For more than a 100 years, the term “stepwise migration” referred largely to the internal migrations of economic migrants who progressed incrementally up some kind of urban hierarchy. When the concept of stepwise migration was extended to include international migration, the common assumption was that migrants move first within their own country to an urban setting where the odds of their emigrating overseas increase substantially, with only the final “step” in their migration life-path being to go abroad. Only in the last couple of decades have there been studies that applied the term “stepwise migration” to the movements of labor migrants engaged in multiple international journeys progressing up a hierarchy of overseas markets. But why would migrants engage in this kind of incremental, “multinational” labor migration? What factors influence their decision-making? Are these serial international movements randomly ordered? Are they the outcome of structural displacements within the global labor market? Or can some intentionality be discerned in stepwise international labor migrants’ progressive movements?

To answer these questions and increase understanding of the factors that lead to the adoption of stepwise international migration, this chapter introduces various concepts and theories to equip readers with a common vocabulary that will be used throughout this book. In this chapter, I emphasize the structural factors that set the stage for the emergence of stepwise international labor migration among

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1 This started with Ernest Ravenstein (1885) and continued all the way up to Dennis Conway (1980). In between, Riddell and Harvey (1972) apply the term to describe internal migrants within tropical Africa moving from rural villages to proximate semi-urban towns, and then to primate cities. More recently, the term has been used to describe movements up and down an urban–rural hierarchy by the Inupiat people in Artic Alaska (Howe, Huskey, and Berman 2014).

2 Kõu and Bailey (2014); Korinek, Entwistle, and Jampaklay (2005); Konadu-Agyemang (1999); Malmberg (1997).
Asian migrant domestic workers, but also highlight the intentional-
ity of individual migrants in deciding to adopt stepwise migration as
part of a broader mobility project.

I start by discussing contemporary migration theories. These theo-
ries operate at different levels – at the level of the individual migrant,
her family and networks, the overseas markets in which she works,
and the sending and receiving states that constrain the legality of her
movements and employment. These theories also cover various aspects
of the international migration process: the aspiration and desire to
leave home, the subsequent negotiation with family members and soci-
etal norms, the decision to migrate and the decision about where to
migrate to, and much later, the decision to stay overseas, return home,
or move elsewhere. Differing theoretical perspectives on the idea
of human agency are also considered, especially in relation to time,
given that stepwise migration is a process that unfolds over years. The
following chapters draw on many of these concepts – the notion of
a segmented labor market in receiving countries, the impact of glo-
balization on origin countries’ economies, the positive and negative
power of migrant networks, the evolving aspirations and capabilities
of individual migrants – to put forward a dynamic, conceptual fram-
work that explains why an individual migrant domestic worker might
engage in stepwise international labor migration. So it is important to
clarify these concepts and theories early on. In so doing, I show how
our understanding of stepwise international labor migration can ben-
et from existing international migration research, but I also show
how studying stepwise migration can contribute to and extend inter-
national migration theory as a whole, especially the need to consider
the fluid and evolving subjectivities, dreams, and desires involved in all
migration and destination decision-making processes.

The Social Forces behind Stepwise Migration

In the concluding chapter of Worlds in Motion, Douglas Massey and
his coauthors argue that for a theoretical account of international
migration to be considered satisfactory, it must contain four elements:

A treatment of the structural forces that promote emigration from develop-
ing countries; a characterization of the structural forces that attract immi-
grants into developed nations; a consideration of the motivations, goals, and
aspirations of the people who respond to these structural forces by becoming international migrants; and a treatment of the social and economic structures that arise to connect areas of out- and in-migration (1998:281).

The authors note that few theories manage to satisfy all four requirements. Three out of four of these essential requirements deal with the role of structural forces: factors that exist at the level of countries, markets, societies, and networks, and create the necessary conditions which predispose individuals and/or households to consider international migration in the first place. Most theories of international migration operate within this area, highlighting one or the other structural factor as a primary driver. However, because each theory tends to examine a single causal factor at a time, each gives us only a partial explanation of international migration, never a comprehensive one. The same applies to how well these theories explain the emergence of stepwise international labor migration among Asian migrant domestic workers.

Perhaps the most established theory of migration is neoclassical economic theory, which proposes that wage differentials between origin and destination are the primary driver behind an individual's decision to migrate after the costs of migration have been taken into account. This theory has been criticized for ignoring the non-economic factors that influence an individual's migration decision (or non-decision), but my interviews revealed that wage differentials do affect some of the stepwise labor migrations of Indonesian and Filipino domestic workers. One of the reasons why many Filipino domestic workers desire to move from Hong Kong to Canada, after having earlier moved from the Philippines to Hong Kong, is because the Canadian market offers a higher average wage rate than either Hong Kong or the Philippines. But neoclassical economic theory cannot explain why it is Canada specifically, and not other Western countries, that features so prominently in Filipino domestic workers’ stepwise dreams. Likewise, this theory cannot explain why these aspiring migrants do not attempt to travel directly to Canada from the Philippines, rather than going stepwise.

3 Borjas (1999); Hicks (1932).
4 For a comprehensive review of all contemporary theories of international migration, see Castles, de Haas, and Miller (2013) and Massey et al. (1998). See also Ratha and Shaw (2007) for a discussion of how cost barriers explain why so much international migration occurs between countries in the Global South.
through Hong Kong. And when it comes to Indonesian domestic workers, the theory fails to explain why Canada does not sit atop their destination hierarchies. In fact, almost no Indonesian migrant I met talked of wanting to move to the West at all, despite the higher wages available there. Clearly, there are other factors besides wage differentials driving international (and stepwise) migration decisions.

Offering a more sophisticated picture of the international migration process, the new economics of labor migration (NELM) theory proposes that the decision to migrate is not only about wage differentials between countries, but also about making up for imperfect/inaccessible credit markets in the home country. Low-income families in developing countries may opt to send one or more family members overseas, or to a different part of their home country, to find higher-paying work. These overseas family members are expected to remit at least a part of their savings so that the family as a whole can access much-needed financial capital—to buy land, build a house, or start a small business—as well as spread their income risk. In this manner, migration can be seen as a household-level strategy with the household treated as a single, rational, decision-making unit. The most powerful support for the idea that the migration decision is a household-level strategy is the staggering amount of remittances sent by overseas migrants back to their non-migrant families each year. The World Bank (2016) estimates that USD432 billion in personal remittances was sent to developing countries in 2015, dwarfing the total value of formal monetary aid these countries received from the developed world.

Theorists from the NELM school also argue that migration is about improving a household’s relative position compared to other households in their social reference group. In other words, households who are not worried about day-to-day survival may still decide to send a representative overseas in order to increase their relative standing and reduce their sense of relative deprivation in their village or

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5 Taylor (1987); Katz and Stark (1986); Stark and Bloom (1985).
6 Massey and Espinosa (1997); Lauby and Stark (1988); Findley (1987).
7 The World Bank reports that net official development assistance to developing countries in 2014 was USD161 billion. This is less than half the total volume of remittances sent to the developing world in 2016. See http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/DT.ODA.ALLD.CD, retrieved on August 7, 2016.
8 Stark, Micevska, and Mycielski (2009); Stark and Taylor (1989).
neighborhood. A sense of obligation to send back regular remittances to her non-migrant family can make it hard for a labor migrant to return home after only one or two overseas contracts. Her family may have gotten used to receiving a steady stream of overseas earnings and may be enjoying the status of having a family member “abroad.” If she decides to continue working abroad, the pressure to keep earning for her family may predispose the labor migrant to consider moving onwards and upwards to another destination country where she can earn even higher foreign wages, and enjoy an even higher standing in her community back home and her broader co-ethnic diaspora. The “relative deprivation” argument can also apply to the decision to engage in stepwise international labor migration if a labor migrant sees compatriots, who had previously worked overseas with her, move to another destination where they earn higher wages for the same work. In both these ways, NELM theory (if extended to consider multiple time periods) can help explain the adoption of stepwise international labor migration.

Feminist migration scholars have, however, criticized NELM theory for ignoring the gender-based power differentials that exist within many socially conservative households in developing countries, that can make it difficult for aspiring female labor migrants to secure the support of their families. These criticisms do not necessarily invalidate NELM propositions, but they do highlight the non-economic negotiations that need to occur within households before a family member is sent overseas (Eder 2006). Many of the women I interviewed had to carefully navigate prevailing gender norms about their appropriate role in their households in order to win their family’s support for their migration and destination aspirations (Paul 2015b). They did so by reframing their independent labor migration (and

9 Katz and Stark (1986) find that rural–urban migration can occur even if expected urban income is lower than current rural income. See also Hyll and Schneider (2014) for an updated discussion of the power of relative deprivation to instigate migration.

10 See, for example, Vergara (2009). It should be noted here that the migrant herself may also enjoy the status that comes with working overseas and being the family benefactor who visits home once a year bearing gifts and cash (see Kelly and Lusis 2006; Lan 2006).

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consequent separation from their families) as a means for them to fulfill their normative female role as a care provider in their household.\footnote{Oishi (2005); Hondagneu-Sotelo (1992, 1994a).} Rather than claiming that they had a right to work overseas by themselves, they presented themselves as dutiful daughters, caring mothers, and/or supportive wives who put their family’s needs before their own, and made steadfast promises to remit a large portion of their overseas earnings to their families. These reassurances often managed to assuage their parents and/or husbands’ concerns about their overseas employment in a vulnerable job. But this approach also meant that these migrants inadvertently cemented the traditional view of Asian women as self-sacrificial. Several of my interviewees spoke of the never-ending need to send remittances back home, but even though they complained about how much they had to send back, they continued to send money anyway. Their internalized sense of obligation to send money home, and the self-pride that came from becoming their family’s benefactress, could also push them to engage in stepwise migration in order to seek out alternative destinations that offered them higher wages for the same work.

But not all countries with higher-than-average wage rates are recipients of large inflows of migrants. Instead, there tend to be distinct flows of people connecting specific origin countries with specific destinations. Michael Piore (1979) proposed that it was particular structural conditions in migrant-receiving countries that were the primary driver behind most international labor migration flows. His segmented labor market theory argued that in advanced industrial economies, rising education and income levels result in the native-born populace no longer wanting certain types of “3-D” jobs. These undesirable occupations include paid domestic, agricultural, sanitation, and construction work in countries where there are either no trade unions at all or where these particular occupations are not protected by unions. The low wages, low status, and job insecurity attached to these occupations result in their being shunned by native-born workers. Piore argued that employers cannot simply raise the wages of these low-status jobs to attract more applicants as this would create upward wage pressures on all other jobs higher up the occupational prestige ladder. The resulting absence of a cheap, internal labor force to fill these low-status...
positions drives governments and employers in advanced economies to enter the global marketplace and seek out foreign laborers to fill these vacancies. Piore proposed that it was by reaching out to particular labor-surplus source countries, that receiving-country employers and governments initiated an international labor migration flow between the two countries. This is the case with many present-day markets for migrant domestic workers in Asia and the Middle East, as discussed in more detail in Chapter 4. What Piore did not consider however were the connections that would develop between various destination markets and the role played by for-profit middlemen in managing people-flows between different markets.

The political economy approach to international migration also emphasizes the power of sending and receiving governments, and other non-migrant actors, to shape and constrain international migration flows through the barriers they erect that limit how many people are able to migrate to a new country. Less than 4 percent of the world’s population are international migrants, despite close to 20 percent of the world’s adult population indicating that, if they could, they would like to permanently move out of their home country and work elsewhere. While it is not a fleshed-out theory of international migration, the political economy approach does put forward an explanation for the discrepancy between the number of migration aspirants in the world and the actual number of international migrants. Receiving country governments impose policy impediments that use an individual’s nationality and income as the primary filters for deciding whether or not she is permitted to freely enter a country and the terms of her stay. These regulatory impediments take the form of visa restrictions, quota systems, guestworker programs, and bilateral agreements with specific sending countries. In 2016, the German passport was ranked the most mobile in the world, as it grants German citizens visa-free access to 177 out of 218 countries. In contrast, the least mobile passport belonged to Afghanistan, which only granted holders visa-free

13 Massey (2009); Facchini and Mayda (2009); Cornelius, Tsuda, Martin, and Hollifield (2004); Rudolph (2003).
14 See Esipova and Ray (2009) for information on a worldwide poll conducted by Gallup on migration aspirations. Meanwhile, the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2016) provides details on the estimated number of international migrants in the world today.
access to 25 countries. Likewise, origin-country governments can make it easier or harder for their citizens – or certain subsets of their citizens, distinguished by gender, ethnicity, religion, political views, health, or age – to leave the country. In 2016, Nepal banned its citizens from working as temporary labor migrants in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, and Syria after several Nepali security guards died in a Taliban suicide attack in Kabul. In 2015, Indonesia banned its female citizens from working as domestic workers in 21 Middle Eastern countries when two of its nationals were executed in Saudi Arabia after being convicted of murdering their employers. Bangladesh, the Philippines, and other traditional migrant-sending countries have also periodically imposed bans on their citizens’ labor migrations on various grounds. Of course, the enforcement capacity of the government bureaucracy in sending and receiving states can vary drastically, and desperate migrants may still find ways to sidestep these restrictions by leaving their country on a tourist visa, undertaking undocumented migration, or purchasing fabricated visa papers. Despite these loopholes, state-imposed barriers to free movement tend to have some effect on the outflows of migrants leaving a country and the initial destinations of these migrants. By shutting aspiring labor migrants out of their preferred overseas markets when they first try to leave their home country, these state-imposed barriers indirectly encourage migrants to engage in stepwise international labor migration in order to eventually reach their preferred destinations.

World systems theory and dependency theory are another set of structural-historical theories that have been applied to the question of international migration. These theories were initially proposed in an attempt to explain the economic and power relations between various categories of countries in the world economy, and then subsequently applied to consider how changing conditions in developing countries newly joining the capitalist world economy can kickstart international

16 Sharma (2016).
labor migration flows. The central thrust of these theories with respect to migration is that, as more traditional economies become increasingly integrated into the global capitalist economy, the resulting financial hardships experienced by low-income individuals and families in these countries push vulnerable workers to migrate to urban centers within their own country or to other countries in search of jobs that can support their households. This economic displacement of workers can stem from various, intersecting factors, including the rise of a cash economy, inflationary pressures because of the introduction of foreign capital into the local economy, the consolidation of agricultural landholdings that pushes poor farmers off their land, the mechanization of agricultural practices that makes many rural workers redundant, and increasing indebtedness among the rural poor. Some of these newly displaced workers migrate internally to manufacturing enclaves or export processing zones located in urban areas or near air-/sea-ports in their own countries. Here, foreign and local capitalist companies can have their goods produced at a fraction of the cost they would have had to pay in the Global North. These export-oriented jobs are very demanding and poorly paid, and tend to be given to women who are viewed as easier to train and more submissive (Fuentes and Ehrenreich 1989). The “footloose” (Breman 1996) or rootless nature of these workers’ lives increases their marginality and vulnerability, making them easier to manipulate and control. Parallels can be drawn with the international migrations of migrant domestic workers given that no guestworker program for migrant domestic workers allows these workers to bring their families

18 See Wallerstein (1974) for a full account of world systems theory and Frank (1966) for his account of dependency theory. These theories did not initially address the question of international migration. It was only much later that the main ideas raised by these theories were applied to the migration question, first to the question of brain drain from the Global South, and subsequently to study labor migration regimes. See Sassen (1988) and Portes and Walton (1981).

19 See also Rodriguez (2010); McKay (2006); Pun (2005); Lee (1998). Several of the women I interviewed talked of having first worked in export-oriented factories in their home countries before making the switch to migrant domestic work. One reason why some of these women made the switch was because they were fired from their factory jobs for demanding better benefits. Other women I interviewed experienced their first taste of independence when they worked in these factories, as they were living away from their families and were more susceptible to the idea of working overseas because they saw it as an adventure.
with them when they first go overseas, heightening these migrants’ sense of social marginality in their host country. Workers are expected to work overseas on their own and travel back to their home country once a year or once every 2 years to briefly visit their kin. At the conclusion of their contracts, migrant workers are expected to leave the country and return home. This kind of circular international migration is viewed favorably by receiving country governments that do not want to deal with the permanent settlement of low-wage foreign laborers within their borders. But once a domestic worker is already employed overseas, it is not much of a stretch to imagine her considering an alternative to simply circulating between home and a single destination market. Moving stepwise to a new destination may seem a sensible way to make the best of her constrained circumstances, especially if she can move to a country that promises her permanent residence or, at the very least, higher wages and better living conditions.

Moving away from a focus on markets, meso-level theories emphasize the role of networks of migrant and non-migrant actors to explain how migration flows between origin and destination are perpetuated and become institutionalized over time. There is a rich literature that demonstrates how existing overseas migrants can encourage the migrations of their network contacts by providing tangible assistance in the form of money to cover the costs of migration, advice on how best to approach the migration process, or by creating cultural norms about the desirability of migration. Cumulative causation theory proposes that these migrant networks steadily increase the benefits and reduce the costs of migration, creating a self-feeding mechanism connecting origin and destination.20

Meanwhile, other scholars highlight the key role played by non-migrant actors – such as labor brokers, smugglers, and recruitment and placement agencies in both receiving and sending countries.21

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20 Network theories of migration emphasize how knowing existing overseas migrants can ease the migration decision for future cohorts of potential migrants. See Garip and Asad (2016); Garip (2008); Curran, Garip, Chung, and Tangchonlatip (2005); Curran and Rivero-Fuentes (2003); Palloni et al. (2001); Singer and Massey (1998); Massey and Espinosa (1997). Even the mere knowledge that a community of co-ethnics exists in a particular destination can sometimes ease the worries of prospective migrants, resulting in a “herd effect” among future potential migrants (Bauer, Epstein, and Gang 2002).

These migration middlemen provide aspiring migrants in the origin country with information about possible destinations and the migration process. They serve as conduits connecting origin with destination (for a price that varies on a sliding scale). For aspiring migrants who lack pre-migratory overseas connections, these non-migrant actors may be their sole source of information and advice as they decide whether or not to migrate, and where to go. The Indonesian domestic workers I met had been particularly reliant on their labor brokers and recruitment agents when they first left Indonesia because a significant proportion of these women had not possessed any overseas contacts prior to their first migration. They spoke to me of how their entire knowledge of what international labor migration entailed and their understanding of the world of possible destination options was initially shaped by what their broker or agent told them. It was only after meeting other migrant domestic workers – typically after they were already overseas or during their training period – that these women began to expand their awareness of the world and alternative destination options.

Network theories of migration are now widely accepted explanations for the perpetuation and institutionalization of international migration. Within the particular context of this book, another strength of these theories is that they help explain how stepwise international labor migration flows between two destinations can also become institutionalized through the actions of migrant and non-migrant actors. Recruitment and placement agencies (and also governments) are crucial in establishing and policing transnational connections between various overseas markets for migrant domestic workers. Together, these actors constitute the “migration infrastructures” that shape the migration flows and the range of next-destinations that potential stepwise migrants tend to select from. In Chapter 8, “The Agents of Stepwise Migration,” I discuss the positive and negative reinforcement mechanisms through which this happens. Of course, such agencies are doing so in order to earn a profit but the unintended consequence of

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22 Among the Indonesian domestic workers I surveyed in Singapore and Hong Kong, 39 and 43 percent, respectively, did not have any overseas contact prior to their first migration. In contrast, among the Filipina domestic workers in these two markets, only 10 and 21 percent did not have any pre-migration overseas contacts.

23 Lindquist, Xiang, and Yeoh (2012); Lin, Lindquist, Xiang, and Yeoh (2017).
their actions has been an expansion in the capacity of migrant domestic workers to work in multiple countries in a sequential and hierarchical manner over the course of their migratory lifetimes.24 Another consequence has been an expansion in these workers’ destination imaginaries and their sense of the possible parts of the world they could work in. This provides a good segue to discuss theories that deal with individuals’ motivations and reasoning as they consider becoming a migrant, and later, a stepwise migrant.

Human Agency in Stepwise Migration

Macro- and meso-level theories of migration provide us with insights into the socioeconomic structures, connections, and processes that underpin the stepwise international labor migrations of Asian migrant domestic workers, but these theories do not leave much room for individual migrants to have any say in their own migration processes. Set against these explanations of international migration are micro-level theories that keep their focus on the individual migrant. These theories can usually be sorted into three different categories: those that focus on a migrant’s capacity to engage in migration, those that explore her aspirations to do so and where these aspirations come from, and finally, those that investigate her decision-making processes and the reasoning and mental heuristics that go behind her eventual decision. Together, all these theories concern the degree of “human agency” or control individuals have in shaping their migration processes to match their migration preferences.

For the first group of migration theorists who are interested in the question of migrant capabilities, Pierre Bourdieu’s (1993, 1986) work on the different forms of “capital” has been fundamental in identifying the various resources an individual may possess that can facilitate her exit from her home country and entry into an overseas destination. Migrant capital also plays a critical role in enabling, at other times curtailing, and still other times, necessitating, the adoption of stepwise international labor migration, and so it is useful to have an

24 In Chapters 4 and 6, I explain why some overseas markets are considered more attractive than others, and why it is important to consider how migrants’ destination hierarchies influence their stepwise migration aspirations.
understanding of the various forms it can take. In Chapter 7, I detail the kinds of capital that can be helpful in the first and subsequent migrations of migrant domestic workers from Asia. The three most commonly utilized forms are human, social, and economic capital. Migrant human capital includes institutionally recognized, embodied capabilities and skills such as an aspiring migrant’s work experience, foreign language competencies and educational qualifications, all of which may facilitate securing a job in and visa to a desired country. Migrant social capital refers to the assistance received through network contacts – particularly existing migrants who are currently overseas – that can reduce the costs and risks of migration, and potentially increase the expected benefits of migration too. In the case of temporary labor migration, this assistance can take the form of simple information-sharing about the migration process or the provision of the name of a trustworthy recruitment agency, to more active forms of assistance such as employer matching or loans/gifts of money. Migrant economic capital refers to the funds needed to pay the necessary agency fees, training costs, visa application fees, travel expenses, and other ancillary costs involved in gaining access to a desired destination. This capital could take the form of wage income, savings, a pension fund that can be liquidated, and land or other private property (such as a car or jewelry) that can be sold or mortgaged for cash. It could be financial resources the migrant personally possesses, or her relatives/friends’ funds that she can draw from because of the strength of her ties to them. The above three forms of migrant capital are the most obvious resources that can aid the migration process, but there are other forms – such as cultural and geopolitical capital – that can also be useful.

A shortage of migrant capital can act as a constraint on an aspiring migrant’s initial migration and destination decisions, and prevent their direct migration to their preferred destination. But this dearth of pre-migration capital can also set the stage for the adoption of stepwise international labor migration in the long run. This was the case with both Ramona and Saira, the migrant domestic workers introduced

25 Paul (2015a); Erel (2010); Ratha and Shaw (2007).
26 Kõu and Bailey (2014); Balá and Williams (2004); DeVoretz and Ma (2002).
27 Garip and Asad (2016); Paul (2013); Garip (2008); Portes and Sensenbrenner (1993).
in Chapter 1. Their stepwise migration stories occurred because they were able to acquire new migrant capital while overseas.\textsuperscript{28} Being able to set aside some of their new overseas earnings can allow a migrant to engage in another international migration further down the road. Other forms of overseas-acquired migrant capital – such as new network contacts, a new visa status, new skills and work experience – can also open doors to new destinations. Together, an initial pre-migration shortage of migrant capital and a post-migration ability to accumulate new capital overseas can combine to encourage the adoption of stepwise international labor migration by migrants who were at first shut out of their preferred destination countries. This accumulation of capital occurs within a particular social setting. The characteristics of each market – or field, as Bourdieu (1993) would have called it – influences how a migrant’s human, economic, cultural, social, or geopolitical capital is valued. Stepwise international labor migration between country-level markets is able to occur when capital acquired in one overseas market is recognized and rewarded by the gatekeepers who control access to and status within another market.

But too much of an emphasis on the role of capital in migration processes can create a rather mechanistic image of individual migrants, downplaying the powerful role their imaginations and aspirations also play in shaping their migration and destination decisions. Anthropologist Arjun Appadurai writes that this aspiration is “a form of negotiation between sites of agency (individuals) and globally defined fields of possibility” (1996:31, 2004). He emphasizes the role of the media, but also that of the specific communities to which we belong, in shaping our subjective understandings of and imaginations about the world at large. Individuals’ socially embedded imaginings of the world of destinations available to them, and their internal narrative about their ideal futures within this world, play a critical role in the migration process. These socially and culturally embedded, highly subjective aspirations can push an individual to consider migration even if they do not possess all the facts about the risks and benefits

\textsuperscript{28} Canadian economist Don DeVoretz has posited that acquiring subsidized human capital (such as English language training programs or specific technical skills for themselves or their children) once overseas, can allow Hong Kong immigrants who moved to Canada during the period of the British handover of Hong Kong to China, to move again to a preferred destination such as the United States (DeVoretz and Ma 2002).
of working overseas, and even if they only have a vague understanding of the different countries they could work in. Recognizing the power of aspirations in pushing individuals to decide to move (and also decide where to move), Hein de Haas (2011) defines the migration process as a function of the capabilities and aspirations of an individual within a given set of opportunities and constraints. Chapter 6 provides more detail about Filipino and Indonesian migrant domestic workers’ imaginings about their world and the global labor market. Understanding the “mental maps” (Gould and White 1986) of these migrant domestic workers, and the differences that exist between Indonesian and Filipino domestic workers’ views of the world, goes a long way toward explaining their divergent stepwise migration plans and trajectories.

The mental heuristics and culturally informed decision-making processes of individual migrants constitute the third dimension of human agency. Neoclassical economic assumptions of a rational, autonomous, individual migrant with access to perfect information about her various migration and destination options are recognized as incomplete by most migration scholars. Work in social psychology has shown that people rarely consider all possible alternatives when making a decision; instead, they often source information about different alternatives haphazardly and are heavily influenced by their cognitive heuristics or mental shortcuts. Many of the migrant domestic workers I interviewed made their initial migration decisions based on a hunch that they would earn more overseas, or based on hearsay from neighbors or friends. They made relatively crude comparisons of expected wages at home and overseas, and few conducted systematic research to confirm information they had heard about different destination markets. But their bounded rationality and imperfect information does not mean that these migrants were dupes or that they were unable to retrospectively reflect on and learn from their past decisions. For instance, prospective migrant domestic workers are often willing to put up with zero wages for the first few months of starting

29 In the context of stepwise international labor migration, I extend this definition to consider multiple temporal and spatial settings, given that an individual’s migration-related capabilities, aspirations, opportunities, and constraints shift over time and space once she moves from her origin to her first destination.

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an overseas job, calculating that they would earn enough in the subsequent months to offset their early months of no income.31 This is a straightforward kind of strategic thinking, and it is an example of migrants’ ability to plan across a relatively long time-frame and delay immediate gratification.32

Human capital theories of migration are based on such an understanding of migration as a rudimentary investment decision with people self-selecting into it as a way to secure greater returns on their education, age, skills, or effort.33 This investment decision involves a certain upfront cost but also a potential return in the long run. In keeping with this theory, younger adults are more likely to emigrate than older ones, at least partly because they are more willing to accept the costs associated with migration as they have a longer time-frame in which to reap the rewards of their migration decision as compared to older individuals (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division 2011). But these returns on human capital that migrants seek do not have to be based purely on objective, economic criteria like wages. A subjective element can also exist within human capital theory with individuals choosing to migrate if they imagine they will be better rewarded in non-economic ways – through a better quality of life, higher levels of prestige, etc. – outside their origin country, given their particular level of human capital. Finally, the human capital theory of migration can also explain why these migrants, once overseas, might choose to travel stepwise to another overseas market if they estimate that they could earn even more or enjoy greater benefits in that second destination while still engaged in the same kind of work. But, again, we need not assume that migrants are either fully rational or in possession of perfect information as they make these decisions. There may be an optimism bias in their estimations that encourages them to imagine the best possible

31 The ethics of this debt-financed migration is a separate question. Many of these “fly-first-pay-later” payment schemes are illegal, and even when they are legal, many recruitment and placement agencies deduct more months of salary than they are supposed to under the law. However, for desperate aspiring migrants, the option of not having to sell their land or take on a large loan in order to migrate is very appealing.


33 Sjaastad (1962); Chiswick (2011); Liebig and Sousa-Poza (2004).
outcome from their migration and discount the likelihood of potential negative scenarios (Price et al. 2002; Weinstein 1980). Migrants’ desperation and/or desires can also make them prey to unscrupulous placement and recruitment agencies and brokers who promise them an easy job, high wages, or a guaranteed path to permanent residence, when the reality is actually much more precarious.

Sociologists Mustafa Emirbayer and Ann Mische’s (1998) way of thinking about human agency is a useful framework that combines these cognitive dimensions. They describe human agency as having three temporally oriented constitutive elements: a past-informed habitual aspect, a future-oriented imaginative capacity, and a present-grounded practical-evaluative ability to reflect on what one has done in the past and should or should not change going forward. Along the lines of what Emirbayer and Mische describe, the women I interviewed frequently reflected on what they did or did not know in the past when they first left their home countries, what they learnt while overseas, how their ideas about different destinations had evolved, and how their imaginations had been fired as they met other migrants who talked to them about new places to consider. Even though there was great variety in how much they thought about their past decisions, current situation, and future possibilities, it was clear that their sense of what else they could do tended to expand after moving overseas. Most critically, these women were able to recognize this change in themselves. This maturation process also led some to consider adopting stepwise migration in the future while, in other cases, this maturation led migrants who had been certain they were going to engage in stepwise international labor migration to change their minds and decide to stay put in their initial destination. I see this latter group of migrants’ decision to not engage in further migrations, even though they had the ability to do so, as an alternative manifestation of their agentic capacity. Migrants’ ability to follow through on their plans was still very much constrained by their weak social position overseas but, within those limitations, they were able to reflect on their shifting capabilities and imagine new mobility projects for themselves and their families.

Stepwise Structuration

But how do we weave together all these disparate theories that disproportionately emphasize either structure or agency, and operate at either micro-, meso-, or macro-levels, when studying the adoption of stepwise
international labor migration by Asian domestic workers? And how do we do so while also recognizing temporal changes in both structure and agency, and in their interactions with each other? It is a fact that stepwise international labor migration is made desirable because of how the structure of the global labor market for migrant domestic workers has developed with uneven working conditions and varying barriers to entry across different countries. But it is also true that migrant networks are critical when it comes to distributing information about new destination options for potential stepwise migrants to consider. Both of these explanations are valid but, independently, neither are sufficient. An alternative approach is required that reconciles all of these theories while providing a comprehensive explanation of stepwise international labor migration that holds true at multiple levels of analysis – especially the level of the individual migrant. This approach must recognize the implications of the transformation of overseas markets from independent entities into interconnected ones that not only draw from migrant labor pools in source countries but also from each other.

Nana Oishi was one of the first migration scholars to attempt to theorize this stepwise migration pattern among migrant domestic workers, calling it “step-up migration” (2005:143) and identifying factors operating at different levels that contributed to its emergence. She argued that it was driven partly by migrants’ desire to work in countries with better wages as well as the desire to settle down overseas. In addition to these pull factors, the fact that preferred destination markets tended to be harder to enter than less-desired destinations – because they required higher agency fees – made an incremental and hierarchical approach to international labor migration a necessary tactic. While Oishi highlighted factors at both the level of the individual migrant and also at the level of the market, she did not focus much attention on the role of migrant networks and non-migrant actors in institutionalizing the practice of stepwise international labor migration among migrant domestic workers.

Claudia Liebelt (2011) does highlight the role of meso-level migrant worker recruitment and placement agencies in facilitating this cross-country movement from one overseas market to the next. She notes that when Israel’s immigration policies toward migrant domestic workers were tightened in the early 2000s 34 – leading to more

34 Esveld and Chen (2010).
deportations of over-staying labor migrants as well as a heightened sense of Israel as being hostile to non-Jews – many Israel-based placement agencies began advertising live-in caregiver positions in Europe and Canada to eager Filipino domestic workers who were looking to leave Israel but were not interested in returning to the Philippines. In this case, the stepwise migrations that ensued were a response to an external shock; it was an organic, in-the-moment adoption of stepwise international labor migration, but facilitated by for-profit, non-migrant actors. The idea of a migrant strategically deciding to adopt a stepwise trajectory even before she leaves her country for the first time is not considered. Neither is the idea of the institutionalization of stepwise migration flows linking one destination to another destination, and following a clearly discernible directional logic.

A more comprehensive, multi-level conceptual framework is necessary to explain how different pathways to and different kinds of stepwise international labor migration emerge. I adopt structuration theory (Giddens 1984; Giddens and Pierson 1998) to explain the fluid relationship between the constrained but evolving agency of individual labor migrants who engage in stepwise international labor migration and the dynamic social structures in which they operate. The simple idea behind the structuration approach is that even as our lives are influenced by the broader society in which we live, we retain some capacity to influence society through our individual actions as these scale up and make their impact felt over time. This interplay is the process through which society is simultaneously constituted in and reconstituted by humans and social groups, though at different temporal and spatial scales. In applying structuration theory to the case of international labor migration from the Philippines, geographers Jon Goss and Bruce Lindquist find that “relatively successful migration experiences [of individual migrants] are rapidly emulated by friends, relatives and others, reinforcing the strategies and social relationships on which they are based” (1995:335). Migrants’ social networks are transformed into migration infrastructures, and individual actions scale up to meso-level mechanisms of change. In this way, structuration theory can be used to highlight the causal mechanisms that link different factors at different levels over time, and thereby integrate different theories of international migration.

Using a similar approach, I show how the initial incremental migrations of pioneer stepwise migrants have restructured the landscape for future cohorts of migrants, making stepwise international labor
migration an increasingly prevalent choice for newer migrant domestic workers from Asia. I describe a similar structuring effect occurring through the profit-seeking actions of placement agencies in various destination markets in Asia as they advertise their ability to place existing migrant domestic workers in other destinations in Asia and elsewhere, and thereby shape migrants’ understandings and views of the world. This approach does not deny the weak social position that migrant domestic workers occupy overseas. As the late Doreen Massey pointed out, there are “groups who are also doing a lot of physical moving, but who are not in charge of the process” (1994:149). The migrant domestic workers in this book are disadvantageously placed within this “gendered geography of power” (Pessar and Mahler 2003) where they move across international borders but are then confined within their employers’ homes for most of their day or stuck in a low-wage, low-status job that offers them no chance for career advancement. These women are not fully “in charge” of their own migrations, their day-to-day spatial mobility, or their long-term socio-economic mobility. What stepwise international labor migration represents to them is their attempt to take back some control over their personal mobility projects. I saw this again and again in the increase in the degree of control and initiative manifested in a stepwise migrant’s second and subsequent migrations as compared to her first departure from her home country. What drove these stepwise migrants was what propelled them to leave their home country in the first place: the hope for something better in a new location compared to what they had in their current situation.

The remainder of this book thus offers an exploration of the stepwise migration process, not just identifying the individual-, family-, network-, market-, society-, and country-level factors that contribute to its adoption by Asian migrant domestic workers, but also emphasizing how these various factors interact with one another in a dynamic fashion to shift the aspirations and abilities of migrants, and create new migration and mobility opportunities for them.

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35 Massey (1994) considered this an example of the “power-geometry of time-space compression.”