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8 Exploring the mobile self: Shifting from monolithic categorisation to dynamic identifications

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ABSTRACT

When planning to investigate the topic of *individual identities* through empirical research, a very extensive choice of conceptual and theoretical underpinnings is available. Multiple academic debates in the social sciences and humanities provide distinct perspectives, which sometimes complement each other, but which can as well seem contradictory. Therefore, the specific circumstances, such as those that individuals face when frequently moving in-between places and cultural settings, or across political, institutional and occupational boundaries, require attention when designing 'identity research'. It appears crucial to account for mobile ontologies, i.e., ways of being in the world, which go beyond established life modes in sedentary societies. For example: certain social identity categories, such as social class, gender or profession that are salient in one very particular location, become more or less relevant for the international mover over time, they transform their meaning according to the changing context and to evolving individual situations. Lived experiences, specific events and turning points throughout a life course, such as separations, encounters or professional achievements, become most significant in individual narratives, whereas certain externally ascribed categorizations might fade. Therefore, this chapter draws attention to specificities when studying identities of 'movers', by confronting conceptual framings with paradigmatic changes that are supported by the *mobilities turn*. Whilst building on previous scholarly discussions, I propose to nurture *emic* research perspectives in the future, in order to prevent reductionist and essentializing categorizations of individuals. The here proposed dynamic and multidirectional notion of *mobile identifications* allows for a more thorough understanding of non-linear, non-sedentary individual life courses and, thus, for the appreciation of mobile ontologies.

INTRODUCTION

The quest for a highly qualified workforce resonates stronger than ever across geographies and sectors of activity in various local settings. Representatives of nation states, cities and employing organizations attempt to position locations as appealing places to work and to live, thereby entering into an exasperated competition to attract and retain so-called 'global talent'. Large scale international surveys and rankings evaluate, for example, the 'talent competitiveness' or 'liveability' of countries and cities (EIU, 2021; INSEAD, 2021), and employer branding initiatives try to capture the attention of potential employees at a global

scale. Increasingly fragmented talent pools and emerging forms of work relations, such as gig work or platform engagements, are adding to the challenges that employers are facing. Anecdotes about top talents who suddenly resign, in order to settle elsewhere, despite extraordinary compensation packages and utmost promising career trajectories, point to a deficient understanding of "who these international movers really are", as practitioners point out. Indeed, analytical classifications of the international workforce in global mobility studies neglect at times to conceive of identities as dynamic assemblages that are 'in flux' and that lead to *ephemeral identifications*. Essentializing accounts of, for example, national identities or professions limit our comprehension and research horizons. Fixed categorizations of "mover types" can lead to distortions, as they might fail to provide a deeper understanding of a person's *situated belongingness* and relatedness to mobility itself.

What does it take to grasp transnational, 'neo-nomadic' life courses, such as labelled by d'Andrea (2006), in all their specificities and contemporary complexities? How can researchers and practitioners foster their understanding about what is commonly referred to as 'identities' of international movers? Comprehending what one could call 'mobile identities' is an endeavour that does not solely require the critical questioning of static, monolithic identity conceptualizations and underlying theoretical assumptions. First and foremost, broader analytical perspectives, beyond the individual as stand-alone psychological entity, may allow for more extensive explorations and provide thorough socio-anthropological and processual insights (Salazar, 2018). When elucidating life-courses characterized by repeat-mobilities, organizations and other 'social fields' (Levitt & Schiller, 2004), it appears crucial to embrace relational and affective ties across places and beyond organizationally constructed rationales or social norms. This means that the investigation of professional and geographical moves and its evolution over time entails more than condensing apparent features, which can be retrieved from employment data or individual curricula vitae, i.e., through an *etic* approach. Locations, time periods in-between moves, professional positions or frequency of moves can certainly give an indication about 'mobility patterns' and 'global career types' (Dickmann et al., 2018). In addition, social identity categories such as nationality, gender, family status or educational degrees are handy analytical filters, that are often leveraged to circumscribe individual identities, such as demonstrated by Briscoe and colleagues (Briscoe et al., 2018). When complementing such analytical segmentation with cognitive rationales about 'motivations to move', as retrieved in large scale surveys and in various sorts of psychological profiling, the typification of international movers allows, indeed, for general distinctions. However, the resulting ascribed categorizations, conceal the very *mean-*

ing that individuals attribute to their own moves and to nomadic life modes, beyond normatively encouraged scripts that focus on mobilities as a means to achieve "career success", "job performance" or a "global mindset" (Cerdin & Pargneux, 2009; Ramsey et al., 2016; Zhao & Zhou, 2020). Analytical categorizations tend, thus, to reproduce normative, sedentary expectations, thereby limiting the possibility to generate novel insights with regards to mobility-related specificities. They prevent recognizing international movers as distinct societal group, whose world views and views of themselves are marked by their experiences.

Moreover, the organizational context with its career opportunities and its demand for geographical mobility, coincides with socio-economic and political macro environments, as well as with individual life spheres, both of which are constitutive for the international mover's lived experiences and, thus, identifications. As physical moves reinforce the need to face negotiations and arbitrages across multiple life spheres, or "domains of existence" (Bertaux, 2016), individuals are forced to reflect on the *meaningfulness* of their moves and mobile lives in an intersubjective manner, in close relation to "significant Others" (Mead, 1932). Mobility choices are not merely rationale and they are not made in a void. They emerge through dense, entangled life situations and lived experiences 'on the move'. Indeed, the attribution of meaning, as well as *identifications* are influenced by family histories and interactions in context. As Salazar reminds us, mobility research "calls attention to the myriad ways in which people become parts of translocal networks and linkages" (2018, p. 2), and thus, it demands for research epistemologies that consider movement as a social process, which dynamically enacts a person's rapport to the world, to life in general and to work more specifically. Therefore, rather than attempting to explain mobility rationales through an *etic* approach, from an outside perspective, I suggest that an *emic* approach towards "mobile identities" seems more sensible. Such a perspective allows for thick descriptions, whilst giving room for unexpected individual narratives to emerge.

Accounting for the grand diversity of individual life courses and *identifications* which transpire or evaporate along the way, involves to empathetically dive into spheres of mobility, movement and trans-locality and to understand how they are lived by those who are close to it, who are in it and into it. Therefore, rather than conceptualizing *identity* as a static construct or a substance that one can attribute, possess or lose, I propose ways to explore the everchanging assemblage of experiences and events, of encounters that affect the "mobile self", whilst moving physically or imaginarily. Inspired by Villesèche and colleagues (Holck et al., 2016; Villesèche et al., 2018) who explore the relevance of different paradigmatic perspectives on 'identity' for determining adequate diversity, equity and inclusion policies, this essay attempts to propose a more fluid, processual conceptualization

of identities in global mobility studies. The goal is to understand *identifications* and their temporal, spatial or situational expressions inductively, without imposing belongingness to pre-defined identity categories and groups (nationality, gender, profession). By paying attention to *how* certain situations and events of international mobility unfold in conversations with international movers, by tracing their ways of attributing *meanin*g and by noting *affective turns* in narratives, one might observe adherence or alienations and therefore generate dense insights. When analysing conversations with movers, it appears helpful to proceed in an iterative manner and to go beyond addressed themes. This allows to reflect on processes and loops that emerge from individual narratives and which point to *multidirectional modes of identification*.

Global mobility practitioners and service providers who accompany individual geographic 'relocations' in various ways, might likewise benefit from momentarily stepping-back from conventional assumptions and operational jargon, whilst nurturing an empathetic understanding of movers. This again would allow to develop additional support services for movers at pivotal stages of their lives. Overall, it appears insufficient and largely unsatisfactory to categorize and to point out commonalities and differences amongst those who are moving or are being moved: despite their similarities they are not alike, despite their distinctive traits and ventures they are connected in manifold ways. Thus, to gain more nuanced insights for theory and praxis, I wish to encourage future investigations on *what it means* for individuals to move, how mobilities *affect* movers and their life and work modes. As follows, I expose different disciplinary understandings of identity and identifications, whilst addressing the limitations of static identity categorizations when it comes to comprehending the mobile self, mobility experiences and related world views. Overall, in the light of future investigations, I wish to draw the reader's attention to alternative perspectives and epistemologies that may provide a deeper understanding of *mobile ontologies* for the field of global mobility research and praxis.

STATIC IDENTITY CONCEPTUALISATIONS ARE NOT FLAWLESS – BUT WHAT ARE THE ALTERNATIVES?

Management and organisation scholars note the inflationary use of the term identity when stating for example that "identity is one of the most popular topics in contemporary organization studies" (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003, p. 1163). Echoing these voices, Corlett and colleagues (2017) recently re-iterated a call to further critically engage with the registers that constitute our own disciplinary assumptions on identity. Others encourage to steadily interrogate and problematize believes and restraining classifications of identity in management and

organization studies, by building on well-established knowledge from other disciplines (Coupland & Brown, 2012; Knights & Clarke, 2017). In response to their call, I suggest to not only build the understanding of "mobile identities" on recent studies in the applied sciences, such as migration or management and organization studies, but to pay tribute to decades of socio-anthropological work that addresses globalization related phenomena in late modern societies. Over the past decades social scientists have conducted various debates about the theoretical value, the conceptual clarity, as well as the empirical applicability of the concept "identity". The extensive range of interpretations and applications of the term is due, amongst others, to distinct contextual frames, political influences and different philosophical underpinnings. This article does not allow to explicate paradigmatic distinctions in detail, nonetheless it seems crucial to point to a few conceptualisations that give ground for many contemporary discussions, when exploring empirical implications of the notion "identity" in general and in the context of human mobilities more specifically. Scholars like Descombes (2013), Jenkins (2008) or Sen (2006) encourage us to more systematically reflect on the concept of identity and to explore meanings and underlying assumptions of identity concepts for a specific context and for distinct phenomena, before leveraging them for empirical research or theorizing. The following brief review shall therefore initiate further critical reflections and help to "interrogate the underlying assumptions [regarding identity] rather than re-producing them", as postulated by Corlett and colleagues (2017, p. 351).

Indeed, from a psychological perspective a person's self-concept embraces intra-personal aspects of the self, including values and beliefs, preferences and habits, traits and aptitudes, that make the individual feel distinct from others (Erikson, 1968; Marcia, 1991; Schwartz et al., 2010). However, one cannot neglect the *social dimension of identity*, the human need to identify with other human beings, to identify with a group or belong to a community, where intra-personal aspects resonate within a collective. Social identity is therefore as much about commonalities as about distinctiveness and difference, or, in Jenkin's words "differences and similarities are implicit in one another; one does not make sense without the other (Jenkins, 1996, pp. 3-5). Understanding identity and identification therefore entails to account for social processes and interactions, as well as for its meaning for "the self". Despite the general agreement about the social dimension of identity, its empirical applications differ across research traditions and according to epistemological assumptions within study fields. Neighbouring disciplines, such as psychology and social psychology relate to distinct, but nonetheless interrelated terminologies. Erikson's (1972) psychological theory on individual psychological development is, for example, built around the concept of a

"threefold identity", that corresponds to psychoanalytical perspectives: the identity of the self ('ego'), the personal identity (integration of context) and the group identity (feeling of belonging). He distinguishes between external, "objective" identity marks and individually experienced "subjective" identity marks, which reflects the traditional dualism in Western thought as fostered historically by Descartes and Humes. It seems important to note though that Erikson conceptualises identity as a dynamic process of co-construction and mutual recognition between society and the individual.

In the European tradition of social psychology, social identity theory (SIT) is the most broadly known and frequently cited paradigm in management studies. It coins the notion of "identity", rather than "self" and encourages to explore group interrelations and collectively shared identities (Tajfel & Turner, 1979, 1986; Turner & Reynolds, 2001). Social identity in SIT is being defined as ''that part of an individual's self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership'' (Tajfel, 1978, p. 63). This tradition further distinguishes "personal identity" and "social identity" marks in self-categorization theory (SCT) (Turner, 1982; Turner et al., 1987). In comparison, Northern American social psychologists (Burke & Stets, 1999; McCall & Simmons, 1966; Stryker & Serpe, 1982) rather refer to the notion of "self" than "identity" and emphasise the importance of exploring "the self in context", drawing on pragmatist, symbolic interactionalist and social behaviourist thought of the Chicago school (James, Dewey, Mead & Blumer). This tradition pays thereby greater attention to situational influences and its inter-relatedness with internal dynamics, by examining "how social structures affect the structure of self and how structure of the self-influences social behaviour" (Stryker & Burke, 2000, p. 285). Thus, in symbolic interactionism self-awareness and self-images do play a crucial role in mediating all kinds of social relationships and human interactions. Vice versa, social interactions and communication are conceptualised as constitutive for meaning making amongst actors, leading, for example, to closer social ties or to labelling the other (Mead, 1934). Brubaker and Cooper (2000), further insist on relational and processual characteristics, and prefer therefore referring to identifications and categorizations, rather than identity. When claiming that identifications are "intrinsic to social life", they oppose earlier structuralist logics of identity. They reiterate, "how one identifies oneself and how one is identified by others may vary greatly from context to context; self- and other-identification are fundamentally situational and contextual." (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000, p. 14). Moreover, sociologists recognize that an individual might refer to collective social identities, such as nationality, ethnicity, age or gender at times, however, complex and dynamic

social interactions, such as mobilities and migrations, contribute to the dissemination, hybridization or confluence of cultural traits and make these categories more or less salient (Axelrod, 1997; Cuche, 1996; Dagnino, 2015; Wikan, 2002). Consequently, increasing fragmentations of life modes and life courses in contemporary societies leads scholars to reflect on individual identities beyond the opposition of structure and agency, by recognizing the fluidity and ephemeral nature of identifications and, thus, of the "mobile self".

Furthermore, hypermodernity and neoliberalism offer, according to poststructuralist thought, an increasing choice and infinite possibilities for individuals to compose with these choices, towards a plurality of existence, as Foucault suggests, where the individual becomes more and more autonomous, reinventing new modes of existence, beyond institutional systems. The late modern being is comprehended as multiple, complex and continuously evolving in its rapport not only to the world, but as well to the self (Baumann, 2005; Lahire, 1998; Maffesoli, 2016). Such contemporary societal complexities, paired with the megatrend of globalization, demand greater reflexivity from individuals, in order to understand and give meaning to their lived experiences. Socio-anthropologists confirm, indeed, the transformation of ways of being and ways of belonging (Levitt & Schiller, 2004) through globalization and migration and observe the advent of more complex social and personal identities. On the other side, for Hannerz (1990), belonging to a "world culture" opens one unique network of social relationships, favours interconnectedness and lets "collective structures of meaning" emerge (1990, p. 239). Abélès (2008) likewise observes individual perceptions of belonging to a global world, beyond attachments to territories or cultural identities, whereas Appadurai (1990) calls out deeply perspectival constructions, "inflected by historical, linguistic and political situatedness of different sorts of actors." (1990, p. 296).

As this brief review illustrates, there are manifold ways of analysing and interpreting individual identities and the "self" in context. Yuval-Davis (2010) underlines quite rightly that the use of different theories of identity is complementary and that it "can add to, rather than detract from, its validity, as long as their boundaries in specific social contexts remain clear." In the given context it seems therefore important to interpret different conceptualizations of identity under consideration of the very phenomenon of 'mobility', where specific research problems guide our reflections about their empirical utility. I therefore suggest retaining the interactional and processual character of identifications in context when exploring highly fragmented and possibly ephemeral identifications and categorizations.

CONCEIVING OF "MOBILE IDENTITIES": SHIFTING FROM THE MONOLITHIC TO THE POLYPHONIC

Although sedentariness is deemed to be the societal norm, the ways in which social identities are constructed through discursive practice, in and to the benefit of local settings and populations, are not necessarily universally applicable. Indeed, locations where the majority of people stays in or nearby a specific location and socio-cultural setting throughout a lifetime may provide rather stable societal and identitarian conditions. In such a setting one may identify others as a member of a particular social class, a professional guild, an organization or a religious or ethnic community, as Lahire (1998) conveys. Perceptible identifiers, such as apparel, chosen words, dialects, or traditions and rituals do not only orient the observer, but they likewise guide individuals' identifications with a social group. However, someone who moves to a given local setting "from the outside", and who even might move on to other places at a later stage, does not necessarily know and understand culture specific meanings in the same way as "locals". From a sociological standpoint and along with Bourdieuan theorizing, they do rarely possess the needed social, cultural nor symbolic capital (cf. Bourdieu, 1977; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). To start with, she or he is perceived and probably classified as the newcomer, the foreigner, the stranger. In addition, someone who newly settles in is not as easily "readable" by local fellows and not easily categorizable according to local standards, which may affect self-identifications and potentially broaden the options for "identity strategies" (Pierre, 2003). Under these circumstances, conceptualizing identity as a solid and substantial core of a person's selfhood seems to be somewhat illusionary in fluctuating settings, even more so when the phenomenon of individual movement comes into play: be it social class mobility, occupational or geographical mobility. When movement across borders or socially constructed boundaries of any kind occurs, individuals are exposed to new situations and they interact in unfamiliar settings. They are simultaneously dissolving and fostering relational ties, they may distance themselves from some groups wile adhering to others, which means that identifications are oscillating accordingly. As sociological studies show, the sphere of action and agency of individuals who move between different social or professional domains manifests in intertwined, intersubjective affinities and relations (Sainsaulieu, 2001). Personal resources and experiences are brought into play in unfamiliar settings and allow the individual to identify, or not, with the other in a very specific situation and context.

As stated earlier, in a hypermodern context marked by economic, social and cultural globalisation, by international migration and instant worldwide com-

munication, individuals and groups are increasingly exposed to the Other: unfamiliar life modes, dress codes, modes of interaction and communication in private and professional spheres seemingly intertwine and hybridize with the familiar. While, at the surface, life and work styles across national borders have become more similar, individuals have to continuously arrange with distinct conditions and societal expectations in their local environments and across different life spheres and spaces, as anthropologists demonstrate (Appadurai, 1996; Augé, 2008; Hannerz, 1990). Movers re-invent their life modes, re-articulate who they are and how they narrate their choices and encounters: in a polyphonic and dynamic way, to exist or to resist, as Glissant (1981, 1990) suggests. They multiply their identifications across national and cultural boundaries and develop identity strategies in a more or less conscious manner (Camilleri, 1992; Camilleri et al., 1998; Pierre, 2003), be it in the case of physical or imaginary mobilities. Strategies and relationalities of the mobile individual are multi-layered and in continuous flux, rather than inert. They are constituted and applied translocationally (Anthias, 2012) and situationally.

Whilst constraints, as well as opportunities, are said to emerge from multiscalar contexts, which are imposed on international movers along the transnational chain (Dahinden, 2017), the degree of individual agency to create and develop "identities" remains equivocal. Environmental factors and macro contexts, such as migration regimes or migrant status in a society may favour or inhibit identifications with a place or a nation state and thereby affect ways and feelings of belonging – momentously or constantly. However, only few management scholars investigate processes of mobile identifications beyond static categorizations. Özkazanc-Pan (2019a) confirms that "mobile ontology has yet to impact the ways in which management and organization studies as a scholarly field conceptualizes and studies people, difference and work contexts." (2019, p. 478). Calás et al. (2013), as well as Özkazanc-Pan and Calás (2015), attempt developing a "mobile ontology" from a transnational lens, articulating an optimistic vision of the "mobile self". Indeed, management scholars tend to refer to identity in mobility situations rather in precarious terms, for example when reifying identity as something that is "threatened" (Collins & Bertone, 2017; Petriglieri, 2011), that can "get lost" (McNulty, 2012; McNulty & Moeller, 2017; Shaffer & Harrison, 2001) or is "sacrificed" and "relinquished" (Salomaa, 2018) through international moves.

In order to determine how to conceptualize identities in global mobility studies and how to empirically explore categorizations and identifications of the "mobile self", research epistemologies condition further choices. As such, deductive, explanatory approaches require to establish analytical categories, for example to define associated sampling criteria and to demonstrate how specific "groups"

act, decide, move etc. Standardised categorizations allow to a certain extent for comparative studies, such as country comparisons or large-scale longitudinal studies. However, the very grouping of individuals under specific categories in functionalist approaches derives often from a jargon that has developed historically and is strongly influenced by research scales and perspectives, often marked by the lens of the nation-state (macro) or the organizational (meso) lens. With regards to organizational perspectives on global mobility of individuals, one can observe a well-established jargon. However, certain categorizations such as 're-pat', 'inpat', 'expat', 'local+' or permanent transfer are mainly adequate when organizing contractual, compensational or visa schemes administratively. They are poor guides though, when it comes to enlightening the black boxes of mobile life modes from a socio-anthropological perspective, as they omit underlying processual and interactionist dimensions beyond the organizational sphere.

In this regard, McPhail et al. (2012), in line with Cappellen and Janssens (2005), call for recognizing the diversity of international profiles and the variety of social groups and mobility constellations, for a better understanding of distinct needs that occur, for example, within a pool of 'expatriate managers'. Likewise, contemporary typologies that designate international movers on a macro scale as, for example "qualified migrants", reflect economic and political interests as well as legal regimes. Moreover, categorizations in public discourses point to the entanglements between state and economy and have thereby a performative function (cf. Martel, forthcoming). Categories like "migrant", "refugee" or "asylum seeker" have been discursively established over time, but they often leave micro-sociological specificities and individual life courses and constellations aside, which limits alternative segmentations and novel insights. Thereby, semantics, as well as the politico-historical emergence of categorizations deserve to be taken into account (Espahangizi, 2022), so that underlying assumptions become explicit and ascribed social categories, as well as analytical categories can be adjusted accordingly.

Some scholars demonstrate empirically that externally ascribed categories, such as nationality, are not always present nor systematically decisive for individual meaning creation in multicultural settings (Muhr & Lemmergard, 2011). Nonetheless, numerous studies in management and organization studies still tend to ventilate results according to nationality - an approach that anthropologists Wimmer and Glick-Schiller (2003) describe as "methodological nationalism". This does not only provoke stereotypical constructions of the "Other", as well as potential power inequalities in organizations (Barmeyer & Mayrhofer, 2010; Mahadevan, 2011), but it simply assumes without questioning that 'national identity' is central for individual identifications. In order to prevent "methodological nationalism" and other essentializing assumptions, migration and mobility

scholars propose indeed alternative epistemologies. Inductive-abductive, socio-anthropological studies require to elaborate research approaches that allow to describe, interpret and comprehend empirical expressions of 'identity', by replacing the concept with analytical cognates, such as belonging, or similar concepts that account for relationality (Dahinden, 2017; Davis et al., 2018). Moreover, Anthias (2012, 2018) proposes to use the notions of location and positionality as they are narrated by international movers. Together with Ghorashi (2004) she affirms that belonging can be trans-locational and that a person can identify with several national, cultural or ethnic identities at the same time. Both scholars leverage location as analytical device, in order to avoid ascribing fixed, standard categorizations to their research subjects. In a similar way, other scholars propose to use the very phenomenon of "mobility" as analytical devise, in order to go beyond sedentarily marked social categorizations. As Salazar quite rightly summarizes, "mobility invites us to renew our theorizing, especially regarding conventional themes such as culture, identity, and transnational relationships" (2011, p. 576).

EXPLORING "MOBILE IDENTIFICATIONS": METHODOLOGICAL HINTS AND PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

Elliott and Urry (2010) confirm that "the paradigm of mobilities is becoming increasingly central to contemporary identity formation and re-formation", for the sedentary as well as for the mobile individual. Thus, physical mobilities and transnational moves constitute individual realities, self-identifications and perceptions of time, place and of the Other (Augé, 2008; Rosa, 2012). Especially for those who have personal or professional ties and activities in other places around the world, the representations that are ascribed to foreigners and newcomers, such as stigmatizing and categoric identifications can be either reflexively embraced, remain unconscious or be leveraged strategically. Adopting a "mobilities" lens, we can assume that historically or socially constructed categories, like "national identity" may alter their meanings for the transnational mover. How exactly individuals relate to such constructs deserves being explored by taking on the movers' perspective, i.e., an emic research approach. In addition, by experiencing mobility oneself, as global mobility manager or as a researcher, one can enrich understanding and "thicken" descriptions through auto-ethnographic complements, as per Geertz (2000) and as demonstrated by Salazar's (2018).

When initiating research on mobile identifications and ways of belonging, it seems sensible to take a glance at the broader context in order to better comprehend the specific environment of the target sample. How do public, academic, and organizational discourses classify the research subject in a specific spatio-temporal, political or organizational context? What labels are discursively performed and applied from the outside within a given setting, for example the

"country of destination" - in the local language and in English? Furthermore, in order to understand processes, loops and oscillations of self-identification of the internationally mobile individual, to grasp "ways of belonging" and "ways of being" (Levitt & Schiller, 2004) of the transnationally acting professional, it seems crucial to recognize along with Callás and colleagues (2013) that the meanings of socially ascribed categorizations such as gender, ethnicity or class change as they travel. This means social identity categories that are projected, for example on foreign workers, depend on societal and cultural norms and traditions. This shows what I propose to call the *dynamic and multidirectional* nature of mobile identifications. According to distinct situations and different societal and cultural backgrounds across locations, individuals are subjected to a multitude of possibly contradicting meanings and interpretations of categories they are subjected to. In addition, while being on the move or settling abroad, individuals are regularly exposed to more or less stigmatizing public discourses or historical and ethical discriminations. This needs to be considered in empirical studies as well as in organizations. By leveraging "mobility" as analytical device, researchers and practitioners can explore how individuals experience their journeys, without referring to standard categorizations that have been forged through a sedentary lens. In conversational settings this means for example to ask for "how" a person experiences / experienced the arrival in a new setting after a move, rather than suggestive questioning, such as "do you rather identify with your home country or your host country?" - For practitioners in multinational organizations this calls attention to the socio-cultural *elasticity of social categorizations*, which needs to be considered in global diversity, equity and inclusion policies.

Thus, the distinction of analytical categories versus categories of practice can be a helpful step towards a deeper understanding of mobile subjectivities. In line with Bourdieu (1977) and Brubaker and Cooper (2000) we can distinguish between *analytical categories*, which are statically applied, such as gender, nationality, age or social class, and so-called *categories of practice* which are enacted and interpreted in social interactions: "categories of practice", as coined by Bourdieu, are "categories of everyday social experience, developed and deployed by ordinary social actors, as distinguished from the experience-distant categories used by social analysts (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000, p. 4). As discussed, labels and categorizations might, nonetheless, be strategically deployed by the individual when narrating mobility experiences. Nonetheless the researcher can ask to reformulate or to further describe what is meant by such or such label. This allows for novel insights on the understanding of the "mobile self" to emerge inductively. Most importantly, during the research phases of data analysis, thematic coding and data interpretation the utilization of specific self-describing categories needs to be related to the situational, cultural and temporal context. The so gained insights go

not only beyond standard social categorizations, but beyond the conceptualization of the individual as psychological entity. Through individual narratives one can derive a better comprehension of immediate and extended relationalities and belonging and about societal processes of moving and settling more broadly.

As suggested, an *emic* research approach (Pike, 1993) allows to account for processes of self-identification as they are lived, experienced and narrated by the transnationally mobile individual. For researchers this implies to ask for significant situations and events, meaningful places and encounters, for shifts and turning points that were memorable for the person. Throughout one or several conversations the researcher can explore ways in which movers identify cognitively and affectively with places, people, objects or situations. It allows to sense the person's way of being in the world, of relating to mobility in general and their motions and emotions more intimately. It is worth noting that when applying an emic approach, research questions that aim at exploring mobile identifications shall be detached from analytical categorizations and sedentary, normative reasoning, as mentioned earlier. Similarly, sampling criteria such as nationality, social class or hierarchical position may limit the richness of cases and lived experiences and distort the choice of research subjects to the benefit of those that are "easily categorizable". A purposive sampling approach appears more adequate, as it seeks to identify cases that are extreme in terms of the phenomenon of interest. In our case the phenomenon could for example be described as "life and work courses marked by transnational mobility". As suggested by Patton (2001), extreme cases that are identified through purposive sampling augment the chances of retrieving information-rich data and unexpected insights. The same applies for questions that may guide an open and trustful conversation with the research subject: without referring to analytical categorizations (such as expatriate, labour migrant, returnee or foreigner) and without pointing to social identity categories (worker, manage, engineer, mother) the interlocutor will be given room to narrate in her or his own way. It allows for categories of practice and terms to emerge, as they are used by the individual to self-describe and to describe others. Moreover, concepts that are subjected to different interpretations (e.g., performance, success) or that are outmost abstract (identity, integration) may reproduce employers' perspectives and meta-narratives, which is misleading, when trying to understand the perspective of the person in front of us. Empathetic comprehension will emerge by genuinely listening and attempting to understand meaningful instances, narrated choices and relational entanglements.

CONCLUSION

As discussed, scholars in the field of migration studies have been reiterating for many years the need to avoid essentialist identity conceptualisations and

methodological nationalism. Numerous are those who assert that nation state centred perspectives and instrumental, functionalist research paradigms limit scholarly horizons for knowledge creation, oversimplify social realities and distort research insights. Indeed, as the present essay demonstrates, the rapport of an international mover to a place, such as the country of origin or country of residence, is not simply a function of binary linkages between the individual and a location, or between an employee and a subsidiary of a multinational corporation. It entails the contingencies of macro environments, of trans-locational social linkages and networks, of boundary crossings, as well as memories of encounters, significant events and turning points along a life course. This affects not only individual self-identifications and world views, but as well the meaning of work and the personal, momentary rapport to an organization or a profession. As the population of international movers is increasingly translocationally entangled, it is crucial to suspend organization-centered or state-centered logics in global mobility research. Clustering research populations around monolithic categories, such as country of origin / nationality, "repat", "expat" or "international transfer", appears misleading, when attempting to understand various mobility constellations and the meaning of movement for the future global workforce.

Global mobility practitioners can benefit from exploring "the mobile self", i.e. the international employee, without necessarily aspiring to grasp all the complexities of contemporary mobile life modes and identifications to a full extent. When conducting conversations with international movers during empirical studies, I frequently encounter comments such as "This was the first time I ever spoke about my moves, thank you for asking." Making the effort to ask questions, even as global mobility or talent manager, such as "what were the encounters / moments that were most significant during your assignment abroad" or "how do you think that moving to different places has changed the way you see our organization?" allow to go beyond relocation logistics and career related talks and, thus, open-up for novel, qualitative insights that are substantial for strategic talent management. It allows to derive an understanding about potential future intentions and aspirations of individuals, but most importantly it allows to establish organizational learning processes, in times where a grand variety of alternative work relationships and professional pathways is on the rise.

Potential employees, with 'atypical' pathways and neo-nomadic life courses, seemingly by-pass classical societal expectations and social hierarchies of class, professional status and other sedentary rationales that are rooted in local employment relations within the boundaries of the nation state. International movers are "newcomers" from the point of view of the local, sedentary host populations. But they are as well accustomed re-settlers, for whom the meanings of the new places transcend local realities. To explore these realities shall be our

research aspiration. They might be identified as but cannot necessarily identify with certain groups. Approaching human mobilities with regards to a start and an end point, e.g. a country of origin and a country of destination, prevents us from acknowledging spaces of in-betweenness and liminal identifications. Instead, by exploring the movement and the distances that movers are experiencing, be it spatial, temporal, cultural or metaphysical, orients investigations towards the continuous process of individual becoming, a route with a direction, but no distinct destination.

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