

# Return to Afghanistan: Migration as Reinforcement of Socio-Economic Stratification

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## ABSTRACT

**This paper explores a new avenue of the hierarchisation of mobility amongst voluntary and involuntary return migrants to Afghanistan. We introduce the concept of multidimensional and multi-local embeddedness as an analytical approach to the multi-sited experience of migration, which merges transnationalism and integration into one analytical framework. Drawing on an in-depth case study that focuses on the life histories of 35 Afghan returnees from European countries, we argue that socio-economic differences that existed prior to migration are reinforced by the migration experience, which results in strongly differentiated patterns of multidimensional embeddedness and transnational mobility. These patterns reinforce previously existing socio-economic stratification and restrict expectations of return migration and development. Copyright © 2014 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.**

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## INTRODUCTION

In this globalised world, newer, cheaper, and more efficient modes of communication and transportation can facilitate increasing benefits of mobility to migrants who can expand their

social environment across borders and maintain ties in multiple social worlds (Vertovec, 2001; Carling, 2002; Hess, 2004; Sherrell & Hyndman, 2006; Mazzucato, 2008). Maintaining connections to places of origin *and* destination allows migrants to take advantage of geographical differences, diversify their opportunities to improve their quality of life, and help guard against potential downturns (Carling, 2002; Horst, 2007; Bakewell, 2008; Hyndman, 2012; Jain, 2012; Piotrowski & Tong, 2013). In addition, different spaces of embeddedness may serve different purposes in the lives of migrants (Oeppen, 2012). This transnationalisation of migrants' lives implies that integration in receiving societies and commitment to origin societies are not necessarily substitutes but can be complements (De Haas, 2010; Dekker & Siegel, 2013; Erdal & Oeppen, 2013).

The transnational turn therefore raised renewed expectations on the contribution of migrants to development. In addition to being considered as the higher educated, wealthy, entrepreneurial, and strongly networked elite, these migrants are expected to benefit from their migration to industrialised countries and obtain additional knowledge, skills, savings, and ideas. Their transnational ties to the country of origin are expected to motivate them to invest these material and immaterial capacities to benefit the development of the country of origin (Al-Ali *et al.*, 2001; De Haas, 2005; Sherrell & Hyndman, 2006; Bloch, 2008; Hall & Kostić, 2009). Although discussions on the link between migration and development globally have focused on successful economic migrants, countries throughout the European Union have expanded this link to also encompass the return of refugees, failed asylum seekers, and undocumented migrants to (post-)conflict countries (ICMPD & ECDPM, 2013).

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Despite these optimistic expectations, the increasing significance and benefits of transnational ties also highlight mobility and the right or capacity to migrate as an important dimension of inequality and social stratification (Bauman, 1998; Portes, 1999; Carling, 2002; Sørensen *et al.*, 2002; Faist, 2008; King, 2012). Mobility, even wartime migration, is a privilege of a relatively wealthy minority, whereas many others are not as free to move as they would like (Carling, 2002; Bakewell, 2008; Lubkemann, 2008; King, 2012). The study of migrants' contribution to development should therefore recognise the 'hierarchisation of the right to migrate' (Castles, 2005: 218, Castles *et al.*, 2014) and 'the power geometries of transnational relations and migratory movements' (King, 2012).

Research shows that mobility is an essential capacity *and* desire in the lives of return migrants, leading to strong empirical differences in the post-return experiences of those who are transnationally mobile after return and those who are not (Van Houte *et al.*, forthcoming). Continued transnational mobility allows migrants to take advantage of geographical differences (Carling, 2002), whilst it gives a crucial sense of security in instable or (post-)conflict countries, knowing that they would be able to re-emigrate if needed (Castles and Miller, 2009). To the contrary, returnees who are unable to match desires of mobility with their capacities, because of their lack of legal status in the former host country and stricter asylum policies, experienced involuntary immobility after return (Carling, 2002), causing a lot of unrest and discontent and a feeling that they are 'stuck' in a possibly explosive environment.

This article explores this new avenue of the hierarchisation of mobility. Drawing on an in-depth case study that focuses on the life histories of 35 Afghan returnees from European countries, we compared voluntary returnees, who had the permanent legal possibility to stay in the country of destination and involuntary returnees, who returned without such possibility (Van Houte *et al.*, forthcoming). Afghanistan's protracted history of conflict and migration of the last 35 years is a relevant case to study a diversity of migration experiences that have developed over time (Jazayeri, 2002; Stigter, 2006).

In the following, we first introduce the concept of multidimensional and multi-local embeddedness as an analytical approach to the multi-sited experience

of migration, which merges transnationalism and integration into one analytical framework. After discussing the methodology and a brief overview of the history of Afghan migration, we analyse the differences between voluntary and involuntary returnees by exploring the interplay between socio-economic background, the migration experience, post-return embeddedness, and mobility. We conclude that migration creates unequal opportunities to accumulate skills, knowledge, and savings whilst abroad, which results in strongly differentiated patterns of multi-local embeddedness and transnational mobility. These patterns reinforce previously existing socio-economic stratification and restrict expectations of return migration and development. As mobility plays a key role in post-return embeddedness, we argue along with Bakewell that the expectations of policies on return migration and development can only come true if return policies respect and enable the continued mobility of migrants (Bakewell, 2008).

#### MULTIDIMENSIONAL EMBEDDEDNESS

The concept of multidimensional embeddedness provides an analytical framework to study the multi-sited and complex experience of migrants. Embeddedness was introduced in its current meaning by Granovetter (1985) who used it to explain how individual economic actions are embedded in contextual factors such as social networks. Granovetter used examples of immigrants to explain the concept of embeddedness, as 'foreign-born communities represent one of the clearest examples of the bearing contextual factors can have on individual economic action' (Portes & Sensenbrenner, 1993: 1322).

Kloosterman *et al.* launched the idea of *mixed* embeddedness, in which the constant interplay between agency and structure is highlighted. Although an actor's choices are to some extent determined by structure, actors also have a certain degree of agency over their choices, which can in turn redefine structures (Kloosterman *et al.*, 1999; Kloosterman, 2010). Agency can be seen as an actor's effort to match desires and capacities, whilst being shaped by and shaping the structural context, defined as the forces that are external to and impacting on people (Portes & Sensenbrenner, 1993; Van Houte *et al.*, forthcoming).

In addition to being mixed, Granovetter's initially narrow understanding of embeddedness

was extended to a multidimensional concept by subsequent scholars. Kloosterman *et al.* highlighted the crucial interplay between the social, economic, institutional, and cultural contexts (Kloosterman *et al.*, 1999; Kloosterman, 2010). The identification of different dimensions of embeddedness, although sometimes arbitrary, facilitates the understanding of the complex reality of migrants, who may be strongly embedded on one dimension and less so on the other (Levitt, 2003, in Oeppen, 2009).

We refer to multidimensional embeddedness as an ongoing process of an individual's identification with and participation in one or multiple spaces of belonging. Two important advantages of this approach are highlighted here. First, the multi-local aspect of embeddedness merges understandings of transnationalism and integration into one analytical framework. This enables an understanding of migrants' belonging to places of origin, destination, and potential other spaces of embeddedness as complements rather than substitutes (De Haas, 2010; Dekker & Siegel, 2013; Erdal & Oeppen, 2013). Second, the multidimensional aspect of embeddedness, including institutional, economic, social, and cultural dimensions helps to provide a holistic understanding of the individual's life. Third, the mixed approach implies a non-static and non-normative understanding as it does not state *how* migrants should relate to these structures. Rather, it offers an approach to look at migrants' self-perceived agency to match their capacities and desires in relation with the structural context. Structural forces, desires, and capacities of returnees can play a role on each of the dimensions of embeddedness (Van Houte *et al.*, forthcoming). Multidimensional embeddedness has the potential to compare pre-migration with post-return circumstances as well as migrants with non-migrants. This article will however focus on the comparison between different types of returnees in order to explore the heterogeneity amongst them.

## METHODOLOGY

The fieldwork for this article took place in Kabul between May and July 2012 during two field visits of one month each and was conducted by the first author in cooperation with an Afghan translator/assistant. The fieldwork was logistically facilitated by Cordaid Kabul. In total, 35

returnees, notably returning from the Netherlands, the UK, Germany, and Scandinavia, participated in the study. All returnees with the permanent legal possibility to stay in the country of destination were considered as voluntary, whereas all returnees without such possibility are marked as involuntary (Van Houte *et al.*, forthcoming). In addition, the level of agency was significantly different for migrants who were returned with the use of force (Schuster & Majidi, 2013). Therefore, a distinction is made between *independent* involuntary return, including those who participated in 'Assisted Voluntary Return' programmes, and (physically) *forced* or deported involuntary return. Table 1 shows the number of voluntary and involuntary returnees in the study.

A methodological challenge was that return migrants from Europe proved to be a hidden population (Bloch, 2008) for a number of reasons. First, returnees from industrialised countries are relatively small in number. Second, as there is no central administration or long-term monitoring system of returnees, they are easily lost out of sight after they have returned (Jacobsen & Landau, 2003; Eastmond, 2007). Third, although voluntary returnees are quite visible in society, involuntary returnees typically do not want to expose themselves. Tracing them was therefore a labour-intensive task. The result was that the sample could not be randomly selected. By diversifying the points of entry as much as possible, we tried to limit the negative effects of these limitations.

The characteristics of the research population inevitably led to a selection bias on multiple grounds. First, the capital Kabul as a research site reflected the reality of return: approximately 30% of all returnees settled in Kabul (Stigter, 2006). This general number is higher for returnees from European countries: Afghans who migrated to Europe were more likely to be of urban

Table 1. Types of return migrants in the case study.

Type of return	Female	Male	Total
Voluntary	4	16	20
Involuntary	0	15	15
<i>Independent</i>	0	11	11
<i>Forced</i>	0	4	4
Total	4	31	35

Source: Afghan return migration study, 2012.

background and were more likely to return to Kabul (Turton & Marsden, 2002). This urban focus nevertheless implies that the results are not representative for return to more remote or rural areas. Second, because of the demographic reality that migratory movements are gender selective, there was a strong male bias on the presented perspectives of the returnees. Third, the vulnerable position of a part of the research group created issues of representativeness as well as ethical issues. Violence and displacement can affect the trust, willingness, or ability to speak (Jacobsen & Landau, 2003; Eastmond, 2007). In this study, some return migrants refused an interview out of anger and disappointment with 'the West', were untraceable, or had already re-emigrated. These unresponsive groups are likely to represent the more vulnerable categories of returnees.

As a research methodology, we focused on the autobiographical narrative to give room to the non-static and non-normative understanding of embeddedness. Instead of asking for pre-defined elements, the researcher asked for their life histories as an emic approach to examine how actors ascribe meaning to a particular set of experiences and to address the socio-spatial ambivalence of migrants who are confronted with multiple social worlds (Eastmond, 2007; Gibbs, 2007; Amelina, 2010; Meeus, 2012). When telling their life history, respondents present their narrative as having a meaningful and coherent order, imposing on reality a unity that it does not inherently possess. Rather than a reconstruction of factual information, this narrative organisation shows how individuals frame their story and ascribe meaning to their experiences from the perspective of today and with relation to the social context (Ewing, 1990; Lutz, 1998; Eastmond, 2007; Gibbs, 2007). The autobiographical exercise was assisted by visual and participatory techniques such as timeline drawing and photographing one's own life. It was attempted to have at least two individual meetings with all respondents. In addition, three group meetings were held, and key informants were consulted. All data were systematically analysed with the help of computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (Atlas.ti GmbH Scientific Software Development, Berlin, Germany), from which an empirically grounded understanding of embeddedness emerged. Before discussing these results, we will describe the structural context within which Afghan migration took place.

## 'WAVES' OF AFGHAN MIGRATION

The early phases of the conflict caused the outflow of refugees from the Afghan élite, consisting of the 'traditional' élite that is often defined by lineage, such as belonging to the royal family or localised political or religious leaders, and 'new' élites who accessed higher education and were part of a relatively wealthy, urban class (Oeppen, 2009). In 1979, the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan to counter the resistance against the Afghan communist regime (Collins, 2011). This started a first wave of élite refugees who were members of the pre-communist regime or non-leftist intellectuals escaping detentions and executions (Jazayery, 2002). In 1992, 3 years after the Soviet Union had withdrawn, the Afghan communist regime was overthrown by the Mujahedeen, causing a second wave of élites who were affiliated with the communist regime (Jazayery, 2002). Despite their sudden departure with few resources, these élite refugees were often relatively well equipped to leave the country (Oeppen, 2009). Those with the greatest resources were able to travel directly to the US or Europe and often received refugee status and permanent residence permits (Van Houte *et al.*, forthcoming). Although the Afghan élite is a minority of the total Afghan refugee population, they are therefore overrepresented in the industrialised countries (Oeppen, 2009).

The widespread generalised and ethnic violence of the later phases of the conflict caused massive outflows of migrants. After seizing power in 1992, several ethnic factions of the Mujahedeen fell apart in a civil war (Marsden, 1999). The continued civil conflict was a breeding ground for the rise of the Taliban in 1994. They violently conquered the country and took power in 1996, installing a harsh regime including the ethnic cleansing of the Shi'a and Hazara population, which coincided with a prolonged drought between 1998 and 2001 (Marsden, 1999; Jazayery, 2002; Turton & Marsden, 2002; Collins, 2011). The vast majority of these new migrants who fled civil conflict, Taliban rule, and drought could only travel across the border and sought refuge in the neighbouring countries. However, the decrease of international funds after the end of the Cold War caused an increasingly restrictive attitude of Pakistan and Iran towards their Afghan refugee populations (Turton & Marsden, 2002; Blitz *et al.*, 2005; Collins, 2011; Abbasi-Shavazi

*et al.*, 2012). A number of Afghans who did not want to return and who had the opportunity decided to move on to European countries (Turton & Marsden, 2002). These later arrivals of Afghans to Europe encountered more restricted immigration and asylum policies and were often given temporary asylum status (Jazayery, 2002; Turton & Marsden, 2002; Van Houte *et al.*, forthcoming).

The overthrow of the Taliban in 2002 sparked both voluntary and involuntary return movements of Afghans from Europe. The greater ability to travel to Afghanistan led to a growing number of Afghans with permanent residence status that was willing to return voluntarily to invest in and contribute to the reconstruction of the country (Jazayery, 2002). A small proportion of these voluntary returnees stayed in Afghanistan on the longer term (Blitz *et al.*, 2005; Braakman, 2005; Oeppen, 2009). In addition, European states withdrew temporary asylum statuses, became stricter on incoming asylum seekers, and initiated the return of Afghans without permanent legal statuses in 'voluntary' return programmes (IRIN, 2011; Schuster, 2011). Hereafter, we will discuss how these differences in socio-economic background and migration experience influence both multidimensional embeddedness and post-return mobility.

#### VOLUNTARY AND INVOLUNTARY RETURN

In this section, we explore the background and migration experiences of the voluntary and involuntary

returnees in this case study. Table 2 shows the circumstances of departure of the respondents.

The majority of voluntary returnees in this study were members of the Afghan élite who were affiliated with the communist regime and migrated in the period around its fall in 1992. Many left at a young age, mostly together with their parents, whereas a number of young male Afghan migrants were sent ahead by their families. Because they were able to leave the country in an early stage of the conflict and because of their high profile, they were often granted refugee status and eventually citizenship of the country of residence. These refugees were able to participate in the new society of residence and had access to education, opportunities to learn the language, and employment. Although these people described the period of familiarisation to the new country as challenging, the experience also gave them the opportunity to increase their capacities and gave them a strong sense of self-worth. Nevertheless, many of these high-skilled migrants experienced a 'glass ceiling', hindering their career, which they related to discrimination and racism (Ammassari, 2004). In addition, especially older Afghans who had an influential position before migration often experienced a downward socio-economic mobility compared with their élite status in Afghanistan (Oeppen, 2009).

Involuntary returnees were of more modest descent and left mainly during the Taliban period. Others had already fled during the civil war and had first resided in Iran or Pakistan before moving on to Europe. All involuntary

Table 2. Circumstances of departure of voluntary and involuntary returnees.

		Voluntary	Involuntary
Year of birth	Pre-1970	1	2
	1970–1980	12	11
	1981–1990	7	2
Year of departure	Pre-1994	16	4
	1995–2001	4	9
	Post-2001	0	2
Age upon departure	4–13	10	0
	14–20	8	6
	21–30	1	7
	30–50	1	2
Means of travel	Unaccompanied	5	15
	With family	15	0

Source: Afghan return migration study, 2012.

returnees travelled alone as unaccompanied minors, young adults, or as married men who left their families behind in Afghanistan or in the neighbouring countries. Although they were not amongst the poorest in Afghanistan, they often sold property or borrowed money from relatives to pay for the journey. In addition, many stayed in transit countries for several years to save money for the rest of the trip and therefore took up to 9 years to reach Europe. They arrived in European countries in a later stage and claimed but never received refugee or permanent asylum status. Their temporary asylum status or undocumented situation restricted their opportunities to enrol in education or improve their language skills. Being lower educated and with an insecure legal status, any jobs they found were in the informal sector and typically low skilled and did not generate many new skills or savings. Their legal status did not allow them to fully participate in society, and their lives there can be described as being *in* that country, but not *of* it, as they tended to live segregated from the broader destination population (Portes, 1999; Piotrowski & Tong, 2013).

Table 3 shows the post-return circumstances of the returnees in this study. Voluntary returnees returned to Afghanistan when they felt this was, given their individual circumstances, the best option (Cassarino, 2004). The foreign-aid industry

and the commercial opportunities in a country where everything needed to be rebuilt after decades of conflict offered them the opportunity to take high-skilled jobs or start their own business that ran on funds provided by the international community. These were highly desirable jobs considering the high expatriate salaries and the opportunity to work in the Afghan context with international colleagues. In this way, although much had changed since their departure, they could reclaim meaningful and prestigious positions upon return, and they found themselves again at the upper end of the social ladder. This pleasantly contrasted with their moderate position in their Western European country of residence. Issues with regard to the reason for migration such as political disputes were remarkably absent from these returnees' narratives. Voluntary returnees, who were single or left their spouse in Europe, lived with other returnees or independently. Returnees who were married left their families in the European country and supported them in cash flows that have been called *reverse remittances* (Mazzucato, 2011). A minority of voluntary returnees married after return and lived with their spouse.

Contrary to voluntary return, involuntary return felt like a step back rather than an improvement. If involuntary returnees succeeded economically, this was despite rather than thanks to their time abroad.

Table 3. Post-return circumstances of voluntary and involuntary returnees.

		Voluntary	Involuntary
Year of (first) return	2002–2007	8	11
	2008–2010	11	2
	2011–2012	1	2
Occupation	Private business owner	8	3
	International organisation	6	1
	Afghan government	2	0
	Afghan non-governmental organisation	2	0
	Low-skilled employee or self-employed	0	8
	Unemployed	0	3
	Unclear	2	0
Housing	Shared house with returnees/guesthouse	7	0
	With family	9	14
	Alone	4	1
Marital status	Single	9	0
	Married or in a relationship, spouse in Europe	7	0
	Married pre-migration, living with spouse	0	4
	Married post-return, living with spouse	4	11

Source: Afghan return migration study, 2012.

They were often in low-skilled and unstable jobs, informally self-employed, or unemployed. Whilst they were already less well networked compared with the élite returnees, they lost the networks they used to have and were therefore disadvantaged compared with a large and equally skilled workforce. In addition, they felt that the working circumstances for low-skilled labour were worse compared with those in the European host country. Only a few involuntary returnees managed to find low-skilled employment within civil or military international organisations. Finally, large parts of their previous savings and belongings had diminished to pay for the journey, and they had not been able to retrieve them. Their weak economic and institutional embeddedness put them in a vulnerable situation, which put them in dependent relationships with their relatives and in which they felt unprotected from generalised violence. Their migration experience felt like wasted time and money. Although they were not amongst the poorest within the Afghan society before migration, their migration experiences often left them impoverished and frustrated. Involuntary returnees mostly lived with their spouse and other relatives, as they were all married in Afghanistan either pre-migration or after return.

To further illustrate and explore the different types of return, we will now discuss two cases that are representative for the voluntary and involuntary returnees in this study. The first case of Nadir is representative for the members of the Afghan élite who left after 1992 and returned voluntarily, whereas the second case of Omar represents the group of more modest descent who arrived in Europe in a later stage and had to return involuntarily.

### **Nadir**

Nadir<sup>1</sup> is an Afghan voluntary returnee in his early thirties whose family belonged to the Afghan urban élite. Nadir and his family escaped to Pakistan in 1992. From there, Nadir was, at the age of 16, the first of his family to travel to the Netherlands with the help of a smuggler, after which his mother, brother, and sisters also came to Europe. Nadir was recognised as a refugee, received support to build his life in the new country, and eventually received Dutch citizenship. With regard to this period, Nadir said that he always worked hard to keep up with his classmates

because of language and adaptation problems and existing preoccupations about foreigners: 'I had to fight. It wasn't easy, but I did everything'.

The events of 11 September 2001 triggered his return. In the rush of attention on the war in Afghanistan, Nadir, who was a journalism student, could profile himself as an expert on Afghanistan, who spoke the local language *and* had followed Western education. After being an assistant journalist and translator for Dutch media in Afghanistan, he was offered a well-paid job at an international aid organisation. Ten years after his first return to Afghanistan, he still works there.

In Nadir's life, three spaces of embeddedness can be identified, which have different meanings for him. The Dutch society as a space of embeddedness means, in the first place, a safe haven. Nadir kept his Dutch apartment to go to in case the security situation in Afghanistan would deteriorate and to escape the stressful working environment of Afghanistan every now and then. In addition, the Netherlands was a place of socio-economic wealth, where facilities are better and comfortable housing and leisure activities make life easier. He said:

I have a born love for my country, but a rational respect for the Netherlands. It gave me everything that I could never get in Afghanistan. (– Nadir [voluntary returnee (m) interview, original in Dutch])

Afghanistan was a place of opportunities where he, as one of the few higher-educated people in the country, could combine a well-paid career with a feeling that he could contribute to rebuilding Afghanistan. Nevertheless, he found it sometimes difficult to identify and interact with Afghan social life.

Life here is meaningful. (...) I speak the language and I know the culture and the job is interesting. The other side is that you don't have a social life, except for some relations. You cannot have a normal social life (...). And the insecurity. That's really eating up your energy. (– Nadir)

Socially, Nadir related to the Dutch space of embeddedness, where a 'normal' social life would for him include having a beer outside a bar with a

couple of friends, although that image now also seemed strange. He chose to live separately from his relatives as he said he became too Western to handle the lack of privacy of an Afghan family home. Nevertheless, he was still drawn to his Afghan social network, as he explained that as a successful migrant with an international job after return, he was now seen as a role model, and he felt responsible for the well-being of his extended family. At the same time, the burden to carry the responsibility for his relatives (Jazayery, 2002) also distanced him from them and put restraints on his behaviour:

In Afghanistan you're always playing a role. If you talk with the community, you have to show that you're a good Muslim. (...) In the Netherlands, you can be yourself more. (– Nadir)

Nadir was also strongly embedded in the large international community of Afghanistan through his employment. His Dutch passport worked like a reliability certificate for these employers, as it suggested a certain knowledge of and affinity with the Western working mentality. In turn, Nadir said he felt more comfortable with his network of international professionals and he identified more with the international than local Afghan working conditions, as he found it hard to deal with the latter's widespread corruption. Staying in the secure and well-equipped guest-house of the international development organisation where he worked gave him the logistical measures to deal with the unstable security situation of Afghanistan. Altogether, Nadir said that if it were not for an international organisation, he would not be able to work in Afghanistan.

Nadir noticed that the security situation was deteriorating and he was becoming tired of the stressful situation. He planned to leave Afghanistan within the next few years.

I think it has been enough. I have tried to help Afghanistan for quite some time, and now I'd like to go back to do some sports, live a bit, think about myself a bit. (– Nadir)

Leaving Afghanistan would not necessarily imply going back to the Netherlands as he felt unsure whether he would be able to find a job

in the current economic and political climate that he felt had become less friendly towards foreigners. In deciding where his next place to work would be, he said: 'I have become a world citizen. I could live anywhere'.

Despite the difficult times he experienced as a refugee and the ongoing dilemmas in his life, Nadir benefitted from his migration experience. His multi-local embeddedness meant that he could fulfil different needs in different territorial and non-territorial spaces of embeddedness. His transnational mobility made him less bound by the structural restrictions of places. He could constantly re-evaluate his options for his private and professional life in the interplay between his desires and capacities for security, socio-economic opportunities, and belonging.

### Omar

Omar is an Afghan involuntary returnee in his early thirties. His family was not amongst the poorest in Afghanistan but was not part of the elite either. Omar and his family fled Afghanistan because of the widespread generalised violence, which erupted with the start of the civil war in 1992, when he was 14. The family lived as refugees in Pakistan and Iran. Omar commented on this period:

[A]ll the Afghanistan people, they just split up and they went to different places. I went to the UK and (...) Afghanistan just broke out like a tree. (...) one branch falls down, the other branch goes another way, one branch just burns and the other branch just get dry and then at the end the actual tree has nothing. It's only a dry tree. This is what happened to me and at this time. (– Omar [involuntary returnee (m), interview, original in Dari, via translator])

With the metaphor of the tree, Omar illustrated how he felt the conflict tore apart the social structure of Afghanistan and that of his family: some family members stayed in Iran, some went back to Afghanistan, and others travelled to Europe and applied for asylum. Omar arrived in the UK in 2000. He was given a temporary asylum status that allowed him to follow English classes and work temporarily at a bakery, before his status was withdrawn after the fall of the Taliban.

He managed to linger on as an undocumented migrant but was finally arrested and agreed to return in 2007, because he said: ‘without the visa in a strange country you’re just a prisoner’.

Omar’s multidimensional embeddedness both in his former host country and in Afghanistan can be described as weak. As Omar never had a legal basis to live in the UK and only stayed there in an insecure temporary asylum situation, he did not have ongoing economic, institutional, or cultural linkages with the country. Rather, he felt that the migration experience was a waste of time and money that prevented him from following education, doing relevant jobs, or saving money. After his return to Afghanistan, he felt that he lacked the education, working experience, and local connections to find employment. He moved from one low-skilled temporary job to the other and was at the time of research working as an electrician for a telephone company. Without a Western passport, higher education, or sufficient knowledge of English or other languages, the doors to the high-paid jobs in the international community also remained closed. The only and important link with Europe was through several of his brothers and sisters who still lived there and supported the family through remittances.

In Afghanistan, too, Omar’s only basis for embeddedness was his family, who took him in the family home, where accommodation, food, and income were shared. Omar felt lucky to be taken in by his family, although it also put him in a dependent situation.

[T]he thing is that in Afghanistan once you’re in a circle, if the circle gets tighter and tighter you have to live with it. And you have to deal with it, (...) you cannot just get yourself out of the circle. (– Omar)

Omar indicated that he felt trapped in the ‘circle’ he was in. He highlighted the lack of agency over his own life and that he could only obey the wishes of his family. Although he tried several times to leave Afghanistan again, he realised that his chances had decreased because of tightened asylum regulations and his lack of savings. This gave him the feeling of being stuck in Afghanistan. The feeling of having played and lost the ‘migration game’ resulting in an impoverished, immobile, and dependent situation had a strong psychological effect on him and was a source of anger and disappointment.

#### DISCUSSION: MIGRATION AND RETURN MIGRATION AS A REINFORCEMENT OF SOCIO-ECONOMIC STRATIFICATION

The life histories of Nadir and Omar are representative cases of voluntary and involuntary returnees from European countries to Afghanistan. They illustrate the strong patterns of how the socio-economic background, migration experience, post-return embeddedness, and post-return mobility are interlinked and reinforce socio-economic stratification, presented in Table 4.

Migrants who were members of the Afghan élite before migration often benefitted from their migration experience. Their voluntary return enabled multi-local embeddedness and continued transnational mobility. These returnees often kept their social, institutional, and economic ties to the European country of residence. Their relative wealth and dual citizenship gave them the freedom to constantly re-evaluate their options to stay or move. They could combine the advantages of the different dimensions in multiple spaces of embeddedness by moving back and forth between the countries of their citizenship. In addition, their European passport represented not only a feeling of belonging to the country

Table 4. Patterns of migration and return.

Background	Arrival in Europe →	Legal status →	Return →	Embedded →	Mobility →
Élite ( <i>Nadir</i> )	End 1980s early 1990s	Refugee status citizenship	Voluntary	Multi-local and strong	Transnationally mobile
Modest ( <i>Omar</i> )	Mid-1990s early 2000s	Temporary asylum Rejected asylum undocumented	Voluntary	Uni-local and weak	Involuntary immobile

Source: Afghan return migration study, 2012.

but also an internationally recognised document that ensured freedom of movement to any place in the world (Nagel & Staeheli, 2004). Some of these returnees did not consider themselves as returned, but rather as living in two places.

On the other hand, migrants of more modest descent lost rather than won from their migration experience. Their involuntary return hampered their embeddedness, which was largely limited to Afghanistan and resulted in a situation of dependence and involuntary immobility (Carling, 2002). In the context of Afghanistan, this was very disempowering. As the opportunities for legal migration or asylum are decreasing both in the region and in Western countries, they know that their possibilities to move are limited, and they would have to resort to even more dangerous and expensive travel routes, with a higher risk of failure. The prospect of having nowhere to go in case the security situation in Afghanistan deteriorates caused an uneasy feeling of being stuck in Afghanistan.

Although the cases of Omar and Nadir represent a very strong general pattern in the data, it does not mean that all migration experiences develop along the same lines. There were respondents in this study with a high social background who returned involuntarily and returnees of more modest background who returned voluntarily, which immediately mitigated the stratifying effect of migration and return. Moreover, migrants' individual experiences strongly vary within these general patterns, based on their personal desires and capacities, which is discussed elsewhere (Van Houte & Davids, forthcoming). The conclusions of this article will however focus on the remarkably strong general patterns that we identified.

## CONCLUSION

The transnational turn has raised renewed expectations within the debate on migration and development, assuming a number of characteristics of return migrants from industrialised countries that enable their contribution to development upon return. However, the increasing significance and benefits of mobility also make inequalities in the right or capacity to migrate an important dimension of social stratification. As research shows that mobility highlights differences not only between migrants and non-migrants but also amongst return migrants, this article explored this new avenue of the hierarchisation and social stratification of mobility

(Castles, 2007). Conceptually, we introduced multidimensional and multi-local embeddedness as an analytical approach to the multi-sited experience of migration, which merges transnationalism and integration into one analytical framework.

This article showed how previously existing socio-economic differences were reinforced by the migration experience, which results in strongly differentiated patterns of post-return multidimensional and multi-local embeddedness and transnational mobility. Returnees who were members of the Afghan elite before migration often benefitted from their migration experience. Their early arrival and high profile led to refugee status, which enabled full participation in the host country, and voluntary return, which resulted in strong and multi-local embeddedness and continued transnational mobility. To the contrary, Afghan migrants who were of more modest descent lost rather than won from their migration experience. Their late arrival meant that they faced the disadvantages of increasingly restrictive asylum policies, leading to insecure legal status. This stood in the way of participating in the host country and resulted in involuntary return, which led to a weak multidimensional embeddedness that was largely limited to the Afghan space. The uneasy feeling of being 'stuck' in Afghanistan because of their involuntary immobility and their relative failure compared with successful returnees (Carling, 2004) made them feel impoverished, disempowered, and frustrated.

The results of this study show, other than the assumptions that underlie migration and development policies, that not all migrants are elites, not all returnees benefit from their migration experience, and not all are strongly multi-locally embedded. Rather, the opportunities migrants have to accumulate skills, knowledge, and savings in the host country, which they may invest after return, are unequally distributed amongst different types of migrants. Socio-economic differences that existed prior to migration are reinforced by the migration experience, which results in strongly differentiated patterns of multi-local embeddedness and transnational mobility. This finding restricts expectations of return migration and development. As mobility plays a key role in post-return embeddedness, we argue along with Bakewell that the expectations of return migration and development policies can only be realised if return policies respect and enable the continued mobility of migrants (Bakewell, 2008).

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## NOTE

- (1) To protect the privacy of the participants in this study, all names are pseudonyms. For the same reason, details such as towns or countries of residence are sometimes intentionally unspecified.

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