Leave – Stay – Return: Conceptualizing migration movements of highly skilled German migrants as ongoing processes

Abstract

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The international competition for the best and brightest has resulted in countries increasingly implementing immigration policies to attract and retain highly skilled individuals. On the one hand, these individuals are seen as “desired immigrants” because they possess high human, social, cultural, and economic capital, and thus, supposedly integrate easily into their new host societies. On the other hand, there is a common understanding that highly skilled migrants are drivers of economic and technological innovation allowing countries to stay competitive in the global economy. Despite this increasing interest in highly skilled migrants, little is known about their actual migration decision-making behaviour and their lived experiences. This is especially true for highly skilled migrants moving between Western Europe and North America. To address this research gap, this paper explores the migration trajectories of highly skilled German migrants moving to and from Canada. Drawing on 48 narrative life story interviews with German migrants during different stages of their migration trajectories (i.e., pre-movement, when settling down and living in Canada and upon return and/or onward movement), this paper specifically focuses on two aspects that are often closely linked: First, the phenomenon of year-by-year planning which means that my interviewees often renegotiated their migration decisions in ongoing processes and determined whether they wanted to stay, or leave and return to Germany or move elsewhere; second, the phenomenon of step-by-step immigration that many interviewees made use of, i.e. slowly transitioning their status from a more temporary to a more permanent one in Canada.

Author’s Bio

Anke Patzelt recently obtained her Ph.D. in Sociology from the University of Ottawa and was a recipient of the Ontario Trillium Scholarship (2014-2018). Her Ph.D. thesis explored the mobility, integration, and settlement patterns of highly skilled German migrants moving to and from Canada. Anke has researched and published on German immigrants in Canada, concepts of identity construction, home and belonging, citizenship in Germany and Canada, the reception and perception of refugees in Germany and Canada, as well as the vulnerabilities of aging migrants.