

The Migration Intersections Grid: An Organizing Framework for Migration Research in and through the Twenty-first Century

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Abstract

For this special issue of the International Migration Review, we develop and provide a comprehensive organizing framework, the Migration Intersections Grid (MIG), to inform and guide migration research in and through the remainder of the twenty-first century. We motivate our work by conducting a high-level scoping review of summaries and syntheses of different directions of travel in migration research over time. Informed by these results, we then identify and describe 12 components that constitute the MIG, which, as we later discuss, is an interactive intersectional 2 International Migration Review 0(0) organizing framework. Finally, we illustrate the MIG's interactive intersectional nature by applying it to several areas of migration research where a comprehensive organizing framework of this sort is needed to address existing and emerging issues and questions now and in the coming decades.

Keywords: migration, research, organizing framework, interactive intersectional

Introduction

Migration has always been, is now, and will continue to be an important issue in many different and interrelated respects (demographically, economically, environmentally, politically, socially, etc.). Approached from many vantage points, migration is fundamentally a process — spatial and otherwise — rooted in historical and contemporary inequalities and inequities within and across populations and places wherein diverse sets of actors and dynamics continually shape and are shaped by and in relation to one another. As one of the only constants here is change, there is not — because there cannot be — a single unifying approach to migration research (Castles 2010; Amelina and Faist 2012; Lee, Carling and Orrenius 2014; de Haas 2021; Scholten 2022). Instead, like the knowledge and tools possessed by an expert journeyman, what is needed is a comprehensive way to think about and approach all aspects of migration research so that researchers are well-equipped to address whatever timeless and timely issues and questions arise.

For this special issue of the *International Migration Review*¹, we take up this task. We do so by developing and providing a comprehensive organizing framework, the Migration Intersections Grid (MIG), which is effectively taxonomy of analytical choices to help inform and guide migration research. In contrast to, say, a theoretical framework that takes the form of abstract concepts and propositions connecting concepts to one another, an organizing framework is broader and encompasses all aspects of the research process, including not just what is researched, but how and why, as well as by and for whom. The MIG is therefore tool (e.g., see others such as the International Migration, Integration and Social Cohesion's Migration Research Hub²) in the proverbial toolbox of migration researchers to help ensure that migration research is and remains inclusive, rigorous, and impactful.

This paper is organized as follows. First, because an exhaustive review of migration research is, if not impossible, well outside of the scope of a single paper such as this one, we motivate the MIG by conducting and reporting the results of a high-level scoping review of summaries and syntheses of different directions of travel in migration research. Drawing on the expertise of the 18 co-authors of this paper representing different sectors and stakeholders, geographies, and career stages, this review samples from different bodies of migration research over the years, decades, and beyond. Informed by these results, we then identify and describe 12 interactive intersectional components that constitute the MIG. Finally, we illustrate the interactive intersectional nature of the MIG by applying it to several areas of migration research where a comprehensive organizing framework of this sort is needed to address existing and emerging issues and questions now and in the coming decades.

Prior Summaries and Syntheses

Summaries and syntheses of different directions of travel in migration research come in many varieties. Focusing here on six types of primary and overlapping vehicles— literature reviews, theoretical frameworks, meta-frameworks, metaphors, methodological approaches, and research and related agendas — we report results of a high-level scoping review that,

¹ See <https://cmsny.org/call-for-papers-special-issue-honoring-imr-60th-anniversary/>.

² See <https://migrationresearch.com/>.

while neither exhaustive nor intended to be, is sufficiently comprehensive and representative. We focus on two key features these summaries and syntheses: their 1) their form with respect to their organization and substance, and 2) their function with respect to the routes and destinations they have taken, or tried to take, migration research. Following other similarly ambitious reviews of this sort (e.g., see Lee, Carling and Orrenius 2014; Climate Migration Council 2024), our findings are organized and described thematically in four subsections. And while we do not have space to reference each individual study that we reviewed³, we illustrate the four themes using a rich set of selected examples.

Expanding and Colliding Orbits

As noted earlier, one of the few constants in migration and, by extension, migration research is change. Consistent with this idea, the first theme emerging from our scoping review is change in the form of expanding and colliding orbits. For example, consider research on the causes, or drivers or determinants, of migration, which has expanded considerably (Massey et al. 1993; 1999; Black et al. 2011a; Black et al. 2011b; Groth et al. 2020; de Haas 2021; Riosmena 2024). It is now widely recognized that there are many intersecting and interacting causes of migration that operate simultaneously at multiple spatial and temporal scales. Black et al. (2011a; Black et al. 2011b), for example, identified five classes of potential causes— demographic, economic, environmental, political, and social — noting that whether, how, and when these affect migration depends critically on the characteristics of the actors and places involved, as well as on intervening obstacles and facilitators (e.g., governing migration policies). In this vein, drawing on prior work by Carling (2002) and others, de Haas (2021) proposed the aspirations-capabilities framework to highlight the dual, intersecting, and interacting roles and tensions of both structure and agency in all aspects of migration.

Expanding topical orbits in migration research have been accompanied by a rich assortment of topical collisions. For instance, a growing body of research on the intersections of climate change and migration has emerged that, on one hand, considers how climate change risks and impacts affect migration decisions and behaviors in ways that are mediated and moderated by natural resource-dependent livelihoods (Thalheimer, Choquette-Levy and Garip 2022; Ekoh, Teron and Ajibade 2023; Hoffmann, Vinke and Šedová 2023; Tebboth et al. 2023), and, on the other hand, examines subsequent connections to and implications for a range of incorporation, wellbeing, and sustainability outcomes (Adger et al. 2019; Maharjan et al. 2020; Adger et al. 2024). Along the way, methodological and empirical modelling approaches have expanded and collided to quantify the number of so-called “climate migrants” in different ways and to varying degrees of success (Schewel et al. 2023), while more empirically grounded studies have shown that migration under climate change is highly complex, differentiated, and, in some cases, can exacerbate the sets of vulnerabilities and risks that migrant and non-migrant actors must subsequently navigate (Carrico and Donato 2019; Tebboth et al. 2023).

In this vein, given the highly unique climate vulnerabilities, risks, and impacts among women and girls, Chindarkar (2012) and others have proposed frameworks for climate change and migration that make explicit gender-specific climate exposures, sensitivities, and adaptative capacities. Others have approached climate change and migration from a distinctively health and wellbeing lens anchored in, for example, the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and international development more broadly (Bastia 2014; Tulloch, Machingura and Melamed 2016; Wilkinson et al. 2016). Still others have incorporated considerations of policies and politics into research on climate change and migration given the rapidly escalating climate crisis and apparent lack of political will to take quick and

³ A list of studies reviewed and selected details about them are provided in the online appendix.

decisive actions to reach the targets in the 2016 Paris climate agreement (United Nations 2015; McLeman 2019; de Haas 2023).

Beyond topical expansions and collisions, there are at least two other important sites for these changes. The first is research disciplines and areas, and the second is the composition of migration researchers representing different sectors and stakeholders, geographies, and career stages (Willekens et al. 2016; Scholten 2022; Hoffmann, Vinke and Šedová 2023). Regarding the former, while some disciplinary and area siloing continues, this situation is changing. Similar to economies, disciplines and areas are elastic and have expanded and collided over time to encompass different facets of migration. For example, despite the fact that political science and “political scientists came late to the study of migration” (Hollifield and Wong 2015, 227), their insights and tools are both necessary and invaluable for addressing a range of pressing migration issues and questions that are inherently political and routinely politicized (Zolberg 1981; Caponio and Jones-Correa 2018; Hainmueller et al. 2018; McLeman 2019; Hopkins et al. 2020; de Haas 2023).

Another example is the discipline of economics. While having worked on migration since at least the 1970s, many recent economists have explicitly joined the ranks of migration researchers (Levy, Pisarevskaya and Scholten 2020). In the US context, their work addresses issues and questions such as the effects of immigration on local labor markets (Card 2001), wage dynamics of immigrants and US-born persons (Borjas 1987, 1989; Peri and Sparber 2009), fiscal impacts of immigration (Mayda, Senses and Steingress 2023), the availability, allocation, and effects of visas (Peri and Sparber 2009; Clemens 2022), migrant remittances (Clemens and McKenzie 2018), and unauthorized immigration (Orrenius and Zavodny 2005).

Expansions and collisions have also occurred with respect to migration researchers who represent different sectors and stakeholders, geographies, and career stages. Although this expansion is due to many factors (Willekens et al. 2016; Oakes et al. 2023), two seem particularly important. The first is that migration is, in many ways, in the eye of the beholder (Donato and Ferris 2020). Indeed, as Bilsborrow (2016, 111) recalled hearing at a meeting of the Household International Migration Surveys in the Mediterranean (MED-HIMS), “A migrant [and, by extension, migration] is not like a strawberry; we have to define it.” Importantly, to do this in ways that are both scientifically rigorous and consistent and consonant with realities on the ground, it is necessary to expand the perspectives, lived experiences, and positionalities represented in migration research. The expansion of migration researchers has also been driven by the growing need for migration research to help solve concrete problems through practice, which requires a skill set that includes research translation and the development of corresponding interventions and programs, training and mentoring, and more.

Complex and Coupled Systems

Expanding and colliding orbits in migration research have been accompanied by another type of change in the form of increasingly complex and coupled systems. To say that migration is or is part of a system is to say that, contrary to randomness and chaos, there is some degree of order and regularity that is manifested in an identifiable structure and a corresponding set of [re]generative dynamics (Mabogunje 1970; Kritz, Lim and Zlotnik 1992; Massey et al. 1993; 1999; Bakewell 2014; DeWaard and Ha 2019).

Consider research on the globalization of migration. Anchored in broader structures and processes of globalization that include the widening circulation of capital and goods, this phenomenon is highly complex and involves the intensification and diffusion of migration around the world in ways that increasingly seep into all aspects of life (Arango 2000; Favell

2001; Czaika and de Haas 2014). Czaika and de Haas (2014) identified five dimensions of the globalization of migration — intensity, distance, connectivity, diversity, and concentration — that each require a unique 6 International Migration Review 0(0) set of conceptual and methodological tools to engage. The globalization of migration also exhibits complex couplings with other phenomena. For instance, prior research on anti-immigrant sentiment and xenophobia has identified correlates and causes that include levels of and changes over time in the size of immigrant populations in migrant-receiving areas (Quillian 1995; Schlueter and Scheepers 2010; Fussell 2014; Creighton, Capistrano and Pedroso 2023). Thus, contrary to the idea that xenophobia is “a basic human instinct” manifested in one’s idiosyncratic perceptions (e.g., of threat) and preferences (e.g., for exclusion) (Hollifield and Wong 2015, 231), there are important and complex couplings with the globalization of migration and social change and transformation more broadly.

It is therefore not surprising that summaries and syntheses of migration research have employed different simplifying metaphors. Massey, Durand and Malone (2003) likened migration to a complex machine with many interdependent parts. Similarly, Hollifield and Wong (2015) likened migration to a locomotive that is difficult for it to stop or be stopped. In subsequently connecting migration to migration policy, their main takeaway is that migration policy is, or at least should be, less about stopping the inevitable train of migration and more about ensuring that it proceeds smoothly — e.g., in line with the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration (GCM) (United Nations 2018).

In the closing panel of the 2013 Theorizing the Evolution of European Migration Systems conference, Robin Cohen remarked that the use of different metaphors tends to parallel technological and societal developments such as those in information and communications technologies (ICTs).⁴ This insight is important for at least two reasons. First, given the complexity of migration systems and their couplings with other systems, there is much to be gained from thought experiments that treat systems as if they were, for example, machines or networks. There are also inherent risks, as metaphors can be and have been weaponized at times to stigmatize migration and migrants (Bettini 2013), including the recent pejorative use of the term “chain migration” (Félix 2021). Second, just as the choice of migration metaphor is tied to technological and social change, so, too, is migration itself. Migration is, after all, a cause and a consequence of broader social change and transformation (Castles 2010; Portes 2010; Van Hear 2010; Amelina, Horvath and Meeus 2016). As such, the complexities of migration systems and their couplings with other systems are endless, which raises important questions about the role of, and the research community’s comfort with, uncertainty.

Differentiation and Integration

The third theme emerging from our scoping review is change in the form of differentiation and integration. Taking each in turn, there has been a pronounced differentialist turn in migration research (Brubaker 2001; Alba and Nee 2005). Brubaker (2001, 533) chronicled the “return of assimilation” in migration research and identified a clear break between earlier transitive and recent intransitive understandings. The former understanding, he argued, has been discredited given its emphasis on becoming or being made similar; the latter understanding, or the return of assimilation, is more abstract and emphasizes heterogeneity

⁴ A list of studies reviewed and selected details about them are provided in the online appendix.

and differentiation rather than sameness. In a similar vein, recent work by Mandić (2022) and others has called for more clearly separating forced and voluntary migration, which is critical to unpacking and understanding heterogeneity in the unique causes, characteristics, and consequences of migration.

In addition to concepts and theory, there has been a similar differentialist turn in methodological and empirical migration research (e.g., see Mahieu, Timmerman and Heyse 2015). Wimmer and Glick Schiller (2003; see also Amelina and Faist 2012), for example, made a strong and convincing case against methodological nationalism in favor of more fluid approaches such as those that underpin, inform, and guide research on transnational migration (Smith 2005). Others have focused on migration data and measures disaggregated by actor- and place-based characteristics (Massey and Capoferro 2004; Donato and Gabaccia 2015; Abel and Cohen 2022). Still others have advocated for different approaches, including qualitative, participatory, and co-creative methods and data anchored in perceptions, lived experiences, and agency (Mahieu, Timmerman and Heyse 2015; Rao et al. 2019; Ryan and Dahinden 2021).

Interestingly, this differentialist turn has also been accompanied by a turn toward integration in migration research. If differentiation is concerned with heterogeneity, particularity, and idiosyncrasy, then how is it possible to glean insights and draw conclusions both within a given differentiated account of migration and also across these accounts in an integrated way? As it turns out, there are many ways. One is with the rise and adoption of intersectional orientations and approaches that privilege such features as interconnections, interdependencies, interactions, and feedbacks (Bakewell et al. 2016; Cundill et al. 2021). Another is the embrace of multi-, inter-, and trans-disciplinary and area research (Willekens et al. 2016; Brettell and Hollifield 2015; Riosmena 2024). And still another is the use multiple and mixed methods such as multi-cited case studies and qualitative comparative analysis (Rao et al. 2019; Singleton 1999; Amelina 2010; Beauchemin 2014).

Embracing Uncertainty

The fourth and final direction in migration research identified from our scoping review is embracing uncertainty. By this, we are not referring to the extensive body of research on uncertainty in migration decisions and behaviors (Stark and Bloom 1985; Anam, Chiang and Hua 2008; Williams and Baláž 2012). Instead, what we mean is the embrace of uncertainty with respect to what may not and cannot be known about migration itself. According to Bijak and Czaika (2020), there are two main classes of uncertainty — epistemic and aleatory — that permeate 8 International Migration Review 0(0) migration and migration research. Recalling our starting point with the causes of migration, there is epistemic uncertainty associated with conceptualizing existing causes and conceptualizing future causes that may or may not be evident now (also see Garip 2012) There is likewise aleatory uncertainty associated with unpredictable and random changes over time in factors that influence migration decisions, behaviors, and outcomes.

At the end of the day, the embrace of uncertainty in migration research boils down to at least two concurrent considerations. The first consists of revisions to and creation of new theoretical and methodological orientations and approaches, which includes, for example, the use of probabilistic methods to estimate and project migration flows (Raymer et al. 2013; Azose, Ševčíková and Raftery 2016; Abel and Cohen 2019; Azose and Raftery 2019). Of

course, as Schewel et al. (2023, 1) pointed out, researchers must take a step back and see these efforts not as definitive or foretelling the future, but rather as “tools to consider a range of possible futures.” As such, the second consideration, which actually precedes the first, consists of adopting a starting point in migration research of radical humility and reflexivity in the face of what is not and cannot be known about migration (Amelina 2021).

The Migration Intersections Grid (MIG)

Informed by our scoping review, this section of the paper identifies and describes 12 interactive intersectional components of MIG, our proposed organizing framework for migration research. In the following subsections, we briefly describe each component. While there is no one way to organize our discussion, we start with the more human-centered components of the MIG in an effort to situate these at the center of migration research. We then transition to the more substantive components of the MIG with respect to key contents and areas of focus in migration research (e.g., the causes of migration). We conclude this section by discussing the remaining components of the MIG that act as anchors and guardrails throughout the research process.

Positionality and Reflexivity

Foreshadowing a key hallmark of the MIG, which, borrowing from Ferree (2009) and as we discuss in the penultimate section of this paper, is that it is an interactive intersectional organizing framework, the first component of the MIG is positionality and reflexivity (Moralli 2023). As the “stance or positioning of the researcher” and of the researched (Rowe 2014, 628), positionality is shaped by both historical and contemporary inequalities and inequities in social location, resources, and power. Positionality also influences agents’ perspectives on migration research, and on research and the world more broadly, through many diverse manifestations that include assumptions, beliefs, and preferences about the roles and responsibilities of the researcher and the researched. Maharjan et al. 9

In contrast, reflexivity is “a practice which must be honed, applied, and kept in mind throughout the research process” (Lumsden 2020, 2, emphasizes ours). In migration research, it is a habit whereby agents look inward to critically reflect on their positionality, asking how it affects and is affected by the research process and what corresponding actions, if any, are warranted. Reflexivity is therefore a continual state of doing by all agents throughout the research process (Amelina 2021).

Agents, Attributes, and Interrelationships

The second MIG component, one foreshadowed earlier, is that of agents and their attributes and interrelationships. In migration research, agents take many forms. These include, for example, individuals; families and households; friendship, peer, community, and other groups; organizations, institutions, and industries; and more. Our use of the term agents highlights the centrality of agency as a starting point in migration research. Agency refers to the capacity to intentionally think and act in ways that invoke and address past, present, and/or future considerations (Emirbayer and Mische 1998). Agency is expressed by different agents and types of agents in different ways over time and space. For example, focusing on migrant workers, Paret and Gleeson (2016) identified four manifestations of agency in: (1) migration decisions, (2) contesting abuses, (3) collective organizing and action, and (4)

decentering work and economic productivity in the lives of migrants. As these manifestations make clear, agency cannot be separated from agents' other attributes (economic, political, social, etc.) because, as Menjivar (2006) and others have clearly shown, agency goes hand-in-hand with many other attributes such as nationality, legal status, and more.

As all agents are inherently social constructions and creatures (Massey and España 1987; Emirbayer 1997), it is also necessary to consider the sets of interconnections among agents from at least two vantage points. First, with respect to the contents of these interconnections, in addition to migration flows of people and populations among places, there are many other complementary flows that are important to elucidate, including, for example, exchanges of information, strategies, capital, goods, services, and more (Bakewell 2014). Second, regarding what these interconnections do, they ultimately reflect and sustain underlying interdependencies among agents that, as we discuss in the next subsection, are shaped by and also shape background operating contexts and fields.

Contexts and Fields

Like any social process, migration and related processes occur in larger contexts and fields. Burke et al. (2009:56S) define social context as background "social forces that shape" all aspects of agents' lives, with contexts often categorized spatially (e.g., micro, meso, and macro), temporally (historical vs. cotemporary, pre- vs. postmigration, etc.), and/or by domain (family and household, employment and work, 10 International Migration Review 0(0) community and country, etc.). Contexts can be viewed as background operating environments that affect agents in a variety of ways; they are likewise highly malleable and changing in ways that are affected by agents and corresponding dynamics such as feedbacks (Entwisle 2007; Bakewell et al. 2016). Closely related to the concept of social contexts is social fields, which Bourdieu (1993) conceptualized alongside corresponding concepts of habitus and capital as structured spaces, or arenas, where agents who are both endowed with and constrained by their positionalities, attributes, relationships, and contexts encounter and struggle with and against one another to signal, secure, and deploy resources and power. Since then, migration researchers have increasingly relied on these concepts (Levitt and Schiller 2004; Erel 2010; Rye 2011; Kim 2018). For example, recalling Levitt and Schiller's (2004) work on transnational migration, this is a type of social field that overlaps, competes with, and has important implications for many other fields and dynamics such as identity, belonging, responsibility, loyalty, and more. Exactly how agents are predisposed to interpret and interact with one another and with wider society in certain ways (i.e., habitus) can and does lead to different migration decisions and behaviors, attitudes toward and treatment of migrants in both destination and origin settings, and numerous other features and dynamics of migration systems. Additionally, the ability of migrants to mobilize economic, political, and social capital to embark on their journeys and settle in and into host communities is shaped by and subsequently shapes social fields, habitus, and capital in ways that can and do give rise to social divisions (e.g., by class or caste) that can exert considerable influence on migration outcomes.

Characteristics of Migrants and Migrations

Narrowing our earlier focus on the attributes of all agents to those of migrants in particular, the characteristics of migrants need to be approached from at least two vantage points: selection and composition. By selection, we mean the characteristics associated with self-

selection into migration (Borjas 1987), as well as those associated with being selected into migration, e.g., by virtue of migration policy (de Haas, Natter and Vezzoli 2018), relative to the characteristics of non-migrants in the same or some comparable group (cohort, migrant-sending area, etc.). By composition, we mean the characteristics of migrants relative to one another. From both vantage points, human capital characteristics (education, skills, earnings, etc.) have been well-studied and are particularly important given the strong economic motivations for migration; however, the list of characteristics (age, gender, race, ethnicity, caste, health, disability, social networks, etc.) is long and growing (O'Neal et al. 2016; Polavieja, Fernández-Reino and Ramos 2018).

In addition to the characteristics of migrants, the characteristics of migrations are important to examine in their own right. Unlike migrants who are a particular type of agent — namely, those who have changed in their [primary or usual] place of residence between two time points — migrations are transition events that can occur at any time and open up additional lines of inquiry. For example, Rogers and Castro (1981) highlighted and mathematically described highly consistent age patterns of migration. And Massey, Goldring and Durand (1994) showed how the timing of migration can vary in systematic ways within and across communities. Of course, exploring similarities and differences in migration remains limited because doing so requires detailed information on not only the occurrence of transition events, but also on their timing, sequencing, duration, and more. It is also important to study migration transitions in relation to other types of events such as life course transitions that include entries into and exits from school, work, unions, parenthood, etc.

Causes, Consequences, and Mechanisms of Migration

The fifth element of the MIG is the causes, consequences, and mechanisms of migration. Regarding the causes of migration, two findings are clear from past and current research. First, there are many overlapping causes that operate at multiple levels simultaneously and interact with one another (Massey et al. 1993, 1999; Groth et al. 2020). Second, for a given cause or set of causes, there is no “monolithic and unidirectional migratory response” given the differential attributes (agency, vulnerability, etc.) of the specific agents and places involved (Gray and Wise 2016, 556). As such, assuming and prioritizing heterogeneity and differentiation is, and must continue to be, a key starting point for research on the causes of migration.

If the causes of migration are heterogeneous and differentiated, so, too, are the consequences of migration. First, given that migration is an inherently spatial process (Roseman 1971), it is necessary to distinguish between the consequences of migration for agents and places in both migrant-sending areas and migrant-receiving areas, as well as in transit and intermediary areas in between (Conway 1980; DeWaard, Curtis and Fussell 2016). Second, as with the causes of migration, the consequences of migration depend on the differential attributes of the agents and places involved. Third, the consequences of migration span a diverse set of domains that include, for example, education and work, health and wellness, civic and political participation, and more (Waters and Pineau 2015; Pinillos 2022). Finally, it is worth noting that, despite the use of different terms — and the unique histories of these terms — such as assimilation, integration, and incorporation to describe the consequences of migration, it is important to continually interrogate and communicate what is meant by these terms given that definitions, understandings, and uses have changed and will continue to change over time (Brubaker 2001; Alba and Nee 2005).

Naturally, research on the causes and consequences of migration raise questions about the pathways and mechanisms involved (Garip 2012; Bakewell et al. 2016). For example, as Nawrotzki and Bakhtsiyarava (2017) showed in their study of climate-induced migration in Senegal and Burkina Faso, while climate stressors have heterogeneous effects on migration, closer examination reveals the importance of agricultural pathways and mechanisms that, in the case of Senegal, involve differences in groundnut production across the country and, in Burkina Faso, the extent to 12 International Migration Review 0(0) which the growing season overlaps with temperature and precipitation extremes. Focusing on India, Kenya, Namibia, and Ghana, Tebboth et al. (2023) showed that mobility is ubiquitous and allows agents to manage climatic and non-climatic risks through novelty (risks gained or lost), modification (risks attenuated or accentuated), or no change at all. Together, these results point to three broad trajectories — upward, downward, and stable — that depend on agents' abilities to manage risk, expand their space to adapt, and negotiate structural constraints (policies, access to credit, etc.). The key takeaway, then, is that research on the mechanisms of migration is necessary for understanding how even the same causes or consequences of migration can and do work very differently across agents and places, as well as over time.

Scales, Zonings and Dimensions

Beyond acknowledging that the causes, consequences, and mechanisms of migration are many and diverse, migration researchers must attend to related issues of scales, zonings, and dimensions. Migration is defined in different ways, with spatiotemporal dimensions being particularly important. For example, Ravenstein's (1889) laws of migration include that most migrations tend to be short distance moves and that longer moves involve big urban destinations, raising questions about the distinction between migration and mobility (Faist 2013). Bilsborrow (2016, 111, emphasis ours) defined migration as "(1) a change in the place of usual residence, which also involves (2) crossing a recognized political/administrative border." However, in some studies, migration is defined with respect to any change in residence, with no regard for political/administrative borders (Bell et al. 2015).

Beyond conceptualization, available global data infrastructure usually permits measuring migration as changes in residence that cross a particular administrative boundary (Riosmena and Balk 2024). Likewise, migrations otherwise measured at finer spatial scales can be categorized in particular ways (as e.g., rural vs. urban, or inter- vs. intraregional) based on substantive criteria, sample size, or data disclosure limitations (DeWaard, Johnson and Whitaker 2019).

With respect to temporal scales, scholars have called for better understanding of migration trajectories, while others question whether long sequences of migrations are as interconnected as implied in these descriptions (Mandić 2022). Simply by virtue of exposure, longer temporal intervals (e.g., five years versus one year) are associated with more migration, with prior migrations and the duration of these moves associated with less subsequent migration (Land 1969; Bernard 2017). Dimension-wise, migration data are sometimes grouped into bins of legal or administrative recognition such "labor" or "family" migrant. Whatever the approach, it is important to not overly ascribe a singular character these moves that are otherwise affected and even confounded by their spatio-temporal resolution, zoning, or legal or other categories in which migration statistics are produced for various reasons.

Scales, zonings, and dimensions also matter for understanding the causes of migration. Massey et al. (1993, 454), in their assessment of the causes of migration Maharjan et al. 13 from different theories, noted that these “explanations are not necessarily contradictory unless one adopts the rigid position that causes must operate at one level and one level only.” Relatedly, recalling Tobler’s (1970: 236) first law of geography that “everything is related to everything else, but near things are more related than distant things,” migration is a spatial process that necessarily connects places and the agents therein to one another (Roseman 1971). As such, going beyond unidimensional approaches to migration, Rogers (1995) and others have advocated for multi-dimensional approaches to migration, taking as their starting point bilateral place-to-place migration flows, which ultimately reflect underlying interconnections and interdependencies between places and the agents residing in them (e.g., see Singh and Basu 2020).

Methods and Data

The previous subsection feeds into and opens up another component of the MIG, which is that of methods and data in migration research. Importantly, we do not advocate for any particular type or types of migration methods or data, and we refer readers to the work of others who have done so (e.g., see Beauchemin and Schoumaker 2016). Instead, acknowledging and appreciating that “one’s weaknesses are the other’s strengths, yielding a body of data with greater reliability and more internal validity,” our starting point is one of multiplicity, triangulation, and integration, and our focus is on ensuring scientific and technical rigor and best practices within and across studies (Massey and Zenteno 2000, 766).

Toward this end, three considerations are paramount: availability, quality, and comparability. Working backwards, comparability refers to whether and the extent to which migration methods and/or data are comparable to one another. Data from official sources are often not comparable to one another, despite, for example, long standing recommendations on defining migration and migrants by the United Nations (1998), as countries collect and publish data to suite their policy needs within the capabilities of their budgets and infrastructure for collecting statistical information on the population. An array of other data sources, including surveys, administrative data, and digital trace data have added further complexity to comparability issues. Differences in migration data have motivated researchers to develop methods to estimate harmonized and complete data. These overlapping data and methods call attention to comparability, which should be interpreted as a call for researchers to understand and communicate the reasons why different migration methods and/or data are not comparable to one another to highlight the added value of each. And, while comparability is often not the main objective in qualitative studies on migration, methods such as Qualitative Comparison Analysis (QCA) are increasingly being used to collate and compare evidence from different settings (Czaika and Godin 2022).

For a given type of method and/or data, quality refers to whether and the extent to which it reflects the highest standards and best practices. For example, Barglowski 14 International Migration Review 0(0) (2018) laid out several quality considerations for case selection and sampling in qualitative migration research. Bell et al. (2002) conducted a similar inventory and assessment with respect to quantitative measures of migration, while Abel and Cohen (2019) introduced a battery of validation assessments when comparing estimated of global migration flows. Schewel et al. (2023, 13) likewise compared and contrasted different

modelling approaches for forecasting climate-driven migration, noting that, still in their infancy, these are “fraught with uncertainty and adding the dimension of climate change only compounds that uncertainty.”

Finally, while availability can be construed very narrowly to mean the availability of a particular type of migration data, e.g., on migration intentions (see DeWaard et al. 2022), our use of the term here also refers to the need for migration researchers to appreciate and understand — that is, be aware of, conversant in, and ultimately able to translate across — the diversity of methods and data in migration research to comprehensively and wholistically answer existing and emergent questions in ways that, as we discuss below, have a strong and increasing eye toward real-world impacts and change.

Disciplines and Areas

Given the previous component of the MIG, while disciplinary and area approaches to migration research are abundant and important (White 2016), it is more and increasingly important to use and leverage these approaches in connected and integrated ways that are sometimes described as multi-, inter-, or trans-disciplinary (Willekens et al. 2016; Maharjan et al. 2020; Brettell and Hollifield 2015). This is so because, as Mead (1972, 289) once remarked, the migration “landscape in all its beauty, sometimes gentle, sometimes terrible, cannot be seen fully by any one” discipline or area. As such, whether initially anchored in a given discipline or area and then extending out from there (Boswell and Mueser 2008), or starting with something more multi-, inter-, and/or trans-disciplinary from the outset (Hajro et al. 2023), the trend for migration research and researchers in and through the twenty-first century must be one of continued disciplinary and area de-siloing.

Sectors and Stakeholders

Although it probably goes without saying in light of everything discussed thus far, the diversity of sectors and stakeholders is also important in migration research and should be prioritized. As the World Health Organization (WHO 2023) recently noted, “[a]ddressing the complexity of migration and displacement should be based on [a] whole-of-society” approach that includes research and researchers in the academy, government, non-governmental and non-profit organizations, for-profit businesses, and more at all levels from global to local. In doing so, it is important to acknowledge that sectors and stakeholders are both enabled and constrained by their unique positionalities, attributes, relationships, and contexts. These structure Maharjan et al. 15 their encounters as they work with, and struggle against, one another in social fields characterized by differential access to and accumulation of resources and power. Additionally, as those who work in multi-, inter-, and/or trans-disciplinary spaces know well, it is vitally important that migration researchers are conversant in and able to translate across different starting points, approaches to, and even vocabularies used to describe migration within and across sectors and stakeholders. Constituents in this diverse landscape all possess unique expertise, whether based in research, training, or practical experience. Importantly, while not all have the expertise, ability, mandate, or even desire to conduct research, each exerts agency within the shared migration space. By considering the range vantage points of other constituents, researchers may therefore identify new and important issues and questions with the potential to affect significant change from angles that they alone may not normally perceive or have access to.

Real-World Impacts and Change

While the MIG attends to scientific and technical rigor and best practices in migration research, it is not sufficient to stop here with what might simply be described as knowledge for knowledge's sake. While knowledge for knowledge's sake is important, we live in a world where migration research without corresponding real-world impacts and change, or at least attempting to make a dent in this area, is not only insufficient, but a disservice. As such, this component of the MIG is intended to call attention to at least two interrelated features that migration researchers must increasingly prioritize.

The first is a clear sense of whether and how one's research might be used, for what, and by whom. The second, which precedes the first, is a guiding theory of change. To provide just one example, focusing on migrant workers, the International Organization for Migration (IOM 2018) developed and disseminated a theory of change with the goal of ensuring "that all migrant workers have access to and can enjoy decent work through ethical recruitment channels." To pursue and achieve this goal, the IOM identified six priority areas — stakeholder knowledge, recruitment processes, recruitment fees, cultures of work in home and host countries, grievance and remediation processes, and governance — each of which was accompanied by an assessment of the status quo, barriers, and enablers, and a set of activities, outputs, and outcomes. While theories of change advanced by IOM and others (e.g., see Betts 2019) are a key component of the MIG, they are in short supply in migration research.

To zoom out here, two prominent global agreements related to migration with real world impacts are the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) 2030 and the GCM. Both were negotiated non-binding intergovernmental agreements, with the GCM particularly focused on the global governance of international migration. Although considered a key milestone offering a framework for governing international migration and leveraging migration for sustainable development, the 16 International Migration Review 0(0) non-binding nature of these agreements and the depoliticized narrative of the GCM have been extensively critiqued (Pécoud 2015; 2021; Höflinger 2020). There is a concern that these agreements fail to sufficiently respond to the needs of protection and institutional support given the rapidly changing context of politicization and securitization on and around migration (Desmond 2020; Murphy 2023). Successful implementation of the GCM will require more individual and collective engagement of migration researchers to better understand divergent worldviews and contradictory migration policies, as well as actively engage with different and diverse stakeholders to find common ground and coherence in migration governance.

Values and Ethics

Values and ethics in migration research are another fundamental component of the MIG and involve three starting considerations that extend some of the components discussed thus far. The first is that of positionality and reflexivity as intentional and honest exercises involving the recognition that researchers are part of the very groups, communities, and societies that they study. As such, any notion of epistemological objectivity must be abandoned and replaced with appeals to epistemological reflexivity. The second is the inclusion of a diverse set of agents, including migrants themselves, in migration research (Sayad 2004). And, third,

attention must be given to unintended impacts and change that can and will affect migrants and their communities in other ways.

Values and ethics are, or at least should be, a routine part of migration research and crop up in many different ways (Borjas 2016; Lamb 2016; Fradkin 2017; DeWaard and Nevarez 2023). For instance, as we discussed earlier, methodological nationalism is the tendency to take the unit of the nation-state at face value in migration research (Wimmer and Schiller 2003; Amelina and Faist 2012). Importantly, this tendency is not just a methodological inclination or decision, but also reflects an underlying value orientation anchored in historical and contemporary inequalities and inequities (e.g., between the Global North and Global South). Another way to say this is that while migration is, by definition, concerned with meaningful political and administrative physical boundaries (Bilsborrow 2016), there are a host of underlying and often taken for granted symbolic boundaries, which Lamont and Molnár (2002) describe as “conceptual distinctions, interpretive strategies, [and] cultural traditions,” that are often at play and reflect both subtle and not so subtle sets of values and ethics.

Uncertainty and Unknowns

Because migration is a complex system coupled with other complex systems, there is inherent uncertainty and corresponding unknowns in terms of future patterns and outcomes that are both foreseeable and unforeseeable. Foreseeable uncertainty (i.e., known unknowns) includes, for example, methodological challenges such as the Maharjan et al. 17 availability, quality, and comparability of migration data, as well as difficulties in attributing causality of migration outcomes. There is also contextual uncertainty regarding the actual and potential drivers of future migration patterns, such as whether the international community will meet their emissions reduction commitments under the Paris Climate Agreement, whether the Sustainable Development Goals will be met, and whether wealthy countries with aging populations will open up to receive more immigrants, as well as asylum seekers and refugees, or continue on their current restrictive trajectories.

Less often discussed in migration research is unforeseeable uncertainty (i.e., unknown unknowns). There is an unstated assumption in migration research that migration behavior and patterns in the future — including their underlying causes — will be similar to those of the past and present. This is a shaky assumption, and we encourage researchers to speculate more broadly on alternative future pathways. For example, what would economies — and therefore labor migration — look like in a world where fiat currencies are devalued and bitcoin or equivalent e-currencies take their place? There is little to no historical precedent for this, but this is a possible, perhaps even probable future. Similarly, what would migration look like in a world where countries are unwilling or unable to enforce their borders? Or, to take a hopeful example, in a world where gender-based violence ceases, how might this impact patterns of female (and male) migration? Still another example concerns the exponential growth of ICTs and tools such as artificial intelligence (AI), which have already impacted and will increasingly impact every aspect of life, including migration research itself (Beduschi 2021; Nalbandian 2022).

Interactive Intersections of the MIG in and through the Twenty-first Century

As mentioned earlier, the MIG is an interactive intersectional organizing framework for migration research. Figure 1 illustrates the intersectional nature of the MIG whereby each of the 12 components are viewed as necessarily affecting and affected by one another. In contrast, the interactive nature of the MIG might be less self-evident. To help understand this feature, it is helpful to recall Desmond and Emirbayer's (2009, 350) observation about interactive intersectionality, namely that "the best metaphor...may not be that of crisscrossing roads but of a web...of relations," perhaps in the style of something like a trampoline. Viewing Figure 1 in this light, if the intersectional nature of the MIG means that each element is connected to every other element, implying that the trampoline is strongest when interconnections are maximized, the interactive nature of the MIG is concerned with each jump and subsequent landing on the trampoline — or, as Ferree (2009, 91) put it, "any given situation" — and the unique set of reverberations that result.

Figure 1. Migration Intersections Grid (MIG).

Put differently, the interactive intersectional nature of the MIG means that its many interconnections and reverberations need to be viewed as unique manifestations that take on a potentially infinite number of forms over space and time depending on the specific people, populations, and places involved. In the following three subsections, we illustrate the MIG's interactive intersectional nature by applying it to several selected areas of migration research.

Gender and Migration

More than three decades ago, Pedraza (1991, 303) lamented the "neglected role of women in migration." Since then, research on gender and migration has come out of the shadows, leading to the awareness that migration is a highly "gendered phenomenon that requires sophisticated theoretical and analytic tools" (Donato et al. 2006, 3). As a result, an impressive array of studies have emerged to significantly expand theoretical, methodological, and empirical work in this area (e.g., see Piper 2006; Nawyn 2010; Hondagneu-Sotelo 2011; Chindarkar 2012; Donato and Gabaccia 2015; Abel and Cohen 2019; Singh et al. 2019; Boyd 2021; Anastasiadou et al. 2023; Bircan and Yilmaz 2023). Some studies have traced how gender has emerged within specific [sub]disciplines and [sub]areas of migration research that include migrant care work, transnational families, and gendered analyses of migration policies (Herrera 2013). Others have focused explicitly on the gendered drivers and mechanisms and subsequent connections to women's economic migration and empowerment, gender relations and gendered social norms, and Figure 1. Migration Intersections Grid (MIG). Maharjan et al. 19 women "left-behind" by men's migration, among many other topics (Tienda and Booth 1991; Fleury 2016; Kanaiaupuni 2000; Choithani 2020).

One specific example of an interactive intersectional theme that has emerged concerns the feminization of migration (Pizarro 2007; Magliano and Domenech 2008; Piper and Yamanaka 2008; Donato and Gabaccia 2015; Tittensor and Mansouri 2017). In different ways over time, this body of research has challenged hegemonic narratives and discourses about male-dominated migration and shows how globalization, economic opportunity, and sociocultural shifts have led to corresponding changes in women's agency and gendered norms around women's (and men's) work. This has led to deep theorizing about gendered transnationalism and how migration is both a highly gendered experience and social field (Grasmuck and Pessar 1991; Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994). Research on gender and migration also shows that the feminization of migration is not a uniform story. Gilbertson (1995), Kofman (2020), and others have shown that many women remain highly vulnerable in the workforce because of pervasive contexts of discrimination, exploitation, harassment, low[er] pay, and gender-based violence.

Gender is only one of the axes along which migration and migrants can be studied and understood. It also intersects and interacts with a range of other characteristics such as age, race, ethnicity, caste, class, disability, and legal status at multiple levels to [re]shape highly variable migration patterns and outcomes (Bastia 2014; Donato, Piya and Jacobs 2014; Chaudhuri and Thimm 2019; Rao et al. 2019). And these interactive intersections can and do collide with many other phenomena, including crises of masculinity (Kukreja 2021). For instance, in India, Rai (2020, 261) showed that migration enables "the flexibility of masculinities" whereby returning labor migrant men deploy "protest masculinities" to subvert claims on their bodies and labor by elite men, which, importantly, are buttressed by the continued exploitation of women's labor, revealing the importance of considering both the contexts of gender and migration and the fields of play where agents encounter and struggle to signal, secure, and deploy resources and power.

Disruptions and Migration

Whether and how migration responds to disruptions and dislocations of different types is an age-old question, and the COVID-19 pandemic is just the latest in a string of examples of a disruption with unique consequences for migration and migrants (Chakraborty and Maity 2020; Guadagno 2020; Rajan 2020; Yüceşahin and Sirkeci 2020). For example, applying the MIG to examine COVID-19 disruptions and migration, it is possible to trace the three types of uncertainty and unknowns at the intersection of labor migration and public policy in South Asia. The first type of uncertainty and unknown concerns identification, or exactly which types of migrants inform policymaking. In South Asia, whereas international labor migration and migrants are governed by established institutional policies and mechanisms, internal labor migration and migrants are governed far less by them, 20 International Migration Review 0(0) which, during the COVID-19 pandemic, led to policy responses that were inadequate at best and absent at worst. For example, in India, policy ambiguity in the face of massive economic and social disruptions and dislocations caused by the COVID-19 pandemic left thousands of migrant workers to walk hundreds of kilometers on foot to return to their home communities (Rahman 2020). The absence of anticipatory, progressive, and empowering policies resulted in contexts and lived experiences marked and marred by the escalating stigmatization of internal labor migrants, which public authorities only sought to counter after the fact by referring to returning migrant workers as atithis, or guest workers. Importantly, this example suggests a larger set of questions about who is or qualifies as a

migrant, belonging, and deservingness, the answers to which vary over time and space and require highly contextualized orientations and approaches.

In addition to identification, there is uncertainty and corresponding unknowns with respect to formalization. As a place to start, formal and informal labor migration are not universally positive or negative. During the COVID-19 pandemic, formal systems in place for international and internal labor migration in South Asia and around the world significantly impeded and jeopardized the livelihoods of remittance dependent households (Uddin, Shrestha and Zwi 2024). Both formal and informal labor migration are an important lifeline for and contribute to resilience of livelihoods for many households (Tang and Li 2021). However, research in India found that families dependent on international migration were more severely impacted than those dependent on internal migration (Rajan et al. 2023). In light of this, there are important questions about whether and how informal labor migration is embedded in formal systems of labor migration as a middle path to ensure adaptation, protection, and other positive outcomes for migrants. One side effect might be the [de]stigmatization of migrants, particularly informal migrants, and, the recognition and appreciation of the many benefits (e.g., remittances) that informal labor migration brings.

Closely related are questions of integration. For migrant workers, labor market segmentation in migrant-receiving areas often mirrors segmentation in migrantsending areas, with migrants discriminated against vis-à-vis non-migrant workers across skill level. Migrants, particularly less-skilled migrants, are often engaged in precarious work with little in the way of occupational safety nets. This precarity was on full display during the COVID-19 disruption, which saw significant losses of jobs and wages among migrant laborers (Che, Du and Chan 2020), and their exclusion from social protections (Kikkawa et al. 2020). Of course, this state of affairs is not inevitable. Indeed, as research on migrant labor in the brick sector in Nepal shows, carefully designed and targeted policies and practices, e.g., the Federation of Nepal Brick Industries' Social Code of Conduct (ICIMOD 2019; FNBI 2020), have contributed immensely to improved labor conditions and protections, and economic productivity. Thus, with eye toward realizing real-world impacts and change per the MIG, a key challenge for migration research is to continue to elucidate the many detailed contours of decent work and just transitions for the migrant workers in the twenty-first century.

Retreats from Globalization and the Politics of Migration

At a December 2023 rally in the State of New Hampshire, former US President Donald J. Trump remarked that immigrants are “poisoning the blood of our country.” While historians have marshalled an abundance of evidence showing that such rhetoric and xenophobia are baked in to the very fabric of governments and societies (Lee 2019), something about this current moment feels different (Levesque and DeWaard 2021). The same can be said for migration research. Reflecting on his 1998 book, *Worlds in Motion: Understanding International Migration at the End of the Millennium*, as a discussant at the 2023 annual meeting of the Population Association of America, Douglas S. Massey noted how the development and integration of migration theories at the close of the twentieth century took the backdrop of globalization as a given.⁵ However, the pendulum has begun to swing the other way, with retreats from globalization and corresponding embraces of nationalism,

⁵ See <https://events.rdmobile.com/Events/Details/16223>.

protectionism, and isolationism increasingly occurring in all corners of the globe (McLeman 2019).

The apparent retreat from globalization raises many concerns and questions given that migration — and labor migration in particular — has typically been understood one of three main types of flows along with the growing circulation of capital and goods in the global age (Massey 2001; Czaika and de Haas 2014; Dickinson 2016). Among these, just as we noted earlier that political science and “political scientists came late to the study of migration” and the politics of migration (Hollifield and Wong 2015, 227), other disciplines and areas have neglected the politics of migration. For example, according to Waldinger (2018, 1411), “the sociology of migration [has] left us unprepared” to address the calcifying liberal dilemma between two sides, each of which gives a different set of weights to, on one hand, liberalism, and, on the other hand, democracy. The end result is standstill, and the doubling down on one’s position as people compete on and across multiple fields for power and as notoriety by any means appears necessary regardless of how cruel (Beltrán 2020; Bashovski 2022).

This state of affairs, as well as the inherent uncertainty and corresponding unknowns, is a wake-up call. First, it is increasingly important to take human-centered approaches that prioritize agents’ perceptions, lived experiences, and positionalities, particularly those of the most vulnerable. Second, recalling our earlier point about real-world impacts and change, it is high time that theories of change and corresponding downstream actions accompany theoretical, methodological, and empirical migration research. Third, and finally, underlying all of the above is the need for continued commitments and vigilance on the set of values and ethics that inform and guide migration research, as well as how these are expressed in, for example, the GCM (United Nations 2018).

Conclusion

This special issue of the *International Migration Review* provides a unique opportunity to look back at migration research in order to look forward. In this paper, after a brief high-level scoping review of different directions of travel in migration research, we developed and provided a new comprehensive organizing framework, the MIG, to inform and guide migration research in and through the remainder of the twenty-first century. Truth be told, the 12 components and the interactive intersectional nature of the MIG are likely — hopefully — not new to most readers. However, what is new is our attempt to encourage and insist that these components and their intersections increasingly occupy the front of mind of migration researchers to ensure that migration research is and remains as inclusive, rigorous, and impactful as possible.

While we have done our best to be comprehensive and representative, the contents of this paper, including research and researchers cited along the way, are incomplete, which ultimately reflects the impressive breadth and depth of migration research. As such, we hope that and encourage others to build on our work by, for example, clarifying and expanding on what we have written here; bringing other topics, issues, and questions not covered here to the fore; and, of course, disagreeing with and challenging our thinking. Finally, we also hope that readers will see that we have tried to practice what we preach by assembling a diverse group of collaborating co-authors who, in addition to different disciplines and areas, interests, and expertise, reflect sectors and stakeholders, geographies, and career stages.

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