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Descriptive Finding

Expectations' predictive power regarding international return and onward migration of immigrants

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Expectations' predictive power regarding international return and onward migration of immigrants

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Abstract

BACKGROUND

Migration expectations and behaviour are almost exclusively analysed separately in the international migration literature, while the predictive power of migration expectations for migration behaviour has received little attention.

OBJECTIVE

We explore the association between migration expectations and actual emigration, distinguishing between return, onward, and back-and-forth movements, for immigrants in the Netherlands.

METHODS

Drawing on the Survey of Integration of Migrants 2015 matched with population register data from 2015 to 2020 (N = 4,158), we use descriptive statistics and multinomial logistic regression to investigate the association between 5-year emigration expectations and actual behaviour for immigrants in the Netherlands.

RESULTS

Twenty-seven per cent of immigrants who expected to return to their country of origin within five years did so. Among those who expected to stay, only 4% returned. Around 9% of those with onward migration expectations migrated onward, compared to below 3% for those with other migration expectations. Of those who expected to spend part of their time in their country of origin and part of their time in the Netherlands, 10% returned and 4% moved multiple times. Adjusting for sociodemographic variables, individuals

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who expected to return were 11 (2.42 coefficient) times more likely to return, while those who expected to migrate onward were 7 (2.06 coefficient) times more likely to do so than those not expecting to migrate.

CONTRIBUTION

This study contributes to migration research by examining the predictive power of immigrants' migration expectations in the Netherlands. Unlike previous work focused on the intentions and binary outcomes of staying versus leaving, we demonstrate that expectations such as return or onward migration are strong predictors of actual behaviour. By linking survey data with longitudinal register data, we provide an accurate measure of migration outcomes.

1. Introduction and background

Understanding the migration expectations of international migrants – whether to their country of origin or elsewhere – is important for two main reasons. First, it allows a better understanding of migrants' perceptions of their current circumstances in their country of residence. Second, it provides valuable insights into future migration behaviour, which is important for population projections and policymakers.

According to the classical Theory of Planned Behaviour, most behaviour is preceded by intentions, but not all intentions lead to behaviour (Ajzen 1985). The existing migration literature uses both intentions as a broad category and more detailed measures of expectations (Carling and Pettersen 2014). In the expanded Theory of Planned Behaviour, Ajzen (1991) argues that when the behaviour in question is not volitional, intentions are poor predictors, and measurements should involve a degree of perceived behavioural control. Warshaw and Davis (1985) argue that intentions and expectations are often treated as interchangeable in literature using the earlier versions of the Theory of Planned Behaviour. They also suggest that intentions are closely linked to expectations through measures of perceived behavioural control, even when this connection is not stated explicitly. They argue that expectations have a stronger predictive capacity than intentions because respondents who report expectations may consider their degree of volitional control as well as other factors that can affect their behaviour (Warshaw and Davis 1985). Based on a meta-analysis of the gap between intentions or expectations and actual behaviour, Armitage and colleagues (2015) indeed find that expectations have a stronger predictive capacity than intentions. Therefore, using migration expectations to predict actual behaviour has an advantage over using intentions or aspirations.

Due to a lack of data on the migration behaviour of immigrants, previous research has either relied on migrants' intentions or aspirations as a proxy for actual migration or

treated intentions separately from actual migration (Bonifazi and Paparusso 2019). Recently, studies have linked survey data with register data to study the association between intentions and internal mobility (de Groot, Mulder, and Manting 2008). To date, only four studies have used this design to examine the predictive power of intentions or plans for international migration outcomes. All four studies find a considerably greater likelihood of emigration among those intending to migrate than among those with no such intention, but the strength of this association varies. Wanner (2021) shows that over 80% of highly skilled migrants who intend to leave within two years do so within that period. Monti and Mussino (2021) employ a dichotomous outcome of staying in Sweden versus leaving and find that 10% of those intending to leave do so within 5 years. Van Dalen and Henkens' (2013) study of Dutch nationals leaving the Netherlands finds that 34% of those who intend to emigrate within five years do so within that period compared with less than 1% for those who do not intend to do so. Flahaux (2015) examine migrants in Europe from Senegal and the Democratic Republic of Congo, focusing on their return intentions upon arrival and subsequent migration behaviour. They find that deteriorating political and economic conditions in the country of origin along with restrictive visa policies lead many migrants who initially planned to return to remain instead. We build and expand on these studies by distinguishing between return, onward, and back-and-forth migration in terms of both expectations and actual emigration outcomes. In addition, our study contributes to the literature by analysing a heterogeneous immigrant population who spend different amounts of time in the country of residence to better understand how migration expectations and behaviour vary across sub-populations.

We address the following research question: To what extent do the migration expectations of immigrants in the Netherlands predict emigration behaviour? We answer this question using the Survey of Integration of Migrants (SIM), linked to the population register of Statistics Netherlands.

2. Data and methods

We use the 2015 edition of the Survey of Integration of Minorities (SIM) for the Netherlands, individually linked with the population register. Statistics Netherlands conducted the survey in 2015 among people with Turkish, Moroccan, Surinamese, Antillean, Somali, and Polish migration backgrounds (The Netherlands Institute for Social Research (SCP) 2015). The original sample comprised 5,778 individuals. Individuals whose income ($n = 80$) or final migration destination ($n = 10$) was missing were dropped from the final sample. From the SIM survey we further selected people born abroad, leaving a final analytical sample of 4,158. The response rate for each origin country was as follows: Turkey 50%, Morocco 46%, Suriname 46%, Antilles 48%,

Poland 45%, Somalia 37%. This dataset suits the research question as it can be linked with the register data to observe the actual behaviour that followed the stated expectations.

2.1 Variables

Our primary independent variable measuring emigration expectations is based on a question regarding 5-year expectations: Where do you think you will be in 5 years? The possible answers were (a) in the Netherlands, (b) in [country of origin], (c) in another country, (d) part-time in the Netherlands and part-time in [country of origin], (e) I do not know. This question was asked of all respondents without the option of skipping, so there are no missing values. The other independent variables are gender, education level, income, age, duration in the Netherlands, and country of origin (presented in Table 1).

Our dependent variable is the actual emigration behaviour observed annually in the population register up to 2020. The possible outcomes are (a) remaining in the Netherlands, (b) returning to the country of origin, (c) onward migration (to another foreign country), (d) multiple moves (see below), and (e) administrative removal. Administrative removal refers to persons whom the municipality removes from the population register after it is established that the address is unknown and the person cannot be contacted (CBS 2024). According to Bijwaard and Van Doeseelaar (2014), emigration is the most likely reason for such removals. De-registered persons appear in the system as having left. Their registration is reactivated if they return and re-register. This allowed us to track whether people who had left the Netherlands had subsequently returned. Anyone who left the Netherlands and returned within the observation period (2015–2020) is categorised as making multiple moves. It should be noted that this category of behaviour does not necessarily correspond with the part-time expectation category. Some respondents might alternate between the Netherlands and their country of origin without de-registering and re-registering. Other respondents alternate between the Netherlands and a third country that is not their origin (58 out of the 128 multiple moves).

2.2 Analytical method

We used multinomial logistic regression to study the association between expectations and outcomes, adjusting for potential confounders. Our model is multinomial because the dependent variable, emigration behaviour, has five outcomes. It includes the following

control variables: income, level of education, age, country of origin, and duration of stay at the time of interview.

3. Findings

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics of the sample and the frequencies of the migration outcomes and administrative removals in relation to the background variables. The most common expectation, reported by 70% of the respondents, was to remain in the Netherlands. Nine per cent of respondents indicated that they expected to reside part of the time in the Netherlands and part of the time in their country of origin. A further 4% indicated that they expected to migrate onward, while 5% indicated that they expected to return. Of the respondents who expected to stay, 88% did stay. All migration expectations were positively associated with actual migration, but the strength of the association varied. The association was strongest for return expectations: 27% of those who initially expected to return did so within 5 years, compared with 4% of those who expected to stay. Among those expecting to migrate onwards, around 10% realised their expectations within 5 years, while 10% moved multiple times between the Netherlands and either their country of origin or another country. Some of these moves to the origin country might indicate a move to prepare for onward migration, such as getting a visa. Of those who expected to spend part of the time in the Netherlands and part of the time in the country of origin, 10% returned and 10% moved multiple times. This result should be interpreted with caution as it could be the effect of censoring the observation period before some of the respondents were able to return to the Netherlands.

Individuals from Somalia and Poland were the most likely to emigrate. Most of those from Somalia who emigrated went onward (12%). Many of these went to the United Kingdom ($n = 46$; not shown in a table). Most of those from Poland returned (15%). Staying was positively related to age, income, and time spent in the Netherlands.

Table 2 presents the results from the multinomial logistic regression of migration outcomes. We found that return and onward migration expectations were most strongly predictive of the corresponding actual outcomes. For example, expecting to return was the strongest predictor of actual return with a coefficient of 2.42 (p -value 0.000), in comparison to other expectations. Similarly, onward migration expectations were the strongest predictors of onward migration behaviour. Expectations to stay part-time were predictive of both return migration and multiple moves but with lower associations than the other 'diagonal' associations. Additionally, those expecting to migrate onward and those expecting to live part of the time in their country of residence and part of the time in their origin country were more likely than others to return rather than to stay.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics

	Sample distribution by migration outcome (row percentages)					% in sample (column percentages)
Variable of interest	Stayed	Returned	Migrated onward	Multiple moves	Administrative removal	
<i>Emigration expectations</i>						
Stay	88.95	3.98	2.48	2.28	2.31	70.76
Return	61.22	27.04	--	6.12	--	4.71
Onward	65.10	--	10.07	10.74	--	3.58
Part-time	80.87	10.46	--	3.57	--	9.43
Don't know	89.98	3.55	2.30	--	--	11.52
<i>Gender</i>						
Man	83.77	5.98	2.94	3.31	4.00	45.05
Woman	88.10	5.60	2.14	2.54	1.62	54.95
<i>Origin background</i>						
Morocco	96.32	--	--	--	--	13.73
Turkey	92.64	3.68	--	--	--	12.41
Suriname	96.95	--	--	--	1.43	16.57
Dutch Caribbean	89.84	6.15	--	2.01	1.47	17.99
Somalia	73.46	3.34	12.65	5.80	4.75	13.68
Poland	74.74	14.18	1.41	4.88	4.79	25.61
<i>Age group</i>						
14–25	78.68	4.54	4.54	6.80	5.44	10.61
25–35	76.95	11.25	4.26	4.54	2.99	26.50
35–45	89.23	3.19	2.49	2.19	2.89	24.12
45–55	91.22	3.17	1.22	1.59	2.80	19.72
55–65	92.72	6.03	--	--	--	11.57
65–75	96.51	--	--	--	--	5.51
75+	93.90	--	--	--	--	1.97
<i>Income</i>						
Lower quintile	76.98	8.00	4.15	5.04	5.83	24.34
Lower-middle quintile	86.28	5.79	3.32	2.25	2.36	22.44
Middle quintile	87.31	5.16	2.17	2.99	2.37	23.30
Higher-middle quintile	91.66	4.64	--	1.99	--	18.16
Upper quintile	94.07	4.09	--	--	--	11.76
<i>Education Level</i>						
Low	83.43	5.96	3.93	2.95	3.73	36.72
Medium	87.69	5.35	1.49	2.97	2.50	40.45
High	87.78	6.22	2.00	2.63	1.37	22.82
<i>Time in the Netherlands</i>						
Less than 5 years	71.43	12.22	3.98	6.63	5.74	16.33
Between 5 and 10 years	74.40	11.12	5.50	5.02	3.95	20.11
More than 10 years	93.64	2.42	1.17	1.25	1.51	63.56
Total	85.38	6.10	2.59	3.11	2.83	

Notes: N = 4,158.

Source: Results based on calculations by the authors using non-public microdata from Statistics Netherlands. Because of the sensitivity of register data with regard to privacy, it is not permitted to publish percentages referring to numbers below 10. Such percentages are instead referred to as "--".

Table 2: Multinomial logistic regression of emigration outcome. Reference: stayed. Coefficients; p-values in parentheses

	Returned	Migrated onward	Multiple moves	Administrative removal
<i>5-year expectation (ref. stay)</i>				
Return	2.42 (0.000)	0.23 (0.764)	1.72 (0.000)	1.34 (0.001)
Onward	0.77 (0.022)	2.06 (0.000)	1.74 (0.000)	1.31 (0.001)
Part-time	1.18 (0.000)	-0.17 (0.703)	0.89 (0.000)	0.95 (0.002)
Don't know	0.57 (0.045)	-0.40 (0.244)	0.22 (0.528)	-0.06 (0.875)
<i>Country of origin (ref. Morocco)</i>				
Turkey	2.03 (0.006)	-1.09 (0.176)	0.30 (0.570)	0.21 (0.693)
Suriname	0.18 (0.844)	-0.47 (0.459)	-0.35 (0.570)	0.40 (0.459)
Dutch Caribbean	2.52 (0.000)	-1.07 (0.104)	-0.02 (0.957)	0.06 (0.908)
Somalia	1.99 (0.008)	1.66 (0.000)	0.95 (0.045)	0.95 (0.05)
Poland	3.28 (0.000)	-0.78 (0.127)	0.64 (0.188)	1.20 (0.016)
Woman	-0.24 (0.092)	-0.41 (0.069)	-0.39 (0.042)	-1.00 (0.000)
Age	-0.01 (0.732)	0.161 (0.014)	-0.02 (0.495)	0.05 (0.276)
Age squared	0.00 (0.753)	0.00 (0.004)	0.00 (0.817)	-0.00 (0.073)
<i>Std. household income quantile (ref. lowest quartile)</i>				
Lower-Middle	-0.25 (0.211)	-0.06 (0.807)	-0.72 (0.007)	-0.86 (0.001)
Middle	-0.19 (0.351)	-0.24 (0.412)	-0.35 (0.157)	-0.78 (0.003)
Higher-Middle	-0.386 (0.095)	-0.655 (0.148)	-0.67 (0.034)	-1.85 (0.000)
High	0.17 (0.541)	-0.65 (0.309)	-1.03 (0.058)	-2.01 (0.006)
<i>Education Level (ref. low)</i>				
Middle	-0.54 (0.001)	-0.81 (0.003)	-0.30 (0.179)	-0.62 (0.005)
High	-0.32 (0.110)	-0.23 (0.468)	-0.29 (0.293)	-1.11 (0.000)
<i>Time in the Netherlands (ref. < 5 years)</i>				
Less than 10 years	-0.08 (0.652)	0.01 (0.968)	-0.171 (0.472)	-0.30 (0.238)
More than 10 years	-0.99 (0.000)	-0.84 (0.013)	-0.89 (0.004)	-0.35 (0.286)
Constant	-4.37 (0.00)	-4.70 (0.00)	-1.67 (0.05)	-2.76 (0.00)

Note: N = 4,158 LR chi2(80) = 929.72 Prob> chi2 = 0.000 Pseudo R2 = 0.2026

Migrants from Poland and the Dutch Caribbean displayed the highest coefficients of return migration, while migrants from Somalia had the highest onward migration coefficient. Some of the returns to Poland might capture seasonal work (Van der Haar and Paenen 2020). Women were less likely to return than men, and those with a middle level of education were less likely to return than those with a lower level. Additionally, the coefficient for return decreased as the time spent in the Netherlands increased. The coefficient of administrative removals was lower for women and those with higher incomes and higher levels of education.

4. Discussion and conclusions

Our study contributes to the body of research on predictors of migration behaviour by examining expectations as a predictor of subsequent migration behaviour in the specific context of immigrants in the Netherlands. We draw on survey data matched with register data to explore characteristics of migration behaviour and introduce expectations as an important indicator of migration behaviour.

Return and onward migration expectations were linked to their respective behaviours, with higher likelihoods of returning or migrating onward compared to staying. Return expectations were also associated with onward migration behaviour, and onward migration expectations were linked to return behaviour, suggesting that these expectations influence both behaviours more than staying. Our estimates for return expectations being realised are similar to those of van Dalen and Henkens (2013) on the emigration of those with no migration background but are lower than those of Wanner (2021). This could be the result of differences in the survey question and sample, as Wanner (2021) used the shorter timeframe of intending to move within 2 years, and the respondents were all newly arrived migrants.

Those who expected to spend part of their time in the origin country and part of their time in the country of residence were also more likely to return to their country of origin or move multiple times. Our measure of multiple moves is an imperfect proxy for living in two countries alternately; therefore we do not know how common this behaviour is. However, it is crucial for migration scholars and policymakers to move beyond the 'here or there' dichotomy and acknowledge the transnational lives that many migrants lead. Overall, respondents with emigration expectations had higher odds of leaving the Netherlands to any destination than those expecting to stay, with coefficients ranging from 0.77 to 2.42 for return migration, onward migration, and living in both countries part-time.

The associations between emigration expectations and behaviour are mostly consistent with the expanded Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen 1991), which suggests

that intentions have predictive power for subsequent behaviour with variations depending on the individual's capabilities. Furthermore, expectations have a stronger predictive capacity than intentions (Armitage et al. 2015). It is important to note that all the outcomes incline towards staying, with staying expectations having an 89% chance of realisation. The realisation rates for all other expectations are much lower, making staying the most common outcome for all expectations.

The likelihood of return and onward migration differed between countries of origin. This finding may indicate the countries' different economic or political situations, bilateral or EU-wide migration agreements between origin and destination countries, or other unobserved country-specific factors.

Because our expectation variable was derived from the cross-sectional 2015 survey, it is possible that the respondents' expectations subsequently changed. We are therefore unable to distinguish between not being able to realise the expectation and changing one's mind. Migration intentions, expectations, and plans are not fixed and may change based on several factors. For example, both getting married in the country of residence and improved family finances have been shown to be associated with changing migration plans from temporary settlement to permanent settlement (di Belgiojoso et al. 2024). Furthermore, as we are considering a heterogeneous group of migrants with respect to the duration spent in the Netherlands, we capture migration expectations at different times after the initial migration, unlike previous studies that focus on newly arrived migrants (Wanner 2021). Future research on the realisation of migration expectations could investigate such changes, given the availability of panel data with updated expectations.

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