

Doctoral Thesis Review – *Anmeldelse av doktoravhandling*

Margaret Walton-Roberts, Megha Amrith & Bjørnar Sæther

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Doctoral Thesis Review – *Anmeldelse av doktoravhandling*

Aslaug Gotehus. 2022. *Agency and Temporality in Skilled Migration: Decisions, Experiences and Practices of Filipino Nurses in Norway and the Philippines*. Thesis submitted for the degree of philosophiae doctor (PhD) No. 883, Department of Sociology and Human Geography, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Oslo, Oslo. 164 pp. + Appendices. ISSN 1564-3991.

In her thesis, Aslaug Gotehus traces the decisions, experiences and practices of Filipino nurses in Norway. Despite the growing need for nurses in the country, labour and migration policies in Norway make it very difficult for Filipino nurses to work as registered nurses, with many having to take up work as au pairs or as auxiliary health care workers first, often for many years, before they are accepted as registered nurses. Gotehus focuses on the microdimensions of everyday human lives alongside the macrostructural factors that shape nurses' migration. She argues that 'individual and family events and concerns in Filipino nurses lives are entangled with the policies, regulations and labour markets in more than one country' and that 'migration needs to be understood as a process across time rather than a single act of mobility at one point in time'. Adopting a transnational approach, the thesis further explores the other side of migration: the case of non-migrant nurses in the Philippines who stay, despite overwhelming pressure in the Philippine context for nurses to go abroad in search of better opportunities and higher salaries. Gotehus traces Norwegian nurses' networks back to the Philippines in order to further her understanding of the transnational context framing their migration.

Drawing on strong qualitative empirical research, Gotehus offers rich insights into the little-known experiences of Filipino nurses in Norway. There is not much on the Norwegian case in the wider literature on Filipino nurses' migration. The thesis examines the Norwegian context for the integration of internationally educated nurses. There, we learn that because of professional regulations and the challenges encountered in the process of getting

authorized as a nurse in Norway, which became stricter in 2017 due to new regulations, many nurses educated in the Philippines end up working as health care workers in Norway. This occupational segmentation between cadres with different status, scope of practice, and compensation is an important feature of migrants' labour market segmentation experience in Norway.

The thesis makes an original contribution to the scholarship on care, migration, agency, and temporality. It allows us to understand the ambivalent experiences of Filipino nurse migrants in Norway, the complex textures of transnational and local care networks, responses to deskilling and waiting, and experiences of staying, all of which shed light on the different ways of moving and not moving in a globalized world.

Part I of the thesis is an overarching foundation chapter comprising six sections: (1) an introduction, (2) contextual overview of nursing, migration and the labour market in the Philippines and Norway, (3) discussion of the guiding theoretical approaches on transnational families, agency and temporality, (4) methodological summary, (5) a presentation of the four articles that form part of the thesis, and finally (6) a concluding section summarizing the thesis's main findings.

The key research questions are:

1. How are the migration decisions, experiences, and practices of Filipino nurses impacted by temporal constraints?
2. How can Filipino nurses' experiences of deskilling and waiting inform our notion of temporal constraints on labour agency?

Part I is convincing in providing an overarching conceptual framework for the thesis, with concepts of agency, temporality, and transnationality running through the thesis as common threads. The conceptual focus on temporality is particularly notable and offers insight into the ways through which nurses' aspirations and experiences shift according to their positionings in the labour market, both in relation to migration regimes and in relation to familial relationships and obligations. The overarching issue of agency, how it is exercised, how we can assess its presence and role especially through migration exit, and

how it is sometimes used in a manner that seemingly undermines migrants' own interests is also important. Gotehus's multisited approach to the fieldwork is fitting, as it is difficult to talk about Filipino nurses' migration without taking multiple places into consideration. The methodological approach addresses some of the limitations of methodological nationalism in terms of how research is conducted, and how migrants' experiences are examined. Gotehus also reflects on the challenges of doing fieldwork in nursing homes and reflects sensitively on her positionality as a Norwegian woman without a nursing background but researching Filipino nurse experiences.

Part II comprises four articles submitted for publication in international peer-reviewed journals. Each of the four articles make a distinctive conceptual contribution: (1) on waiting, (2) agency and deskilling, (3) transnational families and care circulations, and (4) on staying in the Philippines. The first article 'Waiting: Migrant nurses in Norway' (Vaughn et al. 2020), published in *Time and Society*, explores issues of time and 'waiting' among nurses. It is co-authored with Gotehus's colleagues in the WELL-MIG project, and it draws upon comparative findings of Filipino and Swedish nurses in Norway. This is a rich line of inquiry. The authors ask how time and temporal limitations act as a constraint on labour agency. The article highlights the link between time, waiting, and deskilling, and importantly it illuminates the occupational interactions between different cadres of health and care work that immigrants might enter. In effect, intersecting disadvantages frame global mobility patterns and resultant labour market allocation of immigrant workers, and the temporal dimensions of these processes, has arguably been underexamined in terms of their operation and control. The article on time and waiting makes an important contribution to how we conceptualize how structural barriers operate, and it adds to the call for deeper analysis of temporality in migration research (Hui 2016). The article could have included further consideration of how the temporal opens the door to further research, which could consider how time constructs are designed and incorporated into credential processes (implicitly or explicitly) by institutional agents (states). Such analysis can probe how methodological nationalism provides a filtering mechanism for what is increasingly a globalized organization of health care workers (cf. Walton-Roberts 2022).

The second article 'Agency in deskilling: Filipino nurses' experiences in the Norwegian health care sector', published in *Geoforum* (Gotehus 2021), explores the issue of agency using Cindi Katz's ideas of resilience, reworking, and resistance (Katz 2004), and arguing that research on migrant nurses has tended to underplay their agency. In the article, we see how Filipino nurses deal with their experiences of deskilling through resilience, reworking, and resistance, and by taking on jobs that are below their qualification level. Furthermore, the article suggests that migrant nurses risk maintaining the

structural barriers that could also affect future nurse migrants. The discussion on agency echoes a broader trend in migration studies in recent decades, namely to focus on the agency of migrants and not only the structures that shape their lives. The importance of highlighting agency is certainly necessary, and the *Geoforum* article offers a detailed and multilayered contribution to such analysis. It moves beyond a dominant focus in labour geography on more organized forms of resistance by demonstrating how everyday strategies are more relevant in the case of Filipino nurses' migration to Norway. This invites broader comparative questions on why certain forms of agency are prioritized over others in the Philippine migration context. Unlike Swedish nurses who use migration to Norway as a bargaining tool and form of collective resistance to change working conditions in the Swedish health sector (as indicated by Vaughn et al. 2020), the oversupply of nurses in the Philippines acts to reduce their ability to assert collective agency through exit. In fact, their exit maintains the status quo (cf. Cabanda 2020). Gotehus mentions that areas where the analysis could be usefully pushed further include a consideration of the role of the state in preforming the identity of migrants as 'perfect' carers and flexible workers. How effective can individual agency be in relation to this type of systemic state construction of the Filipino worker? Research might usefully explore what openings exist that might express forms of resistance or reworking to these agendas.

The third article, 'She's Like Family': Transnational Filipino Families, Fictive Kin and the Circulation of Care', which has been submitted to an international peer-reviewed journal, examines how care is provided in transnational families and the role of fictive kin. Linked to the family and migration life cycle, as well as migration and welfare regimes, the article examines the notion of family, and how it is expanded. The care chain literature is cited as one avenue for this analysis, in that the 'care circulation framework captures the complexity of care within families and communities by looking at "multigenerational, multidirectional, multidimensional and reciprocal relationships"' and that 'analysis of care circulation within transnational families needs to be sensitive to the (family) life cycle and migration cycle'. Gotehus's study participants were clear about the centrality of providing for their families through income. In line with other work (e.g. Singh et al. 2010), we see that money and care are intertwined and are crucial for sustaining the transnational family. Also, the decentring of the nuclear heteronormative family on the part of migrants is reflective of the state's restriction of what the formal family is or the 'normalizing mechanisms of state power' in defining legitimate family (Eng et al. 2005, 1). Gotehus further discusses how different welfare regimes shape practices and expectations of care (e.g. how Filipino nurses' normative ideas about nursing homes and about child care practices shift upon encountering a different welfare context in Norway).

This is another significant theme that is comparatively less explored in the literature (connecting welfare diamonds, care chains, and transnational families (Ortiga et al. 2021)), and thus offers another important line for future research. The article demonstrates that experiences of work are not the only important dimensions in migrant nurses' lives, but also that familial and affective relationships are equally central. Gotehus writes quite positively about the fictive kin relationships that nurses develop with their peers, particularly in evangelical church settings, but we learn less about the potentially more conflictual dimensions of kinship and friendship among Filipino nurses. One area for further research would be to study the embodied relationships that Filipino nurses have with the Norwegians they care for and with whom they interact.

In the fourth article, "I chose to stay for a while": Aspirations and capabilities in the non-migration decision making of nurses in the Philippines', which has been submitted to an international peer-reviewed journal, Gotehus argues that staying can sometimes be seen as a stronger act of agency than migrating. In the 'culture of migration' in the Philippines, nurses are pressured to work in unpaid voluntary positions prior to migrating abroad to earn money, and to endure long years of waiting as immigration regulations constantly shift. Understanding the choice to stay when migration is the norm reflects agency on the part of the stayer, challenging dominant assumptions in migration studies that link agency exclusively with migration. Gotehus encourages us to think about how opportunities in the Philippines – not only in nursing, but also in BPO call centres – might ultimately be more attractive in offering aspiring nurses more stability than going abroad. The thesis opens for us how the conditions of both stayers and movers are structured by features of globalization and how transformations in the nature of service work in health and care remain an enticing line of inquiry. Interestingly, a focus on those who stay in the Philippines was not originally part of Gotehus' research, but it became an issue of interest once she started her fieldwork. The framing of the focus through migration and life cycle approaches reveals the multiple embedded decision-making processes in which nurses are engaged, and how they change over time in relation to structural and individual factors. The fourth article certainly highlights the need to focus more intently on domestic labour markets in the case of migration research. In the latter case, the larger enterprise that has emerged around nurses' migration has generated skills development for the growing business process outsourcing (BPO) process in the Philippines. For some of these nurses, part of their ability to stay is linked to the creation of a surplus of nursing talent with English language skills, and this supports and facilitates the establishment of a medical call centre industry. This draws our attention to the changing nature of migration, considering emerging forms of work under technological change (Thompson 2019).

The case of Filipino nurses in Norway reveals both similarities and differences when compared with Filipino nurses' experiences of waiting, deskilling, and peer relationships in other destinations. In this sense, Gotehus's thesis must be situated within the global story of Filipino nurses' migration. Filipino nurses often hold multiple destinations in their imaginaries; sometimes they stop in transit places such as Singapore or Saudi Arabia en route to more desirable destinations such as the United States. One strategy is to employ multiple-step migrations in order to seek the best opportunities. At other times, nurses become stuck in certain places due to changing visa policies that limit their onward migration (Amrith 2017; Paul & Yeoh 2021; Walton-Roberts 2021). In this perspective, Norway is not a 'typical' destination, but most of the nurses in Gotehus's study ended up in Norway as a result of prior familial or peer contacts and networks. Given that there are pathways for family reunification in Norway, nurses often end up staying there instead of considering other destinations, despite the challenges of qualifying as a registered nurse and learning the language. While many of the narratives that feature in the thesis suggest that Filipino nurses go abroad for economic and familial security, it is important to note that nurses' motivations to migrate are not exclusively family-oriented but are tied also to personal aspirations to see the world, to be cosmopolitan, and to establish status.

Overall, the thesis offers a comprehensive and nuanced analysis of the experiences of nurses from the Philippines who are working in Norway, as well as providing a detailed transnational analysis of their social embeddedness in terms of transnational networks of family and kin. The incorporation of the life and migrant cycle framework permits detailed understanding of these phenomena and offers novel perspectives on the emerging trend of stayers who make decisions to remain in the Philippines as a response to changing employment options, and how this is a form of agency that needs to be considered alongside that of migrants. Given the 'temporal turn' in studies of transnational migration over the past years, the thesis speaks importantly to this growing interest in questions of temporality, time, and the life course, and how migrants' (in this case, skilled migrants') life projects shift and change direction at different points in their lives and journeys. The global impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the international mobility and immobility of skilled migrants in the health care sector invite us to think about whether things might shift in the structures and policies surrounding nurses' migration and how this in turn would affect the everyday experiences of time and agency in nurse migrants' transnational lives.

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- Margaret Walton-Roberts
Balsillie School of International Affairs, Wilfrid Laurier University,
Waterloo, Canada
- Megha Amrith
Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity,
Göttingen, Germany
- Bjørnar Sæther
Department of Sociology and Human Geography, University of Oslo,
Oslo, Norway

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