The Philippine Research Project Team (PRPT) on marriage migration has just completed its pre-research phase. It discussed the concept of “diaspora” in its search of a theoretical framework and conducted a review of related literature. This paper contains ideas on “diaspora” which we found to have potential as analytical constructs, most of them coming from Dr. Avtar Brah’s article entitled “Diaspora, Borders, and Transnational Identities.”

**Diaspora: A Range of Definitions**

Filipino activists and advocates like me in the field of international labour migration have long used “diaspora” to refer to the “scattering” or “dispersal” the world over of more than 8 million Filipino workers. Beyond this, we have not done any closer investigation. Not until now, that is.

**The Classical Diaspora Paradigm**

Milton Esman (1996: 316) provides the “classic” definition. A diaspora is “a minority ethnic group of migrant origin which maintains sentimental or material links with its land of origin, either because of social exclusion, internal cohesion or other geo-political factors. It is never assimilated into the whole society but in time, develops a diasporic consciousness which carries out a collective sharing of space with others.”

Safran (1991) identifies the key components of the classical diaspora paradigm: dispersal from a homeland, collective memory of the homeland, lack of integration in the receiving country, a “myth” of return, and a persistent link with the homeland.

What this paradigm underscores are two fundamental tenets: the link between a group and a particular territory (a homeland), and an essentialist identity paradigm of the nation-state (Toninato).

Under postmodernism, diaspora ceases to be merely descriptive of a group. Postmodernist discourse now refers to a “condition” which arises from the “experience of being from one place and of another,” and is linked “with the idea of particular sentiments towards the homeland, whilst being formed by those of the place of settlement. This place is one where one is constructed in and through difference, and yet is one that produces differential forms of cultural accommodation or syncretism: in some versions, hybridity” (Clifford: 1994).

The process takes place in the context of globalisation and cultural mixing (hybridity/syncretism).

Clifford’s main ideas are as follows:

- Diasporas think globally but live locally. They are “bonds of ethnic ties, and the fixity of boundaries have been replaced by shifting and fluid identity boundaries…that alter the ethnic landscape.”
- Selective accommodation: the desire to stay and be different. Identity becomes more syncretic—e.g., British-born Cypriots, Australian Greeks, British Blacks. This challenges the notion of a nation-state as the embodiment of a given national group, constructing it as “trans-ethnic and transnational.” (Implication: The myth of the purity of the bloodline of a receiving nation-state is challenged and deconstructed, eventually replaced by a new concept of a transnational, trans-ethnic one.)
- While their specific identities imply a certain degree of boundedness and stability, diasporas must be understood as social and cultural processes of movement and change. Emphasis is on the particularities of the process of territorial and culture shifts such as issues on the destabilising effects of transition and movement of the individual’s cultural certainties, and the changes that take place in all social parts, not only in the diasporic group.

This interpretation of “diaspora” refers to a process at the holistic level (political, cultural, and economic dimensions at the micro-meso-macro levels), and is not limited to group or intergroup relations/dynamics.

While their specific identities imply a certain degree of boundedness and stability, diasporas must be understood as social and cultural processes of movement and change. Imagined as communities, diasporas are transnational in nature rather than mere ethnic or immigrant minority groups situated in a specific nation-state since they represent “ways of conceiving community, citizenship, and identity as simultaneously here and elsewhere.”

Diasporas are viewed as “cultural and social products of transnational capital” that “follow and express...”
Members of a diasporic community may stake out their claim in the receiving country and assert their identity as citizens.

Brah (2003) offers a set of powerful ideas on diaspora, including the view that diaspora is a historical narrative about journeys that involve settling down in another place outside the homeland. The narrative is also about the different forms of relationality internal to and among diasporic formations. As an example, Brah cites the history of South Asians in Britain which is different from, albeit related to, the history of the South Asians in the United States or in Africa.

The identity of the diaspora as an imagined community is neither fixed nor pre-given. Brah describes diasporic journeys as “embarked upon, lived and re-lived through multiple modalities...for example, of gender, ‘race,’ class, religion, language and generation.” Thus, they are “differentiated, heterogeneous, contested spaces, even as they are implicated in the construction of a common ‘we’.”

On the desire to return to the homeland, Brah asserts that not all diasporas sustain an ideology of “return.” Members of a diasporic community may stake out their claim in the receiving country and assert their identity as citizens. For instance, a Filipina married to a Japanese and residing in Japan may continue to regard the Philippines as home because of social exclusion, the denial of what Brah calls “everyday lived experience.” Another Filipina in the same situation may assert herself to be Japanese precisely to oppose the narrative that she cannot be one.

Brah uses as a conceptual grid the three concepts of diaspora, border, and politics of location in a historicised analysis of current trans/national movements of people, information, cultures, commodities and capital. Since
Finally, instead of discussing diasporas in terms of majority-minority relations, Brah puts forth a “multi-axial understanding of power” to emphasise that one group of migrants constituted as a “minority” along one dimension of differentiation may actually be constructed as “majority” using another dimension. Class, gender, race, sexual orientation, generation, and religion are among the different axes of differentiation. The multi-axial understanding of power concerns itself with the following:

(i) Analysis of what makes a diasporic formation similar to or different from another
- Who travels?
- When? Under what circumstances?
  What socio-economic, political, and cultural conditions mark the trajectories of these journeys?
- What regimes of power inscribe the formation of a specific diaspora?

(ii) Analysis of the relational positioning of a diasporic group in a given context
- What are the circumstances of arrival and settling down in the country of destination?
- How and in what ways do these journeys conclude and intersect in specific places, specific spaces, and specific historical conjunctures?
- How and in what ways is a group included/excluded within the social relations of class, gender, racism, sexuality, or other axes of differentiation in the country to which it migrates?
- What is the nature and type of processes in and through which the
collective “we” is constituted?
- Who is empowered and who is
disempowered in the construction of
the “we”?
- How are social divisions negotiated
in the construction of the “we”?
- What is the relationship of the “we”
to its “others”? Who are these “others”? For Brah, this is the start
of deconstructing “regimes of
power” which differentiates one
group from others in order to include
or exclude it from the constructions
of the “nation” and the body politic,
and which inscribe them as juridical,
political, and psychic subjects.”

Concluding Comments
I find Brah’s concepts on diaspora,
particularly the multi-axial understanding
of power, extremely relevant to the
analysis of the phenomenon of marriage
migration, weaving as it does the
political, economic, social, and cultural
dimensions and processes at the subject,
community, and macro levels. They
provide multiple analytic tools with
which to view marriage migrants in the
totality of their situation. Moreover, they
are radical and powerful, particularly for
the marginalised as is often the case of
marriage migrants. They expose and
challenge regimes of power that inscribe
the situation of migrants, and open the
possibilities for the creation of trans-
ethnic and transnational societies
founded on respect for human rights,
and ensuring peoples’ security, devoid of
the majority/minority distinction.

In using diaspora as an analytic lens in
the context of marriage migration, it
may also be worth considering the
following: the orientation and nature of
activities in diaspora communities of
the wives, (e.g., mutual support, welfare,
and political organising to get recognition
from the state), and the communities’
links with other immigrant formations
and broad social movements.

References

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