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## Between Welfare and Farewell

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# Chapter 4

## The Missing Life Course Link

The welfare state is often perceived as one of the key factors influencing migration decisions. Yet traditional international migration theories are rather static in nature as a result of ignoring the dynamic aspect of the individual life course. In this study, we propose an innovative conceptual model which fruitfully combines insights from migration theories with principles of the life course approach. Using qualitative interview data from 36 European citizens born in Poland, Spain and the United Kingdom (UK) and residing in the Netherlands, we investigate how welfare systems are perceived and experienced at the individual level, and how such perceptions, knowledge and practices may enter migration decisions. Our study empirically underpins the main premise of the theoretical model that migration decisions and the factors shaping them should be explained as connected through the life course. The proposed conceptual model is suitable to explain the influence of the welfare system on migration decisions, but also that of other structural factors.

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## 4.1 Introduction

The way in which migration is conceptualized and theorized is largely shaped by dominant historical international migration flows, including nineteenth-century settler migration from Europe to America, post-war guest-workers from the Mediterranean to northwest Europe, and post-World Wars refugees (King, 2002). As a result, international migration theories have had a predominantly economic character and tended to exclusively focus on young male migrants. Yet this no longer fits international migration today, as new mobility strategies are deployed to achieve economic and non-economic objectives, and include young and old migrants, as well as men and women (Castles et al., 2014). It is increasingly acknowledged that besides responses to emergencies and crises, international migration is often a pro-active, deliberate decision to improve livelihoods and achieve personal goals. Migration cannot be sufficiently explained from income differences alone, and factors such as income risks, access to labour markets and social security (welfare) are increasingly recognized as other important determinants.

Another key characteristic of migration theories so far, is that they largely approached international migration as a one time and long-term (possibly even life-long) decision. Potential migrants could therefore be expected to not just consider factors relevant to them at the moment of migration, but also those to become important later in life. Yet since the late 1980s and early 1990s, migration scholars have observed substantial changes in international migration patterns within Europe (Engbersen & Snel, 2013; Favell, 2008; King, 2002). With the enlargements of the European Union (EU), intra-European migration strongly increased. This 'new migration' generally has a more diverse and flexible character than the 'old migration' observed over the first post-war decades. Many mobile EU citizens nowadays are abroad for only a short period of time, responding quickly to changing conditions in the destination country. In addition, more and more people migrate at different stages in their lives as a result of onward or circular migration. Especially in the context of international mobility within the EU this becomes pertinent due to the freedom of movement.

The changed nature of intra-European migration has important implications for theoretical explanations on migration decisions in this context. First, theories that treat international migration as a once in a lifetime, life-long decision seem less suitable to explain the more flexible migration patterns observed today (Carling & Collins, 2018; Collins, 2018). Second, because of their understanding of migration as a single action rather than a process and their largely economic nature, traditional international migration theories do not explicitly address differences in the impact of macro-level factors on individuals' migration decisions over time (De Haas, 2010; Van Hear et al., 2018). To enhance our understanding of contemporary migration patterns, the connection between macro-level factors and individual migration decision-making should therefore be studied in a more dynamic way. Yet so far, this perspective covering the life course has not been integrated in conceptual models on international migration.

With this study we aim to address this gap. We propose a conceptual model for understanding contemporary intra-European migration in which we integrate and expand international migration theories with principles from the life course approach. In the dynamic model we propose, the life course principles of *timing*, *life-span development*, and *time and space* explain how the interaction of structure and agency can be expected to vary over time. The conceptual model aims to explain the influence of structural factors on migration decisions, particularly where the impact of these factors on individuals' lives can be expected to vary over different life phases.

To empirically underpin the model, we investigate how the welfare system is perceived and experienced at the individual level, and how such perceptions, knowledge and practices may enter migration decisions. So far, theoretical reasoning on the welfare system in intra-European migration decisions has mainly evolved around the rather one-sided 'welfare magnet hypothesis' (Giulietti, 2014) without considering life course variation in individuals' welfare needs and rights across European welfare systems. Using data from in-depth qualitative interviews with 36 European migrants living in the Netherlands, we show how our model makes an essential contribution to the literature and for understanding the role

of the welfare system (as a macro-level factor) in intra-European migration decisions.

## 4.2 Theory

Migration theories on the role of macro-level circumstances in individual migration decisions can be roughly grouped within two main paradigms: 'functionalist' and 'historical-structural' theories (Castles et al., 2014). Migration theories within the functionalist tradition largely see migrants as rational actors, who decide to move on the basis of a cost-benefit calculation. The push-pull model (Lee, 1966), but also human capital theories (e.g., Stark & Taylor, 1991) and neo-classical models (e.g., Borjas, 1989) fit within this paradigm. Historical-structural theories on the other hand emphasize how social, economic, cultural and political structures constrain and direct the behaviour of individuals, and help explain why real-life migration patterns often deviate from neoclassical predictions. Both functionalist and historical-structural perspectives can be criticized for being too one-sided to understand adequately the complexity of international migration (De Haas, 2010). Where functionalist approaches largely neglect historical causes of movements and assume perfect knowledge of potential migrants, historical-structural approaches mainly focus on political and economic structures and pay little attention to individual preferences. More holistic migration models, like the ability/aspiration model of Carling (2002) and the migration model of De Haas (2010) therefore have proposed a combination of structure and agency to understand international migration decision-making and the resulting flows.

The general theoretical frameworks on international migration have been used to derive specific hypotheses regarding the role of the welfare system in migration decisions. Most prominent in the literature on this subject is the 'welfare magnet hypothesis', which expects migrants to move towards the destinations where they can enjoy the most generous benefits (Borjas, 1999; Giulietti, 2014). The reasoning behind this is rather economic and mostly in line with functionalist theories: welfare states are expected to be valued for their potential to increase household income, and to reduce costs of migration in the shape of risks. A generous welfare system in the destination country is therefore expected to

increase the returns of migration, this way affecting the direction and size of migration flows. The structural perspective however argues that migrants are limited in their decision on where to go due to restrictive migration policies (Giulietti & Wahba, 2012; Razin & Sadka, 2000).

#### 4.2.1 *Migration and the welfare system in the context of Europe*

Within the EU, many legal barriers to migrate between member states have been abolished. Over the past decades, the EU has engaged actively in promoting free movement of EU citizens between its member states and establishing a legal framework to facilitate such movement (European Commission, 2015). Meanwhile, considerable variation exists in the way EU member states have organized their welfare state arrangements (Kuitto, 2011; Scruggs & Allan, 2006). In the absence of barriers to migration, one could therefore expect the differences in welfare systems across Europe to have a particularly strong influence on intra-EU migration. Empirical findings of studies testing the relationship between migration and the welfare system however have been rather mixed. Several studies found no evidence that generous welfare states attract immigrants (Giulietti et al., 2013; Skupnik, 2014), whereas others documented the existence of a welfare magnet effect – albeit the economic impact was moderate (De Giorgi & Pellizzari, 2009; Warin & Svaton, 2008). These mixed findings from previous studies suggest that the role of the welfare state in intra-European migration decisions might be more complex than has been theorized so far.

The migration models of Carling (2002) and De Haas (2011) allow for interpersonal differences in migration decisions by acknowledging that macro-level factors may not affect aspirations and abilities for all individuals equally. However, related to the role of the welfare system in shaping intra-European migration decisions, one could also expect *intra-personal* differences. Within Europe, access to the welfare state is largely tied to life course events, such as the passage from initial education to work, from work to unemployment, from being single to setting up a family, from work to retirement, and so on (De Graaf & Maier, 2017). As individuals' welfare rights and needs change over the life course, the role of welfare state arrangements in migration decisions may vary depending

on the moment of migration within a person's life. Yet the life course has neither been systematically included in theoretical explanations on the relation between welfare systems and migration, nor in models on international migration decisions in general. In result, shifting impacts of macro-level factors on migration decisions of a single individual are not explained from these frameworks. In this study, we therefore claim that it is much needed to better integrate expectations derived from international migration theories with principles from the life course approach. Like previous models on international migration, the life course approach focuses on how people formulate and pursue their life goals (*agency*), and how they may be enabled or constrained by structural opportunities and limitations in their lives (*structure*). However, the life course approach has an additional leading concept: it focuses on the complex interplay of structure and agency *over time* (Cooke & Gazso, 2009). As such, this framework is highly relevant to study the role of welfare systems in current intra-European migration decisions, precisely adding where previous international migration models fall short.

#### 4.2.2 *Introducing the life course approach*

The life course approach is built around five heuristic principles: life-span development, agency, time and place, timing and linked lives (Elder, 1995; Levy & Buhmann, 2016). Each of the five principles is underpinned by a more general notion that individual lives are embedded within webs that stretch across time and space (Bailey, 2009). International migration research seems to increasingly acknowledge the importance of this notion. King (2002) for instance argued that, to fully understand contemporary European migration, a double embeddedness of migration should be recognized. At the macro scale, the study of migration must be embedded in the societies and social processes of both the places of origin and destination, and at the individual scale, migration must be embedded in a migrant's life course. More recently, Collins (2018) described migration as '*an ongoing process where past, present and future are folded together in the emergence of migrant lives*'. However, despite its relevance to our understanding of new migration patterns observed today, the life course approach has not been included



to its full potential in international migration studies yet (Findlay, McCollum, Coulter, & Gayle, 2015; Wingens, De Valk, Windzio, & Aybek, 2011).

### *4.2.3 Towards a dynamic model of migration*

Compared to the literature on international migration, literature on residential mobility has drawn more actively on the life course approach to explain the relation between the likelihood of moving and other life course events, as well as the implications of these events for the preferred residential environments (Clark & Withers, 2007; Coulter, Van Ham, & Findlay, 2016; Geist & McManus, 2008; Mulder & Hooimeijer, 1999). At the micro-level, the principles of agency and linked lives are used to explain how individuals' mobility decisions are configured by preferences, personal ties and exchanges with other people in their social networks (Dykstra & van Wissen, 1999). The principles of timing, life-span development and time and space stress the dynamics that bind individual lives to structural conditions (Coulter et al., 2016). Thus, where expectations on the role of macro-level factors derived from traditional international migration theories are rather static in nature (see Figure 4-1), this is challenged by the life course approach.

## **4.3 Conceptual model**

Figure 4-2 visualizes our conceptual model on contemporary intra-European migration decisions in which we integrate and add on insights from the discussed theories. As in the ability/aspiration model of Carling (2002) and the migration model of De Haas (2010), macro-level characteristics of the country of residence and possible destination countries are evaluated in the light of personal needs and dreams. The outcome of this comparison might either be to stay or to go, and does not only depend on one's aspirations, but also on opportunities to choose the ideal alternative. Innovatively, points A, B and C in the model represent multiple decision points, to illustrate the ongoing nature of contemporary intra-European

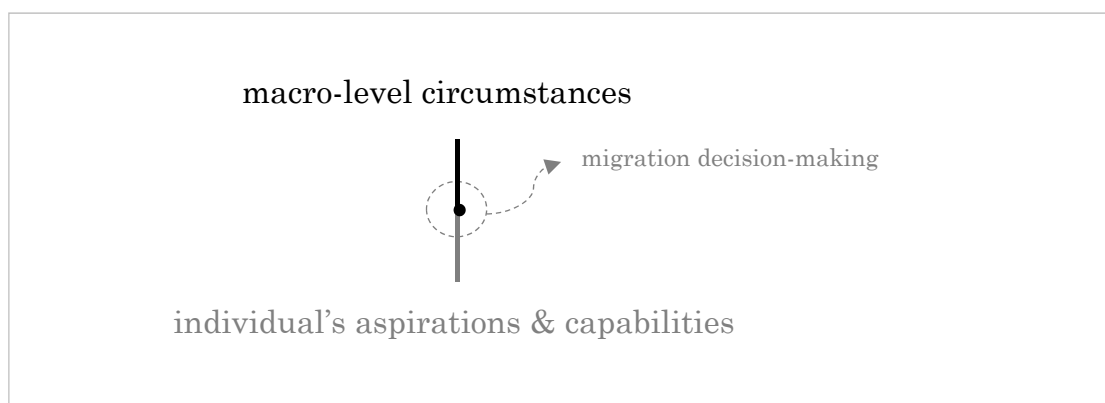


Figure 4-1 Schematic representation of traditional migration models

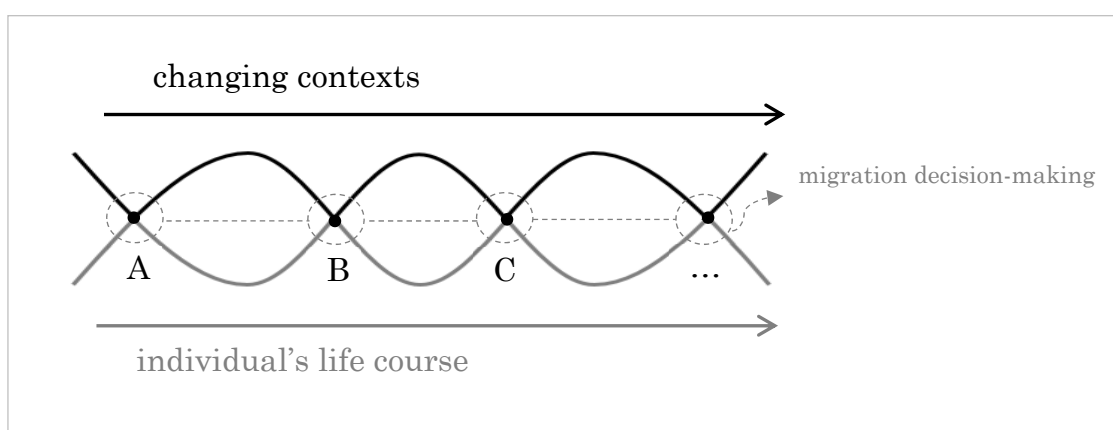


Figure 4-2 The dynamic model of intra-European migration

migration decisions. Furthermore, the model acknowledges that each decision is made at a different point in the individual's life, and possibly under different macro-level circumstances.

In the dynamic model, the principles of the life course approach can be used to explain how the interaction of structure and agency may vary over time. First, the *life-span development* principle argues that life must be viewed as a cumulative process. Thus, the decision on whether or not to migrate at decision point C will depend on earlier evaluations of macro-level circumstances at decision points A and B. Migration decisions in turn should be studied as embedded in the individual's life course, and as shaped by previous experiences and practices. Second, the *timing* principle explains that the personal impact of structural factors depends on where individuals are in their lives. The role of macro-level circumstances in decisions on whether or not to migrate may therefore vary between decision points A, B and C. Third, the principle of *time and place* explains that life courses are located historically as well as spatially. In effect, migration

decisions cannot be understood without taking into account the social context in which they take place. Societal changes over time may result in decisions A, B and C being made under different macro-level circumstances. Furthermore, for someone migrating at decision point A, subsequent decisions to stay or to re-migrate at decision points B and C will be made in a new environment.

The conceptual model can be used to advance our understanding of the role of structural factors in contemporary intra-European migration decisions, particularly when the impact of these factors can be expected to vary over the life course –as is the case for the welfare system. Our theoretical arguments will be illustrated by means of qualitative interview data to show the application of the model for studying the role of the welfare system in intra-European migration decisions.

#### **4.4 Data and Methods**

##### *4.4.1 Data*

For the empirical part of this study, we draw on the qualitative data collection that we carried out within the MobileWelfare project. The MobileWelfare project is a mixed-methods research project, designed to better understand the role of welfare systems in destination and origin countries for migration patterns within and towards Europe. For the qualitative part of the project, interviews were conducted in seven European countries: Norway, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Spain, Turkey and the United Kingdom. In this study we focus on the data collected among European migrants living in the Netherlands at the time of the interview.

The qualitative interviews served two main objectives: (1) To better understand the key factors shaping migration aspirations and decisions, especially factors related to welfare provisions; (2) To gain insight into how access to welfare benefits and transferability are perceived and put into practice by migrants. The interviews mainly consisted of open-ended questions following a cross-national comparative interview guide that covered topics such as the respondent's situation at the country of origin prior to migration, the decision to migrate, organization of

the move abroad, knowledge on and experiences with the welfare system in the origin and destination country and aspirations or plans for the future. Four domains of welfare state arrangements received special attention: child care and (primary and secondary) education, health care, work and old age.

The 36 migrants in our sample were EU citizens born in Poland, Spain and the United Kingdom (UK), residing in the Netherlands at the time of the interview. An overview of the composition of the sample used for this study is presented in Table 4-1. Based on different life course traits, three main profiles of respondents were defined. Hereby the life stage and family situation were leading, whereas the age limit served more as an indicative criterion. The first profile, '*early working-life*', concerned individuals in the early working ages who may be single or dating a partner but have not settled to start a family yet. The second profile, '*(planned) parenthood*', included individuals with dependent children (either in a relationship or single) and individuals living with a partner and thinking of family formation. The third profile, '*(approaching) retirement*', finally was targeted at migrants in older ages, who may or may not be retired yet. Because of the qualitative nature of the project, the aim of the researchers was not to construct nationally representative samples, but instead to diversify. Participants in the project were recruited through various channels (e.g. embassies, migrant organizations, online blogs, forums and Facebook pages, restaurants, shops, personal contacts). As the literature on migration and welfare often expects welfare to be more important to the lower-educated, it was deemed important to include migrants with diverse educational attainments. Different needs of men and women could further result in different experiences and attitudes related to welfare. Level of education and gender were therefore purposefully diversified, resulting in equal numbers of men and women, and individuals with varying educational backgrounds across the origin countries and within each profile. Data collection largely took place in the latter half of 2016. Most participants were living in the 'Randstad' region: the four largest cities of the Netherlands and their surroundings. A small number of interviews was conducted with people in medium-sized cities and rural areas outside the Randstad region. All interviews were conducted by local fieldworkers in English, Dutch or Spanish. The interviews

lasted on average around 60 minutes. In most cases, respondents were interviewed face-to-face while a few (n=7) by Skype.

In the interviews, respondents reflected retrospectively on their previous migration decisions. To limit retrospective biases, the fieldworkers always first asked respondents to describe their situation prior to migration. Only after setting the stage, respondents were asked about their decision to migrate. Furthermore, the sample contained several recent migrants who moved to the Netherlands within the past year, and whose migration experience was therefore still ‘fresh’. Respondents were asked about their future plans to stay or to re-migrate as well, to gain insights into current considerations. Sensitive topics related to welfare usage were only addressed later on in the interview, in order for trust between the fieldworker and the respondent to develop first. In general, respondents seemed comfortable talking about their experiences regarding both migration and the welfare state. On numerous occasions respondents talked openly about their usage of governmental support and the events leading up to it.

*Table 4-1 Distinguished profiles and composition of the sample*

<b>Profile</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Life stage</b>	<b>Family situation</b>	<b>Origin</b>	<b>N</b>
<b>1</b>	18-35	Early working life	No children	Spain	4
				Poland	4
				UK	4
<b>2</b>	25-54	(Planned) parenthood	Couples with plans of having children, or persons with at least one child (up to 16 years) living with partner or not	Spain	4
				Poland	4
				UK	4
<b>3</b>	55+	(Approaching) retirement	Diverse situations	Spain	4
				Poland	4
				UK	4
					<b>36</b>

#### 4.4.2 *Analytical Approach*

From the life course perspective, lives can be seen as biographies made up of a series of events, transitions and experiences, and shaped by the macro-context experienced over the life-span (Bailey, 2009; Dykstra & van Wissen, 1999). Applied to qualitative data, a life course perspective therefore allows one to interpret the meanings and reasons behind people's life stories in the light of past events, socio-historical context, and structural conditions (Cooke & Gazso, 2009). In the current study, we used this approach to gain insight into the way intra-European migration decisions are made. Our attention to immediate experiences and the meanings attached to them helped ensure a data-driven analysis process.

The interviews were recorded, transcribed and subsequently coded using the qualitative software package Nvivo. Data analysis proceeded through three steps. First, all transcripts were read as a whole. This was followed by abstraction of major themes related to migration experiences and welfare, and identification of meaning units associated with these themes across the interviews. Finally, the essence of the particular theme was synthesized into a consistent statement across interviews, thereby moving from the concrete to a more abstract level of understanding. The aim of the analysis was to seek recurrent thematic elements and deviations across the stories told, focusing on the content of the stories rather than dismantling the stories and analysing the segments.

### 4.5 Results

When aiming to understand how migration decisions are embedded in the individual's life course and how welfare systems might play a role in shaping these decisions, it is important to structure our findings as located in time (prior to and after migration) and space (origin or destination country).

#### 4.5.1 *Migration decisions*

Respondents in our study typically did not describe their migration decisions as part of a life-long plan, that is, most individuals did not have a clear timeframe in mind for their stay abroad when making the move. In addition, most respondents

did not look far into the future when deciding whether and where to move. Guiding factors in their migration decisions appeared those that were most relevant at the time of migration, which in turn depended on their life stage and personal situation in terms of family and work. Various respondents described their migration decisions early in life as ‘an adventure’, as they felt they had nothing to lose at that stage. Many of them however stated that their considerations for future migration decisions would be different, as their personal situation had changed in the meantime. The timing of migration in the individuals’ life thus appeared a crucial element for understanding which factors play a role in migration decisions.

Another important element that came up in the interviews was the frequent re-evaluation of the options of staying in the destination country, returning to the origin country or moving somewhere new. Such assessments were often fuelled by other changes in the life course, such as family formation or contrarily a break-up or divorce, the search for a job after finishing education, or the ending of a previous contract. Several individuals described how their plans to stay could alter if changes in their personal situation would require it. One of our Polish respondents for instance answered to the question whether he decided upon his length of stay in the Netherlands prior to migration:

*“No, and we still don’t know. So I don’t have plans like, five years and then coming back or, yeah, I have no idea. I can imagine that I would stay here ‘til the end of my life but I can also imagine that I will come back next year if it’s, if something happens, I don’t know. Children would be one reason, if we have children it would be nice to have family closer. Uhm, if parents need help, I don’t know. If it’s suddenly, there is a flood coming from the sea [laughs], I don’t know.”*

– Polish man profile 1 (‘early working-life’), respondent 15 –

On the other hand, we observed how some life course developments could tie a person – at least temporarily – to a certain location. A British woman in the ‘(planned) parenthood’ profile for instance described how her pregnancy made her

realize for the first time that she could not “simply uplift everything and go back to the UK”. Her strategy to send her children to Dutch day-care, but later on to an international school illustrates her effort to keep the option of remigration open. In line with the life-span development principle of the life course approach, such considerations of respondents show how migration decision-making should be understood as a continuing negotiation process, embedded in the individual’s life course.

#### 4.5.2 *Influence of welfare before migration*

##### Knowledge

When we asked our respondents about their decision to migrate, their motivations seldom included explicit references to the welfare state. In fact, respondents were usually not very informed about welfare state arrangements in the destination country prior to migration. This unawareness partly appeared to follow from a lack of interest in these benefits abroad at the time of migration. A Spanish woman, now almost retired, explained why she did not think about governmental support in case of loss of income when moving to the Netherlands:

*“Well, when I came here I didn’t think about anything. I just thought I’m going to a new country, I’m meeting new people, I’m getting new experiences. (...) I got the chance to do something different for nine months, something fun. And I thought then I come back to Spain. I was 27, so you don’t think about those problems. Yes, but now I’m more worried than back then.”*

– Spanish woman profile 3 ((approaching) retirement), respondent 39 –

Particularly individuals who migrated as young adults before starting a family rarely considered welfare state arrangements in the Netherlands. As we saw before, the factors most important in migration decisions were those most relevant at the time the decision was made. In line with the timing principle, our findings thus can be explained from the fact that in this phase of life many welfare state arrangements simply did not concern these individuals yet.



### Perceptions

Whereas the decision to migrate in several cases was driven by dissatisfaction of respondents with their situation in the origin country prior to their move, in our interviews the welfare system was never explicitly mentioned as one of these factors. In fact, respondents often were quite satisfied with the welfare system in the origin country before migration. Despite their lack of specific information on social protection in the destination country prior to migration, respondents seemed confident that European welfare states in general would be of decent standards, and that they – as EU citizens – would be able to receive support abroad when needed. In addition, respondents' flexible attitude towards migration made returning to the origin country in case of emergencies a feasible option. With return migration as a back-up plan, or the possibility of accessing welfare state arrangements in the origin country, the importance of the welfare system in the destination country appeared less important for these migrants.

### Practices

Throughout the interviews we encountered a couple of situations where welfare state arrangements in the origin country influenced migration decisions. In one of these cases, a Spanish respondent and his Dutch wife purposefully postponed their move from Spain to the Netherlands until after their baby was born to obtain maternity leave under the Spanish system, since the duration was longer there. Other examples concerned respondents who received unemployment benefits from the origin country in the first months after their move to the Netherlands. Such benefits helped them to manage financially in the Netherlands until they found a job here, and as such may have enabled migration. Finally, the availability of grants for individuals to study abroad in several cases contributed to the opportunity of a first move, and typically had an influence on the destinations that were chosen. Consistent with the principle of time and space, the findings illustrate the importance of considering the societal context in which migration decisions are made, i.e. the origin country. This is an important notion for future

research on the subject, as previous studies so far have mainly focused on the welfare state in the destination country.

#### *4.5.3 Influence of welfare after migration*

##### Knowledge

Respondents in our sample typically obtained most information on welfare state arrangements in the Netherlands after arrival, and often only once the need for some type of support arose. Information was accessed through various sources. Some respondents gathered the information they needed on their own, mostly on the internet. Others consulted peers –often fellow migrants–, either within their personal network or through online forums or Facebook groups. Respondents with a Dutch partner mostly relied on their partner and his or her Dutch contacts for help with arrangements in the Netherlands. Several respondents moved to the Netherlands after finding a job there; these persons were usually informed about governmental regulations by their new employer. Finally, sometimes respondents received letters from local authorities which informed them about their rights. A British widow in the ‘(approaching) retirement’ profile, who moved to the Netherlands while receiving a survivor’s allowance from the UK for example was surprised to find out this way that she would soon start receiving a small Dutch pension, as she had passed the legal retirement age. Combinations of the different sources of information occurred as well. Importantly, which sources were available differed between individuals: the channels of a person who moved alone in search of employment in the Netherlands for instance appeared much more limited than those of a person who already had social ties or work there.

Which welfare state arrangements respondents had most knowledge of largely depended on their life stage, and the welfare needs related to it. Respondents in the ‘early working-life’ and ‘(planned) parenthood’ profiles for instance often knew little about old-age pensions, and typically did not actively search for such information as long as retirement still felt far away. Approaching retirement age or hearing the experiences of people in their network on the other hand stimulated older respondents to think about their arrangements for old-age.

Again, in line with the timing principle, such findings indicate how over the life course different welfare state arrangements become salient and how once this happens information is more actively sought.

### Perceptions

In our data, perceptions of welfare state arrangements in the Netherlands were largely shaped by direct experiences with these programs of our respondents themselves, or the people around them. As a result, respondents usually had a limited image of welfare state arrangements they were not entitled to or never made use of. Even after migration, respondents sometimes found it difficult to compare social protection in the origin and destination country, because they only experienced the specific arrangements (recently) in one of these countries. A British woman when asked about differences between the health care system of the UK and the Netherlands, for instance reflected on the question:

*“It is hard to answer, because me and my husband have been here for three years, with our ages, from 25 to 30, it is such as transition in life, there is so much changing anyway. [If I would have] stayed there, would I still be in the same situation as I was when I was 25, or would I be exactly where I am now but just in a different place? Definitely, proved that being in Holland, I believe the healthcare is better and uhm, but it was, I was not thinking, I am gonna move to Holland because the healthcare is better.”*

– British woman profile 2 ((planned) parenthood), respondent 42 –

Which welfare context individuals are most familiar with –the origin country, the Netherlands or yet another destination– thus largely depends on where they had most (recent) experience with welfare. These insights might also explain why our respondents did not seem to engage much in comparisons of welfare in the origin and destination country prior to migration. Without experiences in the Netherlands, the Dutch welfare system could not fully enter their frame of reference yet. The life course approach addresses such shifting perspectives through its principle of time and space.

After migration to the Netherlands, our respondents not necessarily perceived welfare to be better there than in the origin country. Especially the Dutch healthcare system was repeatedly criticized in the interviews. Nevertheless, these negative evaluations seldom seemed to have a large impact on the individual's overall level of satisfaction with the Netherlands. Respondents typically could see upsides and downsides of the system in both the origin and destination country. A British man in the '(planned) parenthood' profile for instance described the Dutch healthcare system as "outrageously expensive" compared to the United Kingdom, yet continued by appreciating how waiting times were much shorter in the Netherlands. The interviews further showed that individuals could be very negative about the Dutch organization of governmental support in one area (e.g., healthcare), while at the same time very positive about another (e.g., support for children and families).

Finally, some respondents mentioned the governmental system of the Netherlands as a whole, or their sense of security here, as attractive features of the country. A Spanish woman in the 'early working-life' profile for instance mentioned how she felt that, in contrast to Spain, "the Dutch government really cares about citizens". In such cases, satisfaction with the welfare system in the Netherlands seemed to affect the overall life satisfaction of individuals after migration, thereby possibly influencing intentions to stay or to migrate again.

### Practices

In the interviews, we observed on several occasions how in some life stages or life domains welfare dependency after migration could form an actual retaining factor. Talking about the educational system in the Netherlands, a Spanish mother for instance argued:

*"We thought that it [the Dutch educational system] could have many advantages. Well, not at the beginning. But when you see how well it works here, we realized it could be very convenient. Not as much because of how good education is here but because of the terrible situation of the educational system in Spain. In Spain education keeps worsening while here it keeps*

*being of a good quality. That pulls you down to stay here. In this sense, I can only see advantages. My daughter will really benefit from this system.”*

– Spanish woman profile 2 (“(planned) parenthood”), respondent 10 –

In another interview, a Polish man in the ‘(approaching) retirement’ profile explained how returning to Poland had become difficult due to his health conditions. An accident at the work place in the Netherlands left him dependent on a wheelchair, therapy and heavy medication, and these needs made him insecure about his possibilities to live in Poland again. The life-span development principle acknowledges the importance of such previous experiences and practices in future decisions.

#### *4.5.4 Variation across skill-level, gender and nationality*

As we argued above, which sources of information on social support were available after migration varied between individuals with different migration histories. Respondents who moved after finding a job for instance were often assisted with formal arrangements in the Netherlands by their new employer. As this scenario occurred more often for individuals with a higher level of education, differences between high- and low-skilled migrants could be observed in this respect. However, although these different migration histories also indicated a more fragile economic position of low-skilled individuals after migration, our data did not support the idea that welfare state arrangements played a more important role in their migration decisions compared to high-skilled individuals.

Another individual characteristic that is sometimes associated with differences in welfare usage is gender. In our study we balanced the number of men and women in the sample as well as over the different subgroups to make sure that experiences of both sexes were represented. No clear gender differences were observed in the experience of the welfare system, migration or the link between the two. Welfare state arrangements that particularly affected mothers, such as maternity leave, prenatal care and child care, were for instance evaluated as important by fathers as well.

Finally, our sample consisted of respondents from three different origin countries: Poland, Spain and the UK. Although substantial differences can be observed in the organization of welfare in each of these countries, the *way* in which welfare systems play a role in migration decisions seemed rather consistent over the three countries. That is, perceptions of the welfare system in the destination country were mainly shaped after migration, whereby arrangements in the Netherlands were compared to those experienced in the origin country. How the Dutch system was evaluated as such depended in part on the origin country of an individual. Nevertheless, whether and which welfare state arrangements were important to individuals appeared to vary more over the different life stages than between countries of origin.

#### 4.6 Migration decisions as embedded in the life course

In line with the proposed conceptual model (see Figure 4-2), our findings illustrate how the connection between a macro-level factor like the welfare system and intra-European migration decisions should be understood in a dynamic way. The principles of the life course approach provide useful tools to interpret, and in turn hypothesize on these dynamic connections. First, in line with the life-span development principle, from the interviews it becomes clear that intra-European migration decision-making is an ongoing process, which does not stop once a person has migrated. Furthermore, people's experiences with certain welfare state arrangements in either the origin or destination country largely determined their perceptions of the welfare system. Previous decisions to stay or to go, as well as one's broader experiences can therefore be expected to have an important influence on (subsequent) migration decisions. Second, because welfare state arrangements in Europe are strongly tied to life course events, we found individuals' knowledge and perceptions of the welfare system, as well as its importance to them, to change over the life course. As intra-European migration decisions were mainly shaped by those factors relevant to individuals at the time of migration, the role of welfare state arrangements in migration decisions therefore varied between individuals migrating in different life stages. These findings fit the timing principle of the life course approach and can be applied more broadly to explain why macro-level

conditions may have a different impact on individual migration decisions in different phases of life. Third, from the principle of time and space we understand how migration decisions should be located in the broader social context in which they are made. In our study, a distinction between the context as perceived by individuals *prior to* and *after* migration appeared crucial. Prior to migration, individuals in our sample typically had limited information on welfare state arrangements abroad, which does not support the idea of the welfare system attracting migrants. Rather, the welfare system influenced migration decisions through the way it was experienced in the country of residence, which could either be the origin country prior to migration or the destination country after. Our findings further highlighted that the macro-level circumstances an individual faces are different before and after migration, and that these changed circumstances will impact the way subsequent decisions to stay or to re-migrate are made. Thus, after migration the destination context can be perceived as a new potential origin context, and the factors stimulating the initial migration decision might be different from those encouraging further migration or settlement. The ongoing and dynamic nature of contemporary intra-European migration decisions – and the macro-level circumstances shaping them – should thus be more acknowledged, as we aimed to do with the conceptual model we suggest.

#### 4.7 Discussion

In his plea for a new understanding of European migration, King (2002) argued that a double embeddedness of migration should be recognized: at the macro scale, the study of migration must be embedded in the societies and social processes of both the places of origin and destination, and at the individual scale, migration must be embedded in a migrant's life course. Although international migration research increasingly seems to recognize such embeddedness of migration in time and space, so far the life course has not been integrated in conceptual models on international migration. This is unfortunate, as the impact of macro-level circumstances on individual migration decisions may vary over time, particularly for factors that are intrinsically connected to the life course. In the current study we therefore combined insights from existing international migration theories

with insights from the life course approach to advance our understanding of the role the welfare system might play in intra-European migration decisions.

In our qualitative data, we found little support for a strong and attracting influence of the welfare system in the destination country on migration decisions of European citizens prior to migration. Migration decisions were typically shaped by the factors most relevant to the individual at the time of migration, without looking too far into the future. Furthermore, information on welfare state arrangements was mainly sought once the need for some sort of governmental support arose. The *timing* of migration thus provides a possible explanation for our findings: most respondents migrated when they were not reliant on the welfare state (yet), and therefore did not really consider this in their migration decision. The principles of *life-span development* and *time and space* further shed light on why welfare systems are rather complex to compare for individuals prior to migration. From the interviews it became clear that people's perceptions of the welfare system are largely shaped by their own experiences, or the experiences of people in their network (*life span development*). Related to this, individuals often had a limited image of the welfare system in the destination country prior to migration, which made it difficult to compare it to their status quo (*time and space*). On the other hand, the interviews indicated three alternative ways in which the welfare system may influence migration decisions. First, prior to migration, welfare state arrangements in the origin country may shape or enable the move abroad by providing a (financial) safety net that protects against risks associated with migration. Second, after migration, general satisfaction with the way the government of a destination country organizes its welfare state may increase individuals' intentions to stay. Finally, welfare dependency can have a retaining effect when individuals are uncertain that they can receive the arrangements they need somewhere else. This may equally apply for those in the original countries of origin, who decided not to move, as for those who moved once and for whom the country of destination became de facto the new country of origin. In our study we per definition only observed the latter for the destination context, yet possibly such forces occur in the origin context as well. This could mean that individuals who are dependent on welfare state arrangements are less likely to



migrate in the first place. These three alternative influences appear more prevalent in our study than an attracting role of the welfare system in the destination country prior to migration and deserve further investigation in future research.

Clear consistencies can be observed in the way we incorporated the life course approach into the model of international migration with previous literature on residential mobility (see Coulter et al., 2016). As has been suggested before (Geist & McManus, 2008), mobility within and across national borders nowadays may operate to a large extent through similar mechanisms. Nevertheless, our study also points towards an important difference between residential mobility and international migration. In contrast to residential mobility, international migration entails the crossing of national borders. Although these borders nowadays seem much less rigid than in the past, particularly within the EU, our interview data illustrated that this change of national contexts still has some important implications. In the case of international migration, individuals appeared to have rather limited knowledge and perceptions of the destination context prior to their move, whereas with internal mobility such knowledge and perceptions can be expected to be much more complete. This is a crucial difference, particularly because individuals are likely confronted with much larger changes in contextual factors in the case of international migration (even when it is within Europe) compared to internal mobility. In addition, international migration complicates the gathering of information due to differences in language, customs and systems in general. These insights not only emphasize that a distinct model for international migration is still desirable; they also draw our attention to the importance of including migrants' (lack of) knowledge of macro-level circumstances in the receiving country when investigating the effect of these factors on international migration decisions.

To conclude, the contributions of our study to the existing literature are threefold. First, using qualitative interview data, we were able to show the way perceptions of the welfare system are shaped at the individual level, and in turn may enter intra-European migration decisions. Second, our findings clearly illustrate the relevance of locating migration decisions in the individual's life

course when studying the role of the welfare system in shaping these decisions. Our study as such provides an explanation for the mixed empirical findings in previous studies. Finally, our conceptual model that incorporates principles of the life course approach provides a valuable framework to explain the way structural factors can influence migration decisions in the contemporary European migration context. We add a much needed dynamic element surpassing critiques on the static nature of previous migration models, and their understanding of migration as a singular event rather than a process (Carling & Collins, 2018; De Haas, 2010; King, 2002; Van Hear et al., 2018). As such our model is useful not just to formulate hypotheses on the role of welfare systems in intra-European migration decisions, but also of other structural factors, particularly those for which the impact on individual lives varies over time. Studying migration decision-making across the life course is much needed to understand what role migration plays in individual lives at different points in time. Only in this way we will be able to understand the dynamics of migration flows between countries, not only in Europe but also elsewhere.

