

Global Embeddedness: Situating Migrant Entrepreneurship within an Asymmetrical, Global Context

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Historically, approaches within the field of migrant entrepreneurship have almost exclusively focused on migration to nation-states in the Global North. Despite more-recent studies extending the scope to migrants' home countries – and even third-country locations – they have nonetheless remained rooted in South–North migratory contexts and, subsequently, have been mainly theorised based on the concept of persistent power imbalances internationally. Indeed, studies of migrant entrepreneurship in reverse (North–South) migratory contexts have exposed a number of assumptions implicit within these approaches. What is needed, therefore, is a theoretical approach which can account for the global asymmetry hitherto overlooked in the field of migrant entrepreneurship. This paper aims to do exactly that, offering the concept of 'global embeddedness', which situates the phenomenon of migrant entrepreneurship within a wider, asymmetrical global environment and, in so doing, provides a way of accounting for variations in migrant entrepreneurship found outside of the Global North.

Keywords: migrant entrepreneurship, ethnic entrepreneurship, transnational entrepreneurship, mixed-embeddedness, global-embeddedness

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Introduction

By jettisoning methodological nationalism, an orientation that makes the nation-state the unit of analysis, scholars of migration and development are better able to examine differences of power within states and regions and around the globe (Glick Schiller and Faist 2010: 5).

Over recent decades, migration and social-science scholars have been preoccupied with using the nation-state as the largest unit of analysis, a tendency referred to as ‘methodological nationalism’ (Glick Schiller 2015; Glick Schiller and Faist 2010; Wallerstein 2004; Weiss 2005; Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002; Wolf 2010). This has been defined by Glick Schiller and Faist (2010: 28) as ‘an ideological orientation that approaches the study of social and historical processes as if they were contained within the borders of individual nation-states’. Despite this, within the niche field of migrant entrepreneurship such an approach has not been fully embraced. Historically, scholars have almost exclusively focused on migration to nation-states in the Global North (Dheer 2018), resulting in many of the leading theories – including disadvantage theory (Clark and Drinkwater 2010; Johnson 2000; Light 1979), ethnic-enclave theory (Light, Sabagh, Bozorgmehr and Der-Martirosian 1994; Portes and Shafer 2007; Wilson and Portes 1980) and the mixed-embeddedness approach (Kloosterman, Van Der Leun and Rath 1999) – being rooted in Western-centric contexts. Despite some authors later extending the scope to include migrants’ countries of origin (Brzozowski, Cucculelli and Surdej 2017; Drori, Honig and Wright 2009; Portes, Haller and Guarnizo 2002), these studies have been largely restricted to a methodologically nationalistic (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002) binary paradigm of the host and home countries. While even more recent approaches have begun to venture beyond this binary paradigm – for example Solano *et al.*’s (2022) ‘multifocality’ approach, Elo *et al.*’s (2022) concept of ‘transnational diaspora entrepreneurship’, as well as revised applications of the term ‘transnational entrepreneurship’ (Harima 2022; Yamamura and Lassalle 2022) – they remain predominantly rooted in methodologically nationalistic, South–North migratory contexts, leading to a number of assumptions that seldom hold true in contexts outside the Global North. What is needed, therefore, is a theoretical approach that can situate the phenomenon of migrant entrepreneurship within a wider, asymmetrical global environment and, thus, reconcile the variations between studies of migrant entrepreneurship in the Global North and South. This paper aims to do exactly that, offering the concept of ‘global embeddedness’. In so doing, it extends scholars’ calls for the adoption of a more-global unit of analysis (Glick Schiller and Faist 2010; Wallerstein 2004; Weiss 2005) into the field of migrant entrepreneurship.

In terms of structure, the paper begins with a brief overview of the literature which details the two main points outlined above. First, it shows how theoretical approaches within the field of migrant entrepreneurship have been rooted within South-to-North migratory contexts. Second – and as a direct consequence of the first point – it shows how more-recent studies of migrant entrepreneurship in reverse (North–South) migratory contexts have exposed a number of Western-centric assumptions embedded within these theories.

Finally, in a thesis statement, the paper subsequently proposes a more holistic approach, offering the concept of ‘global embeddedness’. This concept is then explained and developed. First, at a theoretical level, it is proposed that migrants, their motivations and their various forms of capital must be situated within a wider, uneven global environment. Second, at an empirical level, evidence and examples are introduced in order to demonstrate such an approach ‘in action’ and, specifically, how it can be used to reconcile variations and contradictions of migrant entrepreneurship between Global North and South contexts.

Literature review: the problem with the status quo

Western-centric methodological nationalism

Historically, no doubt as a result of most leading migration scholars being located at educational institutions within the Global North, these researchers have understandably tended to focus on the flows of migration happening right in front of their eyes – namely, migration to nation-states in the Global North. This can even be seen from the language they use, whereby – instead of using the term ‘*migrant entrepreneur*’ – they often use ‘*immigrant entrepreneur*’, implicitly revealing a host-country viewpoint. This, when coupled with the fact that most migration to the Global North tends to originate from *the Global South*,¹ has resulted in the overwhelming majority of migrant entrepreneurship studies to date having focused not only on the host-country nation-state as the largest unit of analysis (Bagwell 2018; Chen and Tan 2009) but also being situated within *South-to-North migratory contexts* (Dheer 2018; Ilhan-Nas, Sahin and Cilingir 2011). Importantly, nation-states within the Global North and South are themselves not situated within a flat and even environment but, rather, within an uneven, hierarchical global landscape, whereby those in the Global North find themselves towards the ‘top’ end and those in the Global South diametrically towards the ‘bottom’ (Sosnowska 2016, 2017). Theories, then, which have been developed in the context of South-to-North migration may well have been created within ‘dominant-subordinate relationships’ which can grant ‘a certain power relationship in favor of the anthropologist’ (Nader 1972: 5). Indeed, by restricting our focus to migration within this direction, many of the current theories and models have been ‘theorized largely on the basis of persistent power imbalances in the international system’ (Croucher 2009: 479). Subsequently, it is perhaps unsurprising that these theories often seem to make a number of assumptions which reflect this dominant-subordinate context within which they were created, as can be clearly seen in several of the leading theories within the field of migrant entrepreneurship.

First, *disadvantage theory* (Clark and Drinkwater 2010; Johnson 2000; Light 1979) assumes that migrants are often disadvantaged. Faced with barriers to the mainstream labour market, the theory proposes that these migrants are ‘pushed’ into entrepreneurship for financial survival.

Second, *ethnic enclave theory* (Light *et al.* 1994; Portes and Shafer 2007; Wilson and Portes 1980) assumes that migrants often have access to a plentiful supply of affordable, co-ethnic labour. Here, within the asymmetrical context of Cuban migration to the USA, Wilson and Portes (1980) found that Cuban entrepreneurs had an advantage over native entrepreneurs via their ability to leverage shared social and cultural capital to hire the comparatively affordable co-ethnic labour.

Third, there is the *mixed-embeddedness approach* (Kloosterman *et al.* 1999) which – despite excellent contributions to the field in terms of acknowledging the crucial role played by macro layers of the environment– restricted this environment to the borders of the host country. This is exemplified in Kloosterman and Rath’s (2001) paper, wherein they create a typology of the opportunity structure consisting of three levels: 1) neighbourhood; 2) regional/urban; and 3) national. Such a typology, as can be seen, immediately rules out any potential role played by a wider, international environment. Considering the original context in which this theory is rooted – namely, that of Turkish bakers and Moroccan butchers in the Netherlands – it is perhaps unsurprising that these entrepreneurs were observed selling their products exclusively to the economically dominant host country and, as a result, the role of external factors – including the migrants’ home countries – was neglected.

Fourth, although more-recent studies of transnational entrepreneurship have extended the concept to include the migrants’ home countries (Brzozowski *et al.* 2017; Drori *et al.* 2009; Portes *et al.* 2002) – and even spaces beyond the home- and host-country binary paradigm (for example, Harima 2022; Yamamura and

Lassalle 2022) as well the concepts of multifocality (Solano *et al.* 2022) and transnational-diaspora entrepreneurship (Elo and Servais 2018; Elo *et al.* 2022) – problems with these terms remain, as shown in the 3 points below:

1. They are still often applied in a methodologically nationalistic manner and – although acknowledging transnational communities (Elo, Täube and Servais 2022, for example) – tend to restrict the largest unit of analysis to nation-states.²
2. As an extension of Point 1, these theories subsequently neglect the important role played by global asymmetrical power hierarchies.³
3. These approaches remain almost invariably rooted within South–North migratory contexts,⁴ commonly leading to findings and assumptions rooted in asymmetrical power dynamics.

Transnational-diaspora entrepreneurship, for example, has been described as helping to develop home countries (Elo and Servais 2018) – implying that these countries are less developed than host countries. The two authors also refer to how these entrepreneurs often employ co-ethnic labour, in effect mirroring the assumptions of ethnic-enclave theory which, as outlined above, was itself formulated within Western-centric contexts. Additionally, these approaches tend to assume that migrants are the most likely to sell products or services to the (economically dominant) host country – thus repeating the assumption of the mixed-embeddedness approach, likewise outlined above.

Last but not least, these theories – with the exception of transnational-diaspora entrepreneurship (Elo 2016; Elo and Servais 2018) tend to neglect the role of migrants' *motivations* within migrant entrepreneurship, a trend which is also exemplified by the interactive model (Waldinger, Aldrich and Ward 1990), Chen and Tan's (2009) integrative model of transnational entrepreneurship, and even Solano *et al.*'s model multifocal approach (2022), whereby none of them include the factor of motivation in the diagrams representing their models.⁵ So why is this? Such an omission seems to naturally suggest that migrants' motivations for relocating and starting their own business are not important. Considering that the great majority of people do *not* migrate (*circa* 97 per cent of people globally – UN DESA 2020), nor start their own businesses (*circa* 90 per cent among women and 82 per cent among men in OECD countries – OECD/European Commission 2019), it is worth asking why leading theoreticians often seem to overlook the motivations underlying such exceptional actions (Elo 2016). The answer, once again, relates back to how such theories are rooted in the context of migration from South to North, whereby it is often simply *assumed* that migrants want to migrate to an economically more-developed country and similarly assume that their decision to open their own businesses is likewise rooted in economic considerations. In effect, this reduces migrant entrepreneurs to a kind of 'homo economicus' (Persky 1995), void of their own free will, drawn to economically more-developed countries and entrepreneurship purely for financial gain.

How more-recent studies outside the Global North have exposed asymmetrical assumptions

Indeed, such Western-centric theories and assumptions have been exposed by more-recent studies of migrant entrepreneurship outside of the Global North. Let us start, for example, with the assumption that migrants are disadvantaged. Here, it has been shown that migrants moving in a North–South direction are less likely to be disadvantaged (see, for example, Mombeuil, Fotiadis and Aimable's 2021 study of Haitian migrant entrepreneurs returning to Haiti from the US) and can even constitute the 'economic upper class' (Verver, Passenier and Roessingh 2019). This privilege, rooted in the migrants' Global-North origins, is mirrored in the labels often used to describe them, for example 'descending migrant entrepreneurs' (Harima 2014) – a term that hints at these migrants' supposedly lofty origins. The same is true outside of the migrant-entrepreneurship literature in which – in North–South migratory contexts, such as the study of North Americans who migrated

to South America (Benson and O'Reilly 2018; Dixon, Murray and Gelatt 2006; Hayes 2014) – migrants have been found to be privileged, leading authors to question the often-assumed correlation between migrants and discrimination (Lundstrom 2017).

These studies within developing economies have naturally raised questions about migrant entrepreneurs' motivations and reasons for moving to a *less* economically developed location. Girling (2021), for example, in a study of migrant entrepreneurs who had moved from Global-North locations (such as Germany, the US and the UK) to Poland, found that they were not primarily motivated by economic factors. In other words, migration to economically less-developed regions 'calls into question taken-for-granted understandings of the relationship between migration and economics' (Benson and O'Reilly 2018: 91). Indeed, owing to the migration to poorer regions often being based upon non-economic factors, it has been labeled by some scholars as 'lifestyle migration', whereby migrants relocate to economically less-developed countries for a better climate and/or lifestyle (Andrejuk 2017; Benson and O'Reilly 2018; Ono 2015; Stone and Stubbs 2007; Torkington 2010). Moreover, in such contexts, migrants' motivations for opening their own business also seem to be less about economic incentives. Here, the handful of studies which have been conducted in such contexts have found these motivations to be more about agency and less about financial gain (Selmer, McNulty, Lauring, Vance 2018; Vance and Bergin 2019).

Migration toward economically less-developed regions has also exposed assumptions about the ethnic division of labour of migrant entrepreneurs. Most notably, ethnic-enclave theory (Light *et al.* 1994; Portes and Shafer 2007; Wilson and Portes 1980) attributed the success of many migrant entrepreneurs to their access to a plentiful supply of affordable co-ethnic migrant labour. As outlined above, more recent approaches have continued this assumption – for example, Elo and Servais (2018), the authors of *Transnational Diaspora Entrepreneurship*, have described how migrant entrepreneurs often employ co-ethnic labour. Yet, in North–South migratory contexts, such assumptions are less applicable. To illustrate this, let us turn to Harima's (2014) groundbreaking study of Japanese migrant entrepreneurs running online English-language schools in the Philippines. Here, Harima documented how their employees were Filipino, while their clients were in Japan. In such a context, it seems, there was no plentiful supply of affordable co-ethnic Japanese labour so, instead, they hired the comparatively more plentiful and affordable *native* Filipino labour. Such findings were mirrored in Girling's (2021) study of Global-North migrants in Poland, whereby Global-North labour was found to be more expensive and less plentiful, leading to these migrants being more likely to access native (Polish) labour, which the author then described as a situation which was 'an ethnic economy in reverse' (Girling 2022: 31).

Studies of migrant entrepreneurship outside the Global North have also revealed at least 2 additional economic assumptions implicit in current theoretical approaches. First, they show that it cannot be assumed that the host country is the economically dominant country. As outlined above, the mixed-embeddedness approach – rooted in the context of Turkish and Moroccan migrant entrepreneurs selling products within the economically dominant host country (the Netherlands) – restricted the largest unit of analysis to the host country only.

Yet, we can return once again to the example of Harima's Japanese migrant entrepreneurs in the Philippines who, by contrast, were not selling products or services within the home country but, instead, were selling them to clients in their country of origin. While, on the surface, this seems to lend support to other studies of transnational migrant entrepreneurship, such as Saxenian's (2002) research on Indian, Chinese and Taiwanese entrepreneurs selling products in Silicon Valley, upon closer inspection we see that Harima's entrepreneurs are selling services in a reverse direction – namely, to the home and not the host country. Such variation, however, can be reconciled by the fact that both groups of migrant entrepreneurs share the trait of selling products or services to economically dominant countries.

Second – and as an extension of the first point – it cannot be assumed that the country of origin is less developed. Transnational diaspora entrepreneurship, for example, has been described as helping to develop home countries (Elo and Servais 2018) – implying that home countries are less developed than host countries. Yet, once again returning to Harima’s Japanese migrant entrepreneurs in the Philippines, this is simply not the case, as the home country (Japan) is undeniably more economically developed than the host country (the Philippines).

Thesis statement

In light of the above and in order to fully understand all factors at play, this paper argues that a theoretical approach is needed which can situate the phenomenon of migrant entrepreneurship within the wider, asymmetrical global environment and, in so doing, reconcile variations between the findings of studies from both Global-North and Global-South contexts. In an attempt to do so, I offer the following statement:

Variations surrounding the phenomenon of migrant entrepreneurship can only be understood when situated within a wider, uneven context, wherein migrants, their motivations and their resources, are embedded not only within the host country, home country and third-party countries but also within an asymmetrical, global environment which varies across both space and time. In order to describe this, the term ‘*global embeddedness*’ is proposed.

A multi-layered, uneven global environment

As noted above, recent studies (*inter alia*, Bagwell 2018; Elo 2016; Girling 2021, 2022; Harima 2014) outside the Global North have helped to expose the asymmetry of the global environment. This environment is, however, a tremendously broad and complex entity so, in an attempt to simplify it while still doing justice to its complexity, it will be broken down into a number of distinct yet closely intertwined layers: 1) economic; 2) socio-cultural; 3) politico-institutional; and 4) technological. At this point, it should be noted that this typology is by no means exhaustive⁶ but, rather, based upon layers that were observable from the data of a previous study of migrant entrepreneurship (Girling 2021) as well as from other studies cited throughout this paper. These specific layers of the macro environment are now outlined below.

The global economic environment

The idea of an uneven, economic environment is nothing new. How certain cities and regions can be more prosperous than others has been well-documented (Kloosterman and Rath 2001; Scott 1998; Scott and Storper 2003). Yet, within the field of migrant entrepreneurship, this observation has been largely restricted to the uneven economic environment within the host country (Bagwell 2018). In the wider literature, however, scholars have highlighted the uneven economic development not just *within* nation-states but *between* them (Sassen 1991; Wallerstein 2004; Weiss 2005). Within the complex internationalisation of trade and processes, control has become centred within a small number of ‘global cities’ such as New York, London and Tokyo, while cities in the Global South have arguably benefited from the decentralisation of other parts of the supply chain (Sassen 1991). Such changes demonstrate not only how the economic environment is uneven across space but also how it changes over time (Hoang 2014).

The global socio-cultural environment

Discrimination is inherently only possible within cultural hierarchies which value certain characteristics over others. While this has usually been observed in South-to-North contexts, wherein migrants' ethnicity is negatively interpreted within local host-country cultural hierarchies, this is not always the case. As noted in the literature review, migrants who move in the reverse direction can often benefit from privilege (Andrejuk 2017; Lundstrom 2017). Importantly, such cultural hierarchies appear to stretch beyond the borders of individual nation-states into international contexts, whereby the cultural capital of those from the Global North 'can become transnationally acknowledged' (Weiss 2005: 722).

The global politico-institutional environment

Within the field of migrant entrepreneurship, authors have correctly outlined the important role played by the politico-institutional environment within the host country (Engelen 2001; Kloosterman and Rath 2001; Kloosterman *et al.* 1999). However, this layer of the environment does not stop at the host country's borders. On the contrary, laws originating from outside the host country can impact on migrant entrepreneurs in a variety of ways. First and foremost, migrant entrepreneurs engaged in transnational business face the challenge of dealing with the laws of the countries in which they are conducting business. Second, even migrant entrepreneurs conducting business solely within the host country are still embedded within a wider, global politico-institutional framework. For example, even their very presence in the host country is dependent upon the laws of the latter allowing them to emigrate (a right, of course, which was previously denied to many citizens of countries within the former USSR). Moreover, within EU countries, a great number of their 'national' laws stem from EU regulations. Additionally, we could also consider the international variation in the politico-institutional environment of the *private sector*. For example, the online payment processor, PayPal, allows clients in countries in the Global North to withdraw money into their bank accounts, yet denies the same right to clients in the Global South (Ukraine, for example). This, of course, comes on top of the large number of firms which restrict access to their websites or services based on geofencing, effectively blocking those from certain (often Global South) countries.

The global technological environment

Spatial variations in the global technological environment are, of course, nothing new. Even prior to the industrial revolution in 'the West', regions in the Middle East and Asia had previously been technologically more advanced (Arrighi, Hamashita and Selden 1996; Lewis 1995). In today's world, variations persist and can be quickly illustrated through indicators such as variation in the structure of a country's economy, as well as the number of patents filed. In terms of the former, economies in the Global North usually have a higher percentage of people employed in high-skilled tertiary sectors (World Bank 2019). In the Netherlands, for example, approximately 82 per cent of the Dutch workforce in 2019 was in the tertiary sector (World Bank 2021a). In Niger, by contrast, this figure stood at just 21 per cent (World Bank 2021b). In terms of the number of patents filed, staying with the same nation-states as examples, in the Netherlands there were 9,253 patent applications (WIPO 2021a), compared to just 153 in Niger (WIPO 2021b). According to Burawoy (2001: 150), such spatial variations in the global technological landscape are representative of a 'hierarchical chain' at a technological level.

Situating migrant entrepreneurship within the multi-layered, uneven global environment: global embeddedness

To truly understand all processes involved in migrant entrepreneurship, the phenomenon must be situated not just within the host- and home-country environment but also within the wider (economic, technological, socio-cultural, politico-institutional) uneven global environment outlined above. To describe the positioning of migrant entrepreneurship within this macro-level global environment, the term ‘global embeddedness’ is proposed. By using this term, the aim is to capture several important implications. First, migrant entrepreneurs operate within an environment extending well-beyond the borders of the host, the home and even third-party countries, as these countries themselves are situated within a broader, asymmetrical global environment. Second, this environment is hierarchical, with some nation-states situated toward the top and others towards the bottom, although it can also vary within nation-states and change over time. Third, migrants’ resources can be shaped by their position within this asymmetrical global environment. Fourth – and finally – despite this global environment influencing migrants and their resources, it is not strictly ‘top down’, as migrants do have an element of agency, albeit often actively consuming and reproducing such structures (Burawoy 2001).

As noted previously, although more-recent approaches have extended the field of migrant entrepreneurship beyond the binary paradigm of host and home countries (Elo *et al.* 2022; Harima 2022; Solano *et al.* 2022; Yamamura and Lassalle 2022), they have done so within South–North migratory contexts, often retaining nation-states as the largest units of analysis and largely neglecting the role of the wider, asymmetrical, global environment. A global-embeddedness approach, however, calls instead for a consideration of how migrants (and their motivations and resources) are embedded not only within host, home and third-party countries but also within the wider, asymmetrical, global environment. As such, the concept of global embeddedness echoes scholars’ calls for the adoption of a more global unit of analysis (Centeno, Chase-Dunn, Chorev, Grell-Brisk, Inoue, Larcey, Reyes and Surak 2020; Glick Schiller and Faist 2010; Wallerstein 1987; 2004; Weiss 2005) and extends it into the field of migrant entrepreneurship, while also – importantly – foregrounding the important role played by uneven power hierarchies. Such an extension, as can be seen in Figure 1, constitutes the ‘next stage’ of an ongoing expansion over time of the size of the unit of analysis.

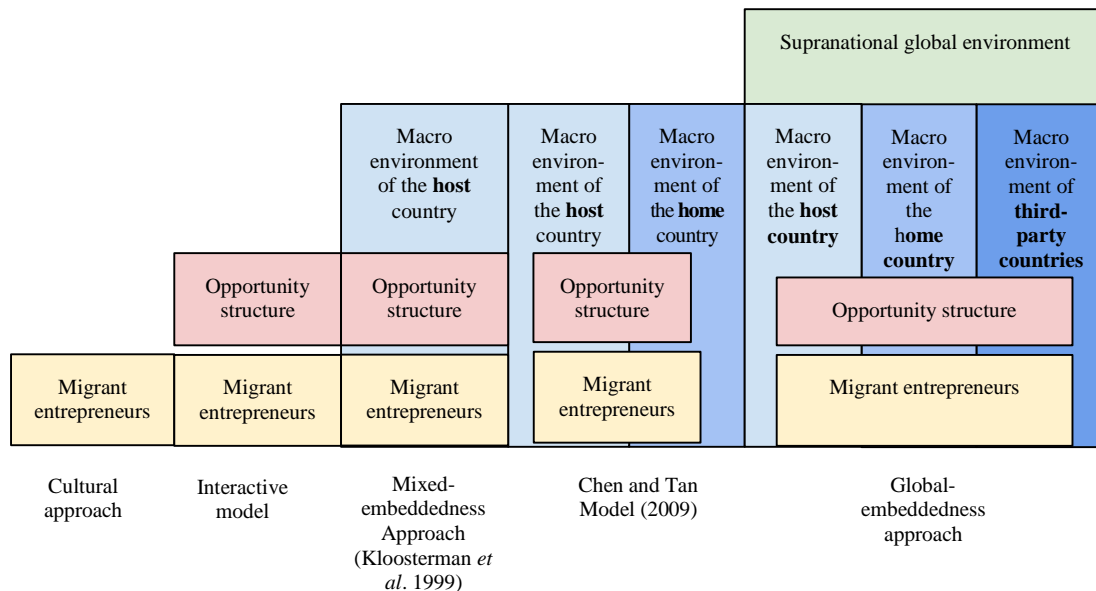
In using the term global embeddedness, three ‘push backs’ are anticipated. First, such global theories have previously been criticised for trying to be a ‘grand narrative’ (Glick Schiller and Faist 2010). However, positioning migrant entrepreneurs within this global environment is the only way to truly incorporate all factors at play. Not doing so would mean not understanding the full picture.

Second, one may ask why a new concept is required, instead of simply extending or expanding upon one of the many pre-existing concepts. Why not, for example, expand upon concepts like the mixed-embeddedness approach, transnational-diaspora entrepreneurship or multifocality? These terms, however – as outlined above – have been firmly rooted in South–North migratory contexts, leading to a number of assumptions embedded within them, as well as the all-too-often continuing use of nation-states as the largest unit of analysis. As a result, they lack any connotations of positioning migrants within global hierarchies. ‘Global embeddedness’, by contrast, immediately foregrounds the importance of the wider, global context, as well as the power dynamics implicit within this.

Third – and this is an extension of the second point – one may ask why a pre-existing concept from outside the migrant entrepreneurship field cannot be used. Why not, for example, borrow from Wallerstein’s world-systems analysis (1987, 2004) and extend it to the context of migrant entrepreneurs? Although this was considered, it was decided against for three main reasons. First, the concept has already become loaded with connotations, which may prove unhelpful and distracting in its adaptation to the field of migrant entrepreneurship. Second, it lacks any of the prevailing theoretical infrastructure from within the field, such as migrants’ opportunity

structures, ethnic division of labour, etc. Third, unlike world-systems analysis, global embeddedness incorporates a greater consideration of other layers of the macro environment beside the economic one, while also acknowledging the agency of individuals.

Figure 1. Global embeddedness: expanding the unit of analysis to include the role of the wider global environment



Source: The author’s own diagram based on an analysis of other models.

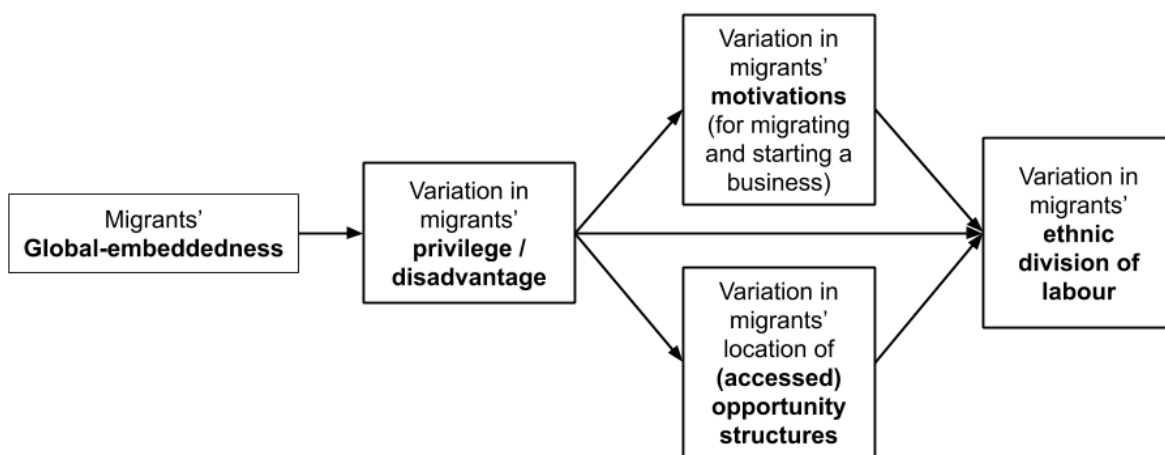
Last of all, two additional aspects should be clarified. First, adopting such a global approach does not mean refraining from using the nation-state unit of analysis altogether (Glick Schiller and Faist 2010). Indeed, as seen from the depiction in Figure 1 of what ‘global-embeddedness’ encompasses, the terms ‘host country’, ‘home country’ and ‘third-party countries’ are still retained, so this approach is clearly not advocating for a total abandonment of the nation-state as a unit of analysis. On the contrary, it is proposed that, in the same way that cities are not the largest unit of analysis, neither should nation-states be. Instead, it is argued that the largest unit of analysis should be much wider – namely, *global* structures. Second, it should be clarified that global embeddedness is an approach and not a model. By this, I mean that it does not attempt to define or predict how global processes work. Rather, the purpose is to simply acknowledge the important role played by an uneven global environment and to situate the phenomenon of migrant entrepreneurship within it. In so doing, we can better understand the full context within which migrant entrepreneurship takes place.

Discussion: global embeddedness in action

Above, this paper has made the case for adopting a more global approach to the field of migrant entrepreneurship. Only a holistic global approach, it was argued, is capable of accounting for the variations experienced by migrant entrepreneurs around the world. Now, such an approach will be seen ‘in action’. Specifically, I demonstrate, below, how adopting a ‘global-embeddedness approach’ can reconcile variations observed in studies of migrant entrepreneurship in both Global-North and Global-South contexts. Four variations, in particular, will be highlighted: 1) the variation in privilege and disadvantage; 2) the variation in

motivations; 3) the variation in the location of (accessed) opportunity structures; and 4) the variation in the ethnic division of labour. Moreover, it is proposed that these variations are causally related. First of all, migrants' global embeddedness creates variations in the levels of privilege and disadvantage which migrants experience. This, in turn, creates variations in their motivations for migrating and starting a business in the first place, as well as the opportunity structures which they access. Finally, these aforementioned factors contribute to variations in migrants' ethnic division of labour. This relationship is depicted in Figure 2 below.⁷

Figure 2. The role of migrants' global embeddedness in contributing to variations within migrant entrepreneurship



Variations in disadvantage and privilege

Here, I argue that, by looking through a global-embeddedness lens, we can begin to reconcile the privilege–disadvantage dichotomy of migrant entrepreneurship. It can explain, for example, why migrants moving in a South-to-North direction often experience disadvantage (Clark and Drinkwater 2010; Johnson 2000; Light 1979), while those migrating in the other direction often experience the exact opposite, namely, *privilege*. As noted previously, the world is not a flat, level playing field. Migrants operate within a multi-layered (economic, technological, socio-cultural, politico-institutional), uneven environment. It is the variation in the position of the migrants and their resources within this uneven environment which generates variations in privileges. For example, starting with the socio-cultural layer of the macro environment, those from the Global North are, unsurprisingly, more likely to possess higher levels of Global North cultural and social capital. This, when situated within cultural hierarchies, takes on structurally imposed values (Coleman 1988). As a result of this, those possessing Global North cultural capital are granted a relatively higher standing within society, while those with cultural capital from the Global South experience the mirror opposite. This, for example, explains why North American migrants, who relocate to South America, often experience cultural prestige. In such contexts, their language (Andrejuk 2017; Girling 2021) and ethnicity (Fechter 2005) become signifiers of their Global-North origins, subsequently granting them prestige within their new environment.

Such privilege is enhanced by other layers of the global environment. First, in terms of the politico-institutional layer, this often grants those from nation-states within the Global North with powerful passports which give them access to a huge number of countries across the globe. German citizens, for example, have an international buffet of 135 countries to pick from while, for those from Afghanistan, such choice is restricted

to just 30 countries (Passport Index 2021). Second, in terms of the economic layer, migrants from the Global North enjoy a relatively greater purchasing power in the comparatively economically affordable Global South. Third, a technological layer also plays a role. Those from the Global North are statistically more likely to hold down high-skilled tertiary-sector employment – which usually provides higher wages – leading to economic privilege. Moreover, those with technological skills, in addition to Global North cultural capital (in particular Global North languages, such as English) are more likely to be able to find well-paid employment within the current global economy. Fourth, at a natural environment level, migrant entrepreneurs may be affected by their position within the natural world. For example, those in areas of drought and other natural disasters may be at a greater disadvantage although, to a large extent, this can be mediated by technological and economic development (e.g. dams, irrigation, desalination plants etc.).

Acknowledging the nuance

At this point, it should be noted that such a binary distinction between North and South, privileged and disadvantaged is not always so straightforward. There is, of course, also great variation within nation-states. There are some people from the Global South with huge capital reserves and human capital and who are well-connected in terms of social capital. Conversely, there are others from the Global North who have no money and are poorly educated. Moreover, just because someone is born into a Global North country with a statistically higher likelihood of tertiary employment, it does not mean that all tertiary employment is better paid. Here we only need to think of service staff at fast-food restaurants and the wider hospitality industry. Indeed, many of the North Americans in Hayes' (2014) and Benson and O'Reilly's (2018) studies of migration to South America were not previously 'privileged' within their home country. These migrants often lacked financial capital within their comparatively more expensive country of origin, which is one of the main reasons why they consider migrating to an economically more affordable country. In doing so, they perform a kind of 'geoarbitrage' (Hayes 2014), traversing spatial disparities in wealth in order to increase their own relative standing, thus elevating themselves within financial (and socio-cultural) hierarchies. In other words, while we must acknowledge the nuance and complexity of the variation within nation-states, we must likewise acknowledge the presence of a broader, asymmetrical environment within which migrants are clearly embedded.

Variation in motivations

Such variation in privilege plays a dominant role in determining the options for both migrating and starting a business. With regard to the former, these variations in motivation are reflections of 'spatial opportunity differentials' (de Haas 2011: 20) between migrants' locations of origin (and third-party countries) and their host-country environment. Importantly, such spatial-opportunity differentials are themselves often the reflection of an uneven global environment and migrants' subsequent privileged (or disadvantaged) position within it. Once we situate the migrant entrepreneurs within the various layers of this environment, such differing motivations between the two subject groups begin to make sense. Firstly, within the uneven, global economic environment, with wealth concentrated in regions in the Global North, it is perhaps unsurprising that the migrant entrepreneurs who are privileged enough to be born into such economically prosperous regions are less likely to relocate to the Global South for higher earnings. Conversely, for those from the Global South, where their migration to the Global North constitutes a move to an economically more-developed region, it is likewise unsurprising that they seem more likely to do so for higher revenues. Of course, as seen with the North American migrants in Hayes' (2014) study, it is not always that simple, as Global North migrants do sometimes

migrate for economic reasons; however, importantly, this seems more about reducing costs as opposed to increasing earnings.

Second, the uneven, international, politico-institutional environment also plays a role. Owing to its unevenness, it grants particular privileges to certain migrants, while unfairly assigning disadvantages to others. Such privileges or disadvantages then influence migrants' motivations for migrating. For example, migrants from Syria in 2015 were understandably motivated to move to nation-states within the European Union for their comparatively safer environment. For those born into nation-states in the Global North, by contrast, where their home-country environments can also be considered safe, this is obviously less likely to play a role in their motivation for migrating. Further, within such an uneven environment, migrants experience variation in their politico-institutional mobility which is based almost entirely upon their citizenship. For those from countries in the Global North, it is often relatively easy to travel and work around the world. Those from the Global South, however, regularly face legal barriers which curtail their ability to travel and work (Sklair 2012). This highlights how migrants' aspirations can be restricted by their abilities (de Haas 2011) and, importantly, how such abilities are a reflection of migrants' privileged or disadvantaged position within an uneven, internationally uneven, international politico-institutional environment. Third and finally, migrants' position within other layers of the wider global environment may also play a role – notably migrants' position within the wider natural environment and migration stimulated by flooding, droughts and other natural disasters (Ionesco, Mokhnacheva and Gemenne 2016; Renaud, Bogardi, Dun and Warner 2007).

Let us now consider the variation in migrants' motivations for starting their own business. As seen earlier in this paper, for migrant entrepreneurs from the Global North, starting their own business has been found to be less about financial incentives and more about an expression of agency (Selmer *et al.* 2018; Vance and Bergin 2019). Those from the Global South, by contrast, have often been found to do so for financial necessity (Clark and Drinkwater 2010; Johnson 2000; Light 1979). Here, once again, it is argued that migrants' varying levels of global embeddedness and the subsequent variation in their composition of privileges and disadvantages, can serve as a way of understanding such differences. Migrants originating from the Global North are often granted the privilege of finding it easier to secure relatively well-paid positions within the mainstream labour market. It stands to reason, therefore, that, if a migrant already has a well-paid job, they would then be less likely to be motivated to open their own business for financial reasons. Conversely, for those from the Global South, who face more barriers to securing well-paid employment in the mainstream labour market (Grand and Szulkin 2002), it should not come as a surprise that they are more likely to be motivated by the relatively higher earnings offered by an entrepreneurial trajectory. As such, it reveals how motivations themselves seem to reflect broader inequalities in the environment and the embeddedness of migrants and their resources (i.e. their 'global embeddedness') within this environment.

Variation in migrants' location of (accessed) opportunity structures

Earlier in this paper I showed how, in Harima's (2014) study of Japanese migrant entrepreneurs in the Philippines, they sold their services to their home country of Japan, instead of selling them locally in their host country of the Philippines. This, it was shown, is in contrast to Kloosterman and Rath's (2001) restriction of opportunity structures to the host country only, unlike studies of transnational South-to-North migrant entrepreneurs who, despite supplying their businesses internationally from their home countries, have usually been found to still sell their products or services locally within the host country. Here it is proposed, once again, that adopting a global-embeddedness approach enables us to account for such variation. Firstly, by situating migrant entrepreneurs within global economic hierarchies, we can account for *why* migrant entrepreneurs would even *want to* sell products or services to clients in the Global North. Within this uneven

economic landscape, whereby wealth is largely concentrated in nation-states within the Global North, clients there can ‘pay more’, so there is an *economic incentive* to target them. Likewise, it explains why migrant entrepreneurs have often been found to be reluctant to sell products or services to the Global South (Rusinovic 2008). Second, it provides a mechanism to explain *how* they access such markets. This can be done by situating migrant entrepreneurs within the other layers (technological, socio-cultural and politico-institutional) of the global environment. In terms of the technological environment, certain industries, in particular those in the tertiary sector, lend themselves better to international distribution. As shown previously, migrant entrepreneurs from the Global North are more likely to be located within such industries, which helps to explain *how* they are able to service clients internationally. Harima’s migrant entrepreneurs are a good example here, as they are providing English-language lessons, which is a service which can be provided remotely.

Turning now to the role of the socio-cultural layer of the global environment, the acquisition of Global North social and cultural capital can act as a bridge to Global North markets. Unsurprisingly, clients situated in the Global North are more likely to conduct business with people they know and in a language they know. It follows, then, that migrant entrepreneurs from the Global North, who have usually spent much of their lives acquiring these countries’ social and cultural capital, are more likely to possess the socio-cultural capital necessary to bridge this gap. Using Harima’s Japanese migrant entrepreneurs as an example once again, we see that they possess the Japanese socio-cultural capital necessary to bridge them to clients in Japan. Last but not least, the international politico-institutional layer of the global environment also helps to account for the ‘*how*’. As mentioned previously, the international politico-institutional landscape is *uneven*. While most migrant entrepreneurs from the Global North can travel and conduct business internationally with relative ease, those from the Global South seem to face greater restrictions. This uneven landscape can prevent migrant entrepreneurs from the Global South from moving freely to countries in the Global North,⁸ subsequently curtailing their ability to acquire social and cultural capital in these countries and with the end result that they are less likely to be able to ‘bridge’ the gap between themselves and clients situated in the Global North. Once again using the example of Japan and the Philippines, those from Japan require no visa to visit the Philippines, whereas those from the Philippines wishing to travel to Japan need a visa (Philippines Visa 2021). Migrant entrepreneurs, in other words, owing to their global embeddedness, inherit a specific composition of privileges and/or disadvantages which, in turn, enable or restrict the opportunity structures which they are able to access.

Variation in migrants’ ethnic division of labour

Last of all, I propose that migrants’ varying global embeddedness, in conjunction with its subsequent shaping of migrants’ privileges, motivations and opportunity structures, can account for the differences in migrant entrepreneurs’ ethnic division of labour. Returning to the example of Harima’s (2014) Japanese migrant entrepreneurs who – in contradiction to ethnic-enclave theory (Light *et al.* 1994; Portes and Shafer 2007; Wilson and Portes 1980) – did not employ co-ethnic Japanese labour as it was neither plentiful nor affordable, we see that, instead, they often opted to hire native, Filipino labour. Why then, in this North-to-South context is co-ethnic labour neither plentiful nor affordable? First, in terms of its availability, an uneven global environment inherently creates ‘spatial opportunity differentials’ (de Haas 2011: 20) which, as seen above, underlie migrants’ motivations for migrating. Such motivations, combined with migrants’ varying ability to move to a location of their choosing (i.e. their position within an uneven politico-institutional global environment), have resulted in relatively high numbers of migrants (272 million in 2019) from the Global South migrating to the Global North, with only a small number of migrants (just over 13 million in 2019) migrating in the opposite direction (UN DESA 2020).

Second, turning now to why Global-North labour is less affordable, this can once again be explained by considering migrants' global embeddedness. Within the context of uneven global hierarchies, those who possess Global North cultural capital are often highly desirable within the labour market (Sosnowska 2016, 2017). Girling (2021: 68), for example, recounts the story of a restaurant owner in Wroclaw, Poland, who has to pay a premium to hire an Italian chef, rather than access the comparatively cheaper local pools of Polish – and Ukrainian – labour. This, of course, comes on top of the huge demand within Wroclaw by Western outsourcing operations looking for speakers of Global North languages, in particular English, to service their Global North clientele (Girling 2021). This demand for Global-North labour, combined with its lower supply within the Global South, provides a mechanism for explaining its relatively higher cost.

Conclusion

This paper has argued the case for adopting a more global approach to the field of migrant entrepreneurship. Starting with a literature review, it has shown how, historically, scholars of migrant entrepreneurship have focused almost exclusively upon migration within nation-states in the Global North. Such a Western-centric approach, we have seen, has led to several of the leading theories, including disadvantage theory (Clark and Drinkwater 2010; Johnson 2000; Light 1979), ethnic-enclave theory (Light *et al.* 1994; Portes and Shafer 2007; Wilson and Portes 1980) and a mixed-embeddedness approach, being rooted in Western-centric contexts. Despite recent theories expanding the scope to include migrants' home countries (Brzozowski *et al.* 2017; Drori *et al.*, 2009; Portes *et al.* 2002) and even third-party countries (Elo and Servais 2018; Elo *et al.* 2022; Harima 2022; Solano *et al.* 2022; Yamamura and Lassalle 2022), the theories have likewise remained rooted in South–North migratory contexts. As a result of this, they make a number of assumptions which do not always hold true in contexts external to nation-states in the Global North. Indeed, it was then shown how more-recent studies of migrant entrepreneurship outside the Global North demonstrate exactly this, revealing how migrants cannot be assumed to be disadvantaged (Mombeuil *et al.* 2021; Verver *et al.* 2019), how they constitute a supply of affordable labour (Girling and Bamwenda 2018; Harima 2014) or are motivated by the desire to move to an economically more developed region (Benson and O'Reilly 2018; Elo 2016; Girling 2021); nor can the host country be more developed than that of the home country (Girling 2022). Subsequently, in an attempt to take account of global asymmetries, as well as to reconcile variations between studies of migrant entrepreneurship in the Global North and the Global South, the concept of 'global embeddedness' was presented; a concept which proposes that the phenomenon of migrant entrepreneurship can only be fully understood when we first situate migrants and their various forms of capital within a wider and uneven macro environment which extends beyond national borders. The concept was then demonstrated 'in action', showing how it can account for variations in migrant entrepreneurship, specifically: 1) variations in privilege and disadvantage; 2) variations in motivation; 3) variations in the locations of (accessed) opportunity structures; and 4) variations in the ethnic division of labour. In proposing the concept of global embeddedness, the paper extended scholars' calls for adopting a more-global unit of analysis (Glick Schiller and Faist 2010; Wallerstein 2004; Weiss 2005) into the field of migrant entrepreneurship while also – importantly – foregrounding the role played by uneven power hierarchies.

Notes


1. South–North migration flows greatly outweigh North–North ones (UN DESA 2020).
2. For example, Solano *et al.* (2022) discuss the multiple nation-states in which migrant entrepreneurs can be embedded, yet there is no mention of how these nation-states themselves are embedded within a broader, asymmetrical global environment.

3. While the concept of cosmopolitanism within the field of transnational entrepreneurship includes a greater consideration of cultural hierarchies (Figueira, Caselli and Theodorakopoulos 2016), it is once again rooted in South–North migratory contexts, leading to certain assumptions – for example, that migrant entrepreneurs are disadvantaged and lack economic capital.
4. Solano *et al.* (2022), for example, document Moroccan migrant entrepreneurs in the Netherlands, while Elo *et al.* (2020) consider the case (among others) of Jamaican entrepreneurs in the UK. While transnational-diaspora entrepreneurship has, indeed, been applied in contexts outside of the Global North, such as the study of migrant entrepreneurs in Uzbekistan (Elo 2016), it should be noted that these entrepreneurs themselves emigrated from countries even less economically developed than Uzbekistan – i.e. they were still moving in a South–North direction, *per se*.
5. The same is true of Yamamura and Lassalle (2022) as well as Harima (2022).
6. While this typology may be considered underdeveloped and superficial, it serves as an accessible point of entry for an exploratory analysis of how the phenomenon of migrant entrepreneurship interacts within an asymmetrical global context.
7. At this point, it should be acknowledged that Figure 2 almost certainly does not capture all elements of the complicated dynamics involved in migrant entrepreneurship, nor does it aim to predict all behaviour of migrant entrepreneurs. It does, however, provide a point of access where we can begin to understand the embeddedness of migrant entrepreneurs within asymmetrical global hierarchies and the causal effect of this upon their motivations, the location of the opportunity structures they access and their ethnic division of labour. Additionally, while the dichotomy of North vs South is often used to illustrate variations, migrants are – of course – situated within a broad spectrum. While the descriptions may lose some of the nuance that this entails, the primary goal is – as started – to highlight the role played by the wider, asymmetrical environment in which migrant entrepreneurs operate.
8. This restriction of international mobility might also help to explain why, in many studies (for example, Kloosterman *et al.* 1999), South-to-North migrant entrepreneurs seem less likely to access international opportunity structures. After all, once inside a country in the Global North, such a restriction of international mobility might discourage them from further moving around, subsequently encouraging them to focus on business opportunities within the Global North host country.

Conflict of interest statement

No conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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