

# Agency and temporality in skilled migration: Decisions, experiences and practices of Filipino nurses in Norway and in the Philippines

*Candidate: Aslaug Gotehus*

This article-based dissertation presents a multi-sited ethnographic study of the migration decisions, experiences and practices of nurses educated in the Philippines. Their decisions either resulted in migration to Norway, or in their staying in the Philippines. The fieldwork on which this dissertation builds stretched across time and space to acknowledge that migration needs to be understood as a process across time rather than a single act of mobility at one point in time. While migration is a future oriented act, this dissertation shows how the decisions and strategies that the nurses employ are shaped by past experiences, the present situation and the prospective future. It also examines how individual and family events and concerns are entangled with policies, regulations and labour markets in more than one country. In this dissertation, acts and experiences in the present are consciously positioned in relation to prior considerations and future imaginaries in the life cycle of the migrants. Theoretically, this dissertation combines two well-established concepts within the discipline of human geography – labour agency and transnational family networks – with theories of time and temporality applied to the migration experience.

The overarching research questions are as follows: How are the migration decisions, experiences and practices of Filipino nurses impacted by temporal constraints? How can Filipino nurses' experiences of deskilling and waiting inform our notion of temporal constraints on labour agency? These questions have been operationalized further in the research questions that are addressed in each of the four articles. From different vantage points, the articles demonstrate the complexity of the lives of skilled migrants and the agency of labour migrants.

The first article, *Waiting: Migrant nurses in Norway* (co-authored with Taylor Vaughn and Marie Louise Seeberg), uses 'waiting' as an analytical lens to understand the experiences of nurses coming to Norway for work. Empirically, we compare the experiences of two groups of migrant nurses, namely nurses educated in Sweden and the Philippines respectively, who are subject to very different structural conditions. While the experience of waiting arises at the intersection of politically imposed structures and the complexity of ordinary human lives, the overall argument of this article is that temporal experiences of waiting may be less determined by structural conditions than has been suggested by evidence so far.

The second article, *Agency in deskilling: Filipino nurses' experiences in the Norwegian health care sector*, examines how migrant nurses exercise agency in the face of deskilling. Focusing on how the Filipino nurses act in order to cope with and change their circumstances within rather strict and formalized professional regulations and migration regimes, I address how the nurses engage with their own process of deskilling. Without discounting how structural constraints shape possibilities and actions, I argue that a stronger engagement with individual experiences is needed to fully give credit to the agentic dimension in nurse migration. Bringing in changes that occur throughout the lifecycle, I further argue that aspirations and priorities may change across time and space.

The third article, *'She's Like Family': Transnational Filipino Families, Fictive Kin and the Circulation of Care*, addresses the complexity of transnational caregiving and draws attention to how regimes of mobility and welfare affect care needs and capacity. Despite strong family connections and the extensive provision of care that takes place in transnational families and through welfare policies in Norway, this article shows how the migrant nurses experience a care deficit, which they turn to fellow Filipinos in Norway to fill. In this article, I suggest broadening the definition of family to include biological and fictive kin, thereby decentring the nuclear heteronormative family as the operational family form.

The fourth article, *'I chose to stay for a while': Aspirations and capabilities in the non-migration decision making of nurses in the Philippines*, draws attention to the complex and multi-layered phenomenon of non-migration. Through an empirical focus on Filipino nurses who are situated in a 'culture of migration', this article highlights the voluntary aspects related to non-migration and the temporal and agentic dimensions of the decision to stay. While 'regimes of mobility' may restrict or enable cross border movements, this article emphasizes ongoing processes within the Philippines in terms of labour market development, family relations and individual considerations in its analysis of non-migration decisions.

While this dissertation contributes to the vast literature on transnational migration, perhaps even more notably, it also contributes to the emerging field of temporality in migration studies. A main contribution of this dissertation is that it recognizes the individual agency of skilled migrants, while at the same time acknowledging that acts are rooted in and shaped by structural relations, which have distinct temporal characteristics. The nurses in this study were actively engaging with and exerting agency within existing structures. One insight from this study is thus that migrant workers are not simply passive objects defined by constraining structures. Another noticeable insight from this study is the possible connection between experiences of waiting and deskilling. Due to structural constraints and a lack of recognition of their professional nursing skills, some nurses in this study entered into

positions below their educational level to be able to remit back to their families and to secure residency in Norway. While their intention had been for this to be a temporary solution as a step towards their professional goal of becoming a registered nurse, several of the nurses got 'stuck' at a level below their educational qualifications. This shows the fine balance between productive waiting and deskilling.