

Skilled Gambian Migrants: How Embeddedness Theory can explain their Decision to Stay Abroad or Leave

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Abstract

Background: The aim of this study was to explore why skilled Gambians go abroad and why under similar circumstances some return while others do not. **Methods:** 41 skilled Gambians both in The Gambia and abroad were interviewed about their decisions to stay abroad or not. Nvivo software was used to test for associations between home/host country embeddedness and the decision to stay abroad or not. **Results:** Most skilled Gambians go abroad to pursue education or look for greener pastures, but they all have the financial ability to travel. However, their eventual return is associated with their degree of home/host country embeddedness. Those with the highest level of host country embeddedness tend to stay abroad while those with highest level of home embeddedness are more likely to return home. **Conclusion:** When considering strategies to counter skilled Gambian migration, the Gambian government must consider their degree of home/host country embeddedness to facilitate the eventual return of its skilled people.

Introduction

Population mobility is an enduring feature of humankind, which has led to the movement of people across international boundaries. The resulting international migration affects both developed and developing countries. A recent OECD (2015) publication estimated that there were nearly 244 million migrants worldwide in 2015, around 66 percent of whom were living in developed countries and the remaining 34 percent were living in developing countries. The report also acknowledged that there has been a rapid growth in the rate of international migration over the past decade. This rise has been higher for highly skilled migrants who move from developing to developed countries (Arslan, et al., 2014; Ngoma & Ismail, 2013; Shah, 2011). While skilled migration has been accelerated by labor shortages in developed countries (Watanabe, 1969; Ngoma & Ismail, 2013), the wage differences and better employment conditions have further encouraged highly skilled workers to migrate to developed countries for employment (Ngoma & Ismail, 2013; Shumba & Mawere, 2012; Shah, 2011).

The general problem is that highly skilled workers are migrating to more developed countries leaving their native countries with fewer skilled workers (Ngoma & Ismail, 2013; Watanabe, 1969). This skilled migration is called “brain drain” and contributes to the human capital deficiency that often characterizes poor developing countries

(Cañibano & Woolley, 2015; Loubaki, 2012; Beine, Docquier, & Rapoport, 2008). This has been recognized as a phenomenon that impedes human capital development in developing countries (Artuc, Docquier, Özden, & Parsons, 2015; Cañibano & Woolley, 2015; Ngoma & Ismail, 2013; Loubaki, 2012; Shah, 2011). The issue of highly skilled migration is a growing concern, even for more developed countries, as their educated young people leave for jobs in wealthier nations – a trend that is likely to persist (Irvani, 2011; Forstenlechner, 2010; Tung & Lazarova, 2006).

The migration of highly skilled people affects almost all African countries and the case of The Gambia is of particular interest as it faces one of the highest levels of brain drain in West Africa (Gajigo & Verdier-Chouchane, 2015; UNCTAD, 2012; Arslan, et al., 2014). This is especially true among highly qualified Gambians as almost two thirds of Gambian graduates are living and studying abroad (Arslan, et al., 2014; Docquier, 2014; Ndulu, 2004). That number will likely be increasing as the number of highly skilled Gambians abroad tripled in just 10 years (Arslan, et al., 2014).

Earlier research has examined the reasons why people leave their country of origin to move to a new host country (Chand, 2008; Ngoma & Ismail, 2013; Cañibano & Woolley, 2015). Despite there being a lack of economic opportunity and/or political instability, it is worth noting that under similar circumstances some people do not migrate (King, 2012; De Haas, 2010; Arango, 2004). For instance, the number of Gambians graduating in the country has been rising, reaching as high as 3520 in 2016 (UTG, 2016) and The Gambia's unemployment rate for graduates remaining in The Gambia reached an all-time high of 29.80 percent in 2013, indicating a high unemployability in the country (Kasseh, 2018). In light of these shared circumstances, it is intriguing to know why some skilled Gambians stay home while others go abroad, and furthermore, why many stay abroad while others return (King, 2012; De Haas, 2010; Arango, 2004). The purpose of this research is to examine the reasons highly skilled Gambian migrants stay abroad or return. Therefore, this study addresses the research question: Why would some skilled Gambians return while others would not?

Methodology

Background information on migrants interviewed abroad and back home

Field interviews provided us with a wealth of empirical data regarding the migration experiences of skilled Gambian migrants, both for those staying abroad and those who have returned home. Here we provide some background information regarding the participants of this study and the research sites. A short profile is drawn from the migrants who participated in the interviews conducted abroad or online, and the returned migrants who participated in the interviews while in The Gambia. The main findings are presented in the next section of the chapter.

Respondent profile

In total, 41 interviews were conducted with 23 migrants and 18 returned migrants. Among the migrants interviewed 18 were females and 23 were male (Table 1). A high proportion of male migrants were interviewed both abroad and online in the abroad

round of the interviews. The age of the interviewees varied between 25 and 65 years; half were in their 40s and the majority were married.

The education of the respondents ranged from bachelor's degrees to PhDs, but most had attained a master's degree or higher. Almost all the participants went abroad to pursue higher education. At the time of the interviews the great majority were employed, some were self-employed and some, however minimal, were unemployed.

Table 1: Characteristics of migrants who participated in the interviews by destination country. Sample description (n=41)

Interview	Migrant types	Age	Gender	Host country	Marital status	Level of education	Interview location	Length of stay abroad
1	Returnee	35-44	F	UK	DV	Bachelor	Gambia	2 yrs.
2	Returnee	25-34	F	USA	MA	Bachelor	Gambia	4 yrs.
3	Migrant	25-34	F	UK	MA	Bachelor	Online	3 yrs.
4	Migrant	35-44	F	Norway	MA	Master	Norway	16 yrs.
5	Migrant	35-44	M	USA	MA	Master	Online	19 yrs.
6	Returnee	45-54	M	UK	MA	Master	Gambia	7 yrs.
7	Returnee	25-34	F	USA	MA	Master	Gambia	8 yrs.
8	Migrant	25-34	F	USA	MA	Master	Online	11 yrs.
9	Migrant	25-34	M	UK	MA	Master	Online	2.5 yrs.
10	Migrant	35-44	F	USA	MA	PhD	Online	11 yrs.
11	Returnee	35-44	F	UK	MA	Master	Gambia	4.5 yrs.
12	Migrant	35-44	M	USA	MA	Master	Online	16 yrs.
13	Returnee	55-65	M	Sweden	MA	Bachelor	Gambia	41 yrs.
14	Migrant	45-54	F	UK	DV	Master	Online	17 yrs.
15	Returnee	45-54	M	UK	MA	Master	Gambia	17 yrs.
16	Returnee	35-44	M	Sweden	MA	PhD	Gambia	12 yrs.
17	Migrant	45-54	F	Sweden	MA	Master	Online	32 yrs.
18	Migrant	45-54	F	Norway	MA	Master	Norway	26 yrs.
19	Migrant	35-44	M	Sweden	MA	Bachelor	Online	3 yrs.
20	Migrant	35-44	M	UK	MA	Bachelor	Online	19 yrs.
21	Migrant	25-34	F	Sweden	S	Bachelor	Online	5 yrs.

22	Returnee	45-54	M	UK	MA	Master	Gambia	13 yrs.
23	Migrant	35-44	M	Norway	MA	Master	Online	9 yrs.
24	Migrant	25-34	F	UK	S	PhD	Online	28 yrs.
25	Migrant	25-34	F	USA	MA	Bachelor	Online	2.6 yrs.
26	Returnee	45-54	F	USA	MA	Master	Gambia	16 yrs.
27	Migrant	45-54	M	UK	DV	Master	Online	15 yrs.
28	Returnee	55-65	M	Norway	MA	PhD	Gambia	12 yrs.
29	Returnee	55-65	M	USA	MA	Master	Gambia	9 yrs.
30	Migrant	35-44	F	Norway	S	Bachelor	Norway	17 yrs.
31	Returnee	45-54	F	UK	MA	Bachelor	Gambia	30 yrs.
32	Migrant	45-54	M	Norway	MA	Master	Online	26 yrs.
33	Returnee	55-65	M	Sweden	WD	Master	Gambia	20 yrs.
34	Returnee	55-65	M	Norway	MA	Master	Gambia	11 yrs.
35	Returnee	25-34	M	Norway	MA	Master	Gambia	2 yrs.
36	Migrant	35-44	M	USA	MA	Master	Online	14 yrs.
37	Migrant	55-65	M	Norway	MA	Bachelor	Norway	34 yrs.
38	Returnee	45-54	M	USA	MA	PhD	Gambia	18 yrs.
39	Returnee	45-54	M	USA	MA	Master	Gambia	11 yrs.
40	Migrant	45-54	M	Sweden	MA	PhD	Online	28 yrs.
41	Migrant	25-34	F	Sweden	MA	Master	Online	20 yrs.

Note. DV: divorced; F: female; M: male; MA: married; S: single; WD: widow.

Data collection

Data was collected from March 2017 to September 2017. During the data gathering, the researcher travelled to Norway to conduct interviews with migrants staying abroad and then to The Gambia for returnees. As for migrants residing in other countries, interviews were done online due to geographical location and associated budgetary constraints. Snowball sampling was used to recruit the interview participants from their acquaintances (Creswell, 2003). Thus, contact with migrants in a particular host country enabled the author to establish connections with other participants who met the highly skilled Gambian migrant profile. Potential interviewees, referred by the initial participants in each host country, were approached via email or phone. Approximately

45 skilled migrants were contacted, resulting in 41 interviews, a number that lies within the range of previous qualitative studies (Saunders, et al., 2018; Vasileiou, Barnett, Thorpe, & Young, 2018). Twenty-two interviews were conducted face-to-face (Norway 4; The Gambia 18) and 19 were conducted using online means. The face-to-face interviews took place at various locations according to the preferences of the participants. With the exception of one (acquaintance), the researcher did not know the interviewees beforehand, dates and locations for the face-to-face interviews were fixed via telephone conversations and the participants first met the interviewer during the face-to-face the interviews. As for the online interviewees, the interviewer and interviewee did not meet physically. The interviewees received a detailed explanation of the purpose of the study and its context before the interviews were conducted. Twenty-three of the interviewees were staying abroad while 18 had returned to The Gambia. Table 1 provides further details about the interviewees' profiles.

An interview guide was prepared, and all the interviews were conducted in English. The choice to use English was due to language barriers existing between different dialects in The Gambia, which made English the only common language for all parties involved and eliminated the need for translation. The interview was semi-structured, designed to encourage the participants to elucidate their decisions to stay abroad or not using their own words. Pilot interviews were performed with the first couple of interviewees who were particularly interested in the topic when contacted. The interviews were recorded with the consent of the participants to enable accurate review and reflection of their experiences regarding the topics covered in the interview guide. According to Miles & Huberman (1994), the aim of interview guides and probing questions is to allow the respondents to shape their stories. The duration of each interview was between 30-60 minutes. In each case, the interview questions were adjusted to take into account the participants' personal experiences and their interpretation.

Findings

The findings of this study reveal interesting decision patterns among skilled Gambian migrants' decisions to stay abroad or not. When asked why they would eventually return, the participants were probed about their decision to eventually return home. Each of the 23 current migrants gave unique answers to the question which could be divided into two categories: home embeddedness and host country embeddedness.

Home embeddedness

Factors such as links (formal or informal connections between a person and people from their home country), fit (the perceived compatibility or comfort with their home country) and sacrifice (the perceived cost in material or psychological benefits that may be forfeited by leaving their home country) embed people to their home country. Additionally, career embeddedness and family embeddedness are two sub-categories that also embed migrants to their home country.

Fit home

Home is a construct considered by most to be important in a person's life, and as expected, our study revealed that most interviewees considered fit home as a major

dimension in their decision to return. They stated that the perceived compatibility or comfort with their home country could make them return. This kind of feeling is described in the following quote: 'I am a home boy, I don't like travelling too much and I am not also, I like to believe I do not believe in material life' (Returnee UK, male, 7 years abroad).

Furthermore, most returnees thought that this sense of compatibility with their home country was what drove them to return. Some even stated that despite their being war in the country they would come back, for example:

Even if there was war in The Gambia I would have stayed in The Gambia because my mind was fixed. That is how fixated I was to The Gambia (Returnee UK, male, 17 years abroad).

Almost all returnees who participated in this study shared views that suggest a high fit home. They asserted that their sense of comfort or compatibility with their home country played a major role in their decision to return. Furthermore, it served as a motivator for their continued stay at home and a constraint against any attempt to re-migrate.

Sacrifice home

On top of the recognized importance of fit home, skilled Gambian migrants' decisions to return home are also influenced by sacrifice home. These participants argued that their decisions to return home were based on the perceived cost of forfeiting material or psychological benefits when leaving their home country. These costs include leaving a family behind, sending children born abroad back home, living a stressful life abroad and so forth. These sentiments are echoed by one interviewee and the example below is a perfect illustration:

I think I would have stayed, I would not have migrated because it is very difficult to live in somebody else's country and you know migrating I have to leave my kids behind (Returnee UK, female, 16 years abroad).

Contrasting with the reasons that motivate migration, the participants described in detail the perceived benefits they forfeit due their decision to leave their home country. These home sacrifices, which exist in both groups, influenced the decision of most of the returnees in their decision to go back home.

Family embeddedness

Skilled Gambian migrants pointed out 'family embeddedness' as another reason for their decision to return. According to most of the returnees interviewed, the decision to go back home was influenced by their attachment to family remaining in their home country or the need to look after older parents. Additionally, some returnees alluded to the importance of raising their offspring in their home country. The next quotation portrays the importance of family embeddedness by a returnee from Norway:

The return was easy, I was tired of being there {Norway} so I just come back home. My return was so simple because I was already married, my wife was here {The

Gambia} and I had one daughter and they were both here {The Gambia} (Returnee Norway, male, 12 years abroad).

This sentiment was reverberated by others who went further to state that they prefer to raise their child in The Gambia to inculcate in them with their religion as illustrated by a female returnee in the quotation below:

You know the different culture and stuff, and the fact that it is very difficult for them to learn the religion when they are in the US it is not as easy as it is over here. I think when migrating, um, you don't have that control over your kids that you have over here in The Gambia than in the US because they have different cultures and peer pressure and things like that (Returnee USA, male, 11 years abroad).

Even though it is widely considered very important, family embeddedness does not necessarily constitute an immediate reason for skilled migrants to return, but it can have strong influence on the decision. In some cases looking after older parents was the motivating trigger to go back home, while in other cases child rearing in the home country was the primary influence prompting return. Skilled Gambian migrants do not go abroad with the intention to stay forever, they already have a general plan to go back home, but the plan can be expedited when the need to be close to one's family arises.

In summary, our study found that the level of home embeddedness plays an important role in the decision to return by skilled Gambian migrants. Fit home, sacrifice home, and family embeddedness respectively constitute the main dimensions that push migrants to return home or plan an eventual return.

Host country embeddedness

Host country embeddedness refers to all the factors that entrench an individual to his or her host country. Concerning the dimensions of host country embeddedness that most influence the decisions of skilled migrants to stay abroad, the participants referred to factors such as links host, sacrifice host, fit host, and family abroad.

Links host

The majority of the interviewees stated that they had formal and non-formal relations connecting them to their host countries. Although the returnees also had links in their respective host countries, the migrants who were still living abroad had the tendency to develop more connections encouraging them to continue their sojourn abroad. Twenty of the 23 migrants mentioned having links in the host country. These links consisted of family and relatives living abroad as well as connections made during the migration process, at work or during their school days.

In fact, these social networks, consisting mostly of family or friends living abroad can be considered factors that consolidate the stay abroad by providing social connections as portrayed in the following quotation: 'I have family members here and social connections, my high school friends some of them were already here before I came' (Migrant USA, female, 11 years abroad).

Some of the interviewees highlighted the importance of the social networks they have built during their stay abroad, which fostered their stay abroad. These quotations refer to the value of the networks built abroad:

The real outcomes are being able to go to school, getting the two degrees that I wanted for myself since I was young, making friends and building a community here for myself that I really value (Migrant USA, female, 11 years abroad).

The Participants also refer to social connections developed abroad as a gateway to their careers abroad. This is illustrated by a female migrant residing in Norway:

I am a Norwegian citizen and everything and I have settled and have my life here so I probably think like even if I decide to move back home, I am still going to be connected to Norway (Migrant Norway, female, 16 years abroad).

In summary, the presence of a family and social network in the host country plays an important role in both the decision to migrate as well as the decision to stay abroad or not. Such links were also reported by the returnees, who report maintaining relationships made in their former host countries, however the migrants tended to rely more on those networks in fostering their stay abroad. The participants generally recognize the benefits of belonging to such networks in terms of creating links, opening gates for career growth or other personal or development-related issues. The presence of these social networks is not only a pull factor for aspiring migrants but it is also a survival tool that migrants develop and use to integrate into the society of their host country and subsequently stay abroad.

Sacrifice host

The skilled Gambian migrants underline sacrifice host as the most important factor influencing their decision to stay abroad. These sacrifices are all the benefits migrants would forfeit if they choose to leave their host country. These sacrifices include social welfare systems, a comfortable life, opportunities abroad (e.g. career options), and so forth. The majority of migrants (17 out of 23) mentioned these sacrifices as the primary factors keeping them abroad. Despite their willingness to eventually return home, some migrants refer to the host sacrifices as a constraint on their decision to return; as the next quotation demonstrates: 'I never wanted to stay in America, I think America they have a way of keeping people here' (Migrant USA, female, 11 years abroad).

Another host sacrifice identified by the participants is the difficulty of leaving a host country. These difficulties can include factors such as leaving before retirement, giving up the welfare provided to one's family and a free education. A female migrant puts it as follows: 'In addition, some go after retirement. But also, because after working here for all these years you will want to secure yourself for the future in terms of insurance' (Migrant Norway, male, 34 years abroad).

While sacrifice host does not often constitute the sole reason for keeping migrants abroad, it is an important determinant. Forfeiting the benefits gained in a host country, like health care and free education in Scandinavian countries, is important to consider as the difficulty of securing those benefits at home may be formidable. In migration literature these sacrifices are called pull factors (Lee, 1966), but in the expatriation

literature the embeddedness theory explains these as sacrifices (Mitchell, Holtom, Lee, Sablynski, & Erez, 2001; Tharenou & Caulfield, 2010).

Fit host

Most skilled Gambian migrants mentioned 'fit host' as a determiner for their decision to stay abroad. They refer to feeling so compatible with their host country that they prefer it over their home country. Most of the migrants (15 out of 23) refer to it as their reason for staying abroad. Interestingly, the fit host is higher in women than men. It may be explained by the fact that we have more female migrants than male, or that female migrants feel more comfortable in the host country. The factors advanced by migrants who refer to fit host include professional and personal development, settling down, and liking a host country to name a few. The illustration below describes in detail how fit a female migrant is to her host country:

I think I have developed myself professionally and personally I have learned a lot of things that I would not have learned if I had stayed at home. I have met different kinds of people; I have travel to different countries and I have been able to take care of myself (Migrant Norway, female, 17 years abroad).

Another male migrant residing in Ireland reported that he actually feels like a stranger in The Gambia because he has been away for too long. So, he feels he fits better in his host country than The Gambia: 'Because if you stay in a country for 15 years, actually I know more about Ireland now than in The Gambia' (Migrant UK, male, 15 years abroad).

To summarize, host fit is the third reason why migrants choose to stay abroad. Feeling more comfortable in a host country coupled with having the opportunity to develop oneself are the factors that migrants think made them choose to not return to The Gambia and stay abroad which is sometimes referred to as a second home.

Family Abroad

Family abroad is the final reason influencing migrants' decisions to stay abroad. While only 2 returnees mentioned having a family abroad, 8 migrants listed family abroad as a reason for staying. Additionally, we noted that it is mainly the female migrants who stated family abroad as a reason. Five of the 8 female migrants mentioned having a family abroad and this can be explained by the fact that reuniting with family is the main concern when choosing a host country for women. If females migrate to join their family abroad, it is obvious that this would be a reason for their staying abroad as well. This finding goes in tandem with the migration literature, which purports that females migrate generally for family reunion (Güngör & Tansel, 2014). To this point, this female migrant residing in the UK reported that she has no choice but to stay with her husband which was her reason for migrating in the first place: 'Because I have started having family here, I am married to somebody who is staying so I don't have a choice but to stay with him' (Migrant UK, female, 3 years abroad).

Despite the gender disparity, both male and female migrants mentioned having a family abroad as a reason for their choice to stay abroad. They prefer staying with them to leaving them behind, thus their decision to stay abroad.

In summary, the home embeddedness and the host country embeddedness are two variables used in this study to help us differentiate between the stayers and the leavers. Host country embeddedness shows us why some migrants choose to stay abroad whereas home country embeddedness shows why some choose to return home. For the returnees, feeling compatible with the home country, sacrifice home and family embeddedness are the most important considerations when choosing to return home. Whereas the migrants living abroad cite having connections in the host country, sacrifice host, and family abroad as their reasons for staying abroad.

Discussion

This study revealed that economic reasons are not the sole factors pulling skilled Gambians out of The Gambia, other factors significantly influence their decisions to migrate and stay abroad or not. Apart from education, the most prevalent reasons for skilled Gambians to migrate are financial means to travel, looking for greener pastures, and the presence of a network abroad. The increasing rate of skilled migration is not only stimulated by The Gambia's previous lack of universities, but also by the quality of higher education abroad. Furthermore, there are other favourable conditions pushing skilled Gambians and their families out of The Gambia such as 'Tekki' or the optimism to become successful abroad, the host country attractiveness, and family reunion.

After a thorough analysis of the various motives for skilled Gambians to go abroad, financial means to travel was the deciding factor for the majority of skilled Gambians in our study, whether they had savings that allowed them to go abroad or they got assistance from their immediate family to pay for their trip. This finding is surprising as it contradicts the migration literature which generally considers African migration to be driven by poverty (Flahaux & De Haas, 2016).

Although the majority of research on migration cites the importance of a network abroad and the search for greener pastures as the main motives for migration (Asiedu & Nyarkoh, 2017; Mbah, 2017), our empirical findings do not support Flahaux & De Haas (2016) and the transition theory (Zelinsky, 1971) which, assert that African migration is poverty driven. Thus, finding that financial means to travel is a significant determinant in skilled migration is relevant because the financial ability to pay for travel and education abroad is a key factor pulling skilled Gambians abroad and may even influence their decision to remain and migrate to another country.

As for the embeddedness factors, the findings of this research support what Tharenou and Caufield (2010) stated, that when expatriates are strongly embedded in a host country, they are pulled to remain and consequently have little intent to leave. Consequently, the decision to remain in a host country or not, is often dependent on their degree of embeddedness.

This perception has implications for The Gambia and its skilled migrants because the Gambian government has undertaken numerous initiatives to facilitate brain-gain, skills circulation, and to counter the negative effects of brain-drain with the goal of accessing the expertise of skilled Gambians in the diaspora. This effort is necessary because, despite the increasing number of skilled migrants, the majority do not return

home and prefer to live and work abroad. This situation is likely to continue as the country is witnessing the departure of its skilled citizens (Kebbeh, 2013).

Moreover, as discussed in the theoretical framework, the degree of home/host country embeddedness leads skilled Gambian migrants to develop a strong enclave, to establish a solid network that influences the ultimate decision to either stay in the host country or return home. Thus, recent efforts by the Gambian government aim to attract Gambians from the diaspora, creating a migration strategy aimed at attracting the return of expertise and facilitating brain gain and skills circulation (Gambia Diaspora Directorate, 2018). This finding has important public policy implications and supports what Zanker and Altrogge (2017) have suggested that Gambian skilled emigrants have an important role to play due to the human capital and financial resources they have gained abroad.

It is then clear that skilled Gambian migrants' choices whether to return to The Gambia depend on their degree of home/host country embeddedness. Furthermore, job opportunities for Gambian migrants returning home is one of the recurrent explanations of their decision to return or not. This is portrayed as a combination of elements such as difficulty of finding work in the destination, failure to secure a well-paying job, hoping to find work at home, attachment to the family left behind, and perceived sacrifices in leaving their host country.

This study used a small number of structured interviews with skilled Gambian migrants in the United States, the UK, Norway, Sweden and returnees in The Gambia. Further research is needed to explore what factors would most influence skilled Gambian migrants' decisions to stay in these four developed countries or return home. For example, the Scandinavian countries had the lowest number of returnees, which may be due to the social welfare provided by Scandinavian countries. Thus, further work is needed to unravel why skilled Gambians often decide to remain in Scandinavian countries.

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