([2008](#): 127) argue skilled migration is "simultaneously influenced by both family and employment considerations with the balance shifting over time."

This said, it is still commonplace to see the female career sacrificed when middle-class families move both internally and internationally (Boyle et al. [2001](#); Cooke [2007](#); Hardill [1998](#); Purkayastha [2005](#); Yeo and Khoo [1998](#)). So, while our understanding of middle-class migration needs to be rooted within more complex and multilayered decision-making processes, there is still a need to examine and explain important gendered outcomes: most obviously, the continued phenomenon of the female "trailing spouse" and the associated career (and other) sacrifices that are made. Though the situation is changing, with up to one-third of tied professional movers now male (Clerge et al. [2017](#)).

The above can have significant implications for how well women do in particular middle-class careers. To elucidate, certain professions expect internal, and in some cases international, mobility as part of career progression. Academia is a prime example. Several studies indicate, for instance, the necessity of geographic mobility for academic success; and this may account for why women appear more likely to drop out en route to top academic positions (Ackers and Gill [2008](#); Jöns [2011](#); Schaer

et al. [2017](#)). There is, then, an important gendered dimension infusing the relationship between social and spatial mobility, for some professions at least.

Alongside calls for gendered and familial perspectives on middle-class migration decision-making, scholars have also pointed out that some professional families engage in transnational patterns of behavior. Ong ([1999](#)), in a study of Chinese professional migrants, observed the phenomena of both “astronaut” parents shuttling across borders on business, and “parachute” children studying in foreign countries while their parents work (often transnationally). Often transnational family formation is both specific to certain nationalities and gendered. Commonly, for example, it has been observed among southeast Asian (especially Chinese and Taiwanese) professional whereby the man of the household works at distance from the rest of the family as the latter engage on a quest for an international (Western) education (Waters [2006](#)). In such scenarios, the mother’s professional life is often put on hold, and “the achievement of a mother lies in her children’s education” (Chiang [2008](#): 516) which in turn is expected to convey class advantage. It is, therefore, education rather than employment that underpins the gendered transnational strategies of some middle-class professional families. Education explains why parents (usually the father) may work at a distance from the rest of their family and why the family may be spread transnationally across two or more nation-states.

Emplacing Middle-Class Migrants

In this final section, attention turns toward the ways in which middle-class migrants ground their life-worlds both within actual places and in terms of a more abstract sense of identity. The development of social networks, on the one hand, and a sense of place and belonging, on the other, is usually rooted both within and across nation-states. In the case of the latter, it is worth noting the “transnational turn” that took place within migration studies from the mid-1990s and the implications of this for the study of middle-class migrant communities (see, e.g., Beaverstock [2011](#); Colic-Peisker [2010](#); Conradson and Latham [2005b](#); Scott [2004](#)). Notwithstanding this transnational turn, van Riemsdijk ([2014](#)) argues that the everyday experiences of ordinary skilled migrants have been neglected by researchers even though these experiences are extremely important in understanding processes of middle-class migrant integration.

One area where noteworthy insights have been made is in relation to the gendered nature of middle-class migration. There are, put simply, implications of the “trailing spouse” often being the female partner/wife. It seems that in-group communality is underpinned in many contexts by migrant women’s ability to network (Ryan and Mulholland [2014](#); Willis and Yeoh [2002](#); Yeo and Khoo [1998](#)). This is, in a sense, indicative of an adaptive strategy whereby middle-class migrant women often lose their productive/professional function and replace it by turning to the social and communal realm in order to ground their everyday life and identity. The presence of children and the use of specialist international schooling seem to further augment the importance of the social and communal realm in the life-worlds of the trailing spouse. This occurs through parents’ “school-gate” networking and because the presence of specialist schooling can lead to middle-class residential clustering (White [1998](#)).

This said, there are also ample studies demonstrating the in-group networking prowess of those migrants who are professionally employed (Beaverstock [2011](#); Cohen [1977](#); Colic-Peisker [2010](#); Conradson and Latham [2005b](#); Scott [2007](#)). Further, in some contexts, this middle-class (often professional) networking involves certain types of “performance.” Most notably, there are studies pointing to the importance of the club/society (Cohen [1977](#); Scott [2007](#)) and studies pointing to role

of alcohol, drinking, bars, nightclubs, and house parties in middle-class (Western) socio-communal behavior (Clarke [2005](#); Walsh [2007](#); Yeoh and Willis [2005](#)).

Beyond actual in situ social networks, middle-class migrants have been shown to maintain transnational contacts and harbor transnational/multicultural identities (Colic-Peisker [2010](#); Ong [1999](#); Scott [2004](#)). There is no simple process of integration happening, therefore, among middle-class migrants. Instead, foreign professionals often maintain in-group social and communal ties to different degrees depending upon the type of migrant they are (Scott [2006](#)). Likewise, they attach to different places depending upon their own particular circumstances, their biography, and their future aspirations and expectations. Middle-class labor migrants, like all migrants, are engaged in a complex process of adaptation within the host country that places them both here and there in terms of their everyday life-worlds they inhabit.

Conclusions

This chapter has argued that it is important to consider migrants who are “in-between” the elite and the low-waged. These “middling” migrants are highly diverse and do not appear to constitute a stable or homogenous group. To this end, they have been referred to as “new middle-class labor migrants” to acknowledge their dynamism and complexity. Given the diversity, the chapter has sought to identify common themes emerging from a literature that has not been drawn together until now. Five core themes have emerged. The most significant concerns the link between spatial and social mobility and, specifically, the ways in which the middle class move in order to advance, or at least cement, their class position. The concept of the “escalator” city/region first advanced by Fielding is particularly important here. For some, however, the link between spatial and social mobility is one that stretches across generations: with migrants sometimes investing in their children and prepared, themselves, to accept “brain waste” and delayed gratification. Second, it is clear that some members of the middle class see international experience as a “rite of passage” into adulthood, and as part of this, cultural and lifestyle considerations are important in deciding to live and work abroad. The balance between culture and economics in explaining patterns of middle-class labor migration is developed further in the third theme of the chapter. Here, Florida’s “creative class” thesis is significant in helping us to understand why certain places appeal more than others to graduates and professionals. Fourth, middle-class labor migration was connected to a household and gendered perspective to take us beyond a narrow notion of individual career path mobility. Finally, relatively little attention has been directed toward the everyday emplacement of middle-class migrants and their related socio-communal networks and cultural identities. The work that is available suggests that in-group communality is significant among middle-class migrants and that migrants’ identities are complex and often transnational.

The above shows why one should not only care about the middle classes but care in particular about middle-class migration. The middle classes are growing globally, and middle-class labor mobility is a highly significant piece of the overall international migration jigsaw. Studying professionals on the move draws one into consider, *inter alia*, how class categories are defined; the relationship between spatial and social mobility; the role of age and life stage in mobility; the balance between culture and economics in migration decision-making the importance of the household and gender in the migration process; and the complexities of migrant integration and belonging. These are all issues that relate specifically to migration studies while, crucially, also drawing migration scholars into other areas of the social sciences. One may well be interested in middle-class labor migration *per se*, but this interest is one that inevitably connects to wider social issues, themes, and questions.

Cross-References

- . [Ethnicity and Class](#)
- . [Ethnicity, Class and Nation in a Changing World](#)

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