

Gendered differences in emigration and mobility perspectives among European researchers working abroad

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Abstract

This paper focuses on gendered mobilities of highly skilled researchers working abroad. It is based on an empirical qualitative study that explored the mobility aspirations of Austrian scientists who were working in the United States at the time they were interviewed. Supported by a case study, the paper demonstrates how a qualitative research strategy including graphic drawings sketched by the interviewed persons can help us gain a better understanding of the gendered importance of social relations for the future mobility aspirations of scientists working abroad.

Keywords: Problem-centred interviewing, graphic drawing method, migration experiences, gender and mobility.

Introduction

This paper focuses on the question of gendered mobilities of scientists crossing the international borders of developed countries. The considerations presented here are based on an empirical study including qualitative interviews with 21 Austrian scientists. The research explored the mobility aspirations of researchers who had been working in the USA on a medium-term or longer basis at the time they were interviewed. The analysis of the research project led to the elaboration of three ideal types of mobility: Migration, short-term research stays, and transnational modes of mobility¹. In this contribution, the focus will be on gendered transnational mobility patterns of researchers as they came to the fore in this analysis. This issue will be discussed based on the case studies collected for this project.

As existing research indicates, transnational mobility aspirations with a focus on the impact of gender, in particular, have long been neglected (Dannecker 2005; Pessar and Mahler 2003). Based on the case study, this paper will discuss gendered forms of researchers' mobility in a transnational setting and the methodological questions they raise. The qualitative data generated in this study, including graphic drawings of the interview partners, allowed insights into the important role attached to social relations for future mobility aspirations. The gendered difference in caring for social relations, a role that is still ascribed to women, may represent a key factor when looking

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¹ See Scheibelhofer (2005) and (2008a) for a detailed report of the results of the study.

at highly mobile women from Western Europe, as the present case study indicates.

The missing argument: Highly qualified women and mobility

The case that Eleonore Kofman (2000; 2004) makes in her contributions regarding gendered global migrations holds true for the issue developed in the present article. Kofman describes how the globalization of migration has brought about increasingly diversified and stratified forms of migration. Such approaches as transnationalism (Basch et al. 1994; Levitt et al. 2003; Pries 2002) or alternative circuits of globalization reflect the complex character of migration under present-day circumstances. Most of the scholarly attention so far has been focused on socio-economically disadvantaged female migrants working in private households or in the sex industry (Kofman 1999: 53).

However, the interest in highly skilled migration has been growing over the past fifteen years (Ackers 2004; Ackers 2005; ARGE MOMO 2000). These studies emphasize the importance of gender and of life-course dynamics to be taken into account for understanding the mobility and migration patterns of highly qualified workers (Kofman 2000; Raghuram 2002).

This study aims contributing to a better understanding of the gendered differences in future mobility plans of female researchers who are working abroad. This paper reflects in particular on the need to adopt a research methodology that is open to the everyday-life of the research participants in order to adequately analyse gendered differences. In theoretical terms, an approach is required that gives space to perceive the individual as embedded in social relations such as the workplace, the scientific community, family and friendship circles. To do so, a qualitative network approach seems the most promising way to conduct such research. A network approach also allows us to include all relevant interaction partners seen from the interviewees' perspective. The relevance of a network approach in migration studies is becoming increasingly evident by means of the empirical evidence produced during the last years. Thus, we now understand that classic concepts of migration are limited in scope, as they are frequently no longer able to reflect the multifaceted character of migration (Dahinden 2009, Haug 2000, Pries 2008).

The empirical example presented also shows that we cannot assume all relevant and decisive interaction partners to be located in the same physical area as our interview partners. Our methods thus need to reflect these social realities. In the presented empirical study, a triangulation of methods (qualitative interviews and graphic drawings sketched by the interview partners) proved to be helpful in this respect.

The empirical study

The case described in detail below is drawn from an empirical study carried out in 2002. In total, 21 scientists from Austria were interviewed who all found themselves in an early stage of their careers² when they went to the USA. Most of the interviewees were supported by an Austrian research grant. The sample was selected accordingly in an attempt to analyze gender differences. The data collection was done in the USA and the problem-centered interview (PCI) method was applied (Witzel 1982, 1996, 2000). Andreas Witzel designed this interviewing method along the lines of which an open, initial interview sequence is followed by a semi-structured topic guide that is flexibly used according to the interview situation. The interview method is based on the research strategy of Grounded Theory (Witzel 2000). It encompasses a short questionnaire (in order to collect data on social characteristics relevant to research) and a postscript (intended to complement the interview tape recordings, also cf. Scheibelhofer 2004). The analytical strategies of the PCI are various, yet a case-specific approach focussing on biographic stages is prevalent.

In the discussed research project, the interview is based on the method of the narrative interview developed by Fritz Schütze in order to carry out biographical studies (cf. Schütze 1983). This ensured that the interviewees would have as much freedom as possible to structure their answers³. Yet, the first interviews showed that it was difficult to gain insights, via classic open interviewing, into the various meaningful social relations the interviewees were part of. Thus, after these test interviews, we decided to introduce another phase after the PCI was completed: The informants were asked at that point to draw their most important interaction partners on a sheet of paper in the middle of which a circle already indicated the position of the interviewees themselves.⁴ The interview partners were told that the distance from the circle in the middle should be an indication of the importance these individuals had for them at the very moment the conversation took place. Upon completing these drawings, they were prompted to explain who the persons included in the graphic drawing were and what kind of relationship the interviewees entertained with them.

Analyzing the interview data subsequently, this additional method of graphic drawing proved useful in overcoming the problems encountered during the first wave of interviews: In the course of these interviews, either

² As Bazeley (2003) defines the concept of early career in research, the project focused on individuals who held a PhD (or doctorate in Austria) and were involved in research without holding a tenure-track position. Unlike Bazeley's early career status definition, the project did not focus on researchers who received their PhD only five years before.

³ For a closer methodological reflection upon the combination of the narrative and the problem-centered interview, cf. Scheibelhofer (2008b).

⁴ For a discussion of these drawings, cf. Scheibelhofer (2006); for a detailed description of the methods used, cf. Scheibelhofer (2003).

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many people were named without describing the quality of the relationship, or the focus was on a limited number of people and the broader picture of a social network was lost. Also, the drawing led the interviewees to explain in detail the significance of their ties— in terms of academic matters as well as private relations (e.g. family relations, partnerships, friendships, etc).

The analyses of the collected interviews and drawings were informed by a constructivist Grounded Theory research strategy (Charmaz 2000), with a coding process leading to case studies of each interviewee and containing a chronological biography.⁵ This biography was then broken down into different phases that were described in detail according to the specific circumstances of each biographic phase⁶. Consideration was also given to the interviewees' aspirations over time, their activities and evaluations as conveyed in the interviews (also cf. Witzel 1996 for this biographic model and Scheibelhofer 2004). Subsequently, the biographies were compared to one another and showed to differ in the following issues: the individuals' identity constructions, social networks, professional situations, plans for mobility, and living situations. The interviews also revealed that their initial plans to return after a one- or two-year stay changed as career and working opportunities subsequently took on new shapes for many of the interviewees.

Analyzing the drawings and explanations provided by the interviewees, we were also able to focus on the mobility aspirations for the future. It turned out that mobility aspirations were closely linked to the scientists' social networks – be it the influence of career opportunities or be it considerations that are linked to their partnering (also cf. Ackers 2004 for dual career couples in research). Thus, especially by triangulating the PCI with graphic drawings, it became clear that individual social networks and future mobility aspirations were closely interlinked.

In relation to the above-mentioned issues, the empirical investigation identified three main forms of mobility. First, individuals on short-term research stays who were determined to return after a well-defined period abroad; second, those settling down in the USA and thus qualifying as classic work migrants; and finally, individuals with transnational lifestyles based on continuous physical and communicative mobility between Austria and the USA.

⁵ The empirical work was based on a constructivist take on Grounded Theory. This implies that the principle of the comparative method within Grounded Theory (leading in this study to the description of three types of mobility) has guided the research process. Open coding was the main analytical work that gradually led to axial and selective coding within the coding process. In addition, the strategy of theoretical sampling was applied: Consequently, both men and women were interviewed, and different disciplines were selected such that varying circumstances for scientific work could be included into the study. Also, interviewees in varying private situations (children, married, in a relation) were specifically explored.

⁶ This was carried out according to the scheme proposed by Andreas Witzel in his analytic work (Witzel 1996): For each identified phase in a biography, the aspirations for this phase, the realizations and evaluations are reconstructed.

In the next section, one case is selected and analyzed in-depth. The results of this analysis for the transnational mobility type are presented in order to clarify highly qualified women's patterns of gendered transnational mobility for future debates.

The case study of Vera Jungwirth

Vera Jungwirth⁷ is a 36-year-old political scientist who had been living in New York City for ten years when the interview was carried out. After completing her M.A. in Austria, she obtained an Austrian grant to study at a university in New York. Two years later, she received her diploma and her New York M.A. advisor encouraged her to apply for a PhD fellowship at that university. She won this fellowship, began her PhD studies and went into instructing undergraduates. At the same time, she was part of an Austrian-based research team carrying out independent research projects for Austrian funding institutions. At the time of the interview, Mrs. Jungwirth taught at two universities in New York and at one university in Austria. Additionally, shortly before the interview took place, she won a prize for her research in Austria, thus stabilizing her financial situation for another two years.

The close and diverse connections with peers, both on a professional and a personal level, were specific for this case when contrasting Vera Jungwirth's social relations with those of other interviewees. Her most important interaction partners were described as being her husband, with whom she lives in New York City, and her family living in a small provincial town in Austria. She has a very close friend, an Austrian woman who is also a political scientist living in New York and in Austria. They often cooperate in research projects or coach one another when involved in research teams with others. She pointed out that many other people she meets are also constantly on the move between their places of origin and New York. These contacts were explained to be convenient, as she can consult with her acquaintances about various difficulties arising from their common transnational lifestyle. As she has annual teaching assignments in Austria and spends part of the summer holidays there, Vera Jungwirth still rents her Viennese apartment that she shares with a roommate.

In the course of the interview, Mrs. Jungwirth reflected upon her own position as a scholar and saw herself as a translator between the American and German-speaking scientific communities. She defined her contribution as transmitting research agendas from one community to the other. Her activities and orientations were described as highly self-determined. Her work and social networking have resulted in social relations with important scholars in her field of research. While discussing the insecurities of her present situation as a researcher, Mrs. Jungwirth was at the same time forging strategies of how to cope with the exigencies of the field and the circum-

⁷ All names, dates and specifics of the fieldwork presented here have been altered in order to make the data anonymous.

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stances she has to work in. Making use of resources (contacts, information, teaching possibilities and research funds) both in Europe and in the USA is crucial for her engagements.

Nevertheless, her economic and working situation at the time of the interview suggested uncertainty regarding her future plans. It was clear to her that she would not gain a tenure-track position in New York without prior research stays at other institutions in the USA. At any rate, she had decided that she would live nowhere else than New York City, or another intellectually and culturally important – highly competitive – city in the USA. For private reasons, going back to work in Austria was not an option, as her American husband did not speak German and would thus be unlikely to find adequate employment in Austria.

Another aspect impairing Vera Jungwirth's status was that, in view of future aspirations and mobility, she was aware that she would immediately move back home to the Austrian periphery should her aged parents ever need continual care and help. As a single child, she made it clear in the interview that there was no other solution to this problem that she saw would come up at some point in time. She mentioned that in general, she avoids thinking about these insecurities, as she could not figure out how her professional and private life, with her husband being in the USA, might develop after leaving for Austria to take care of her parents. In the course of other interviews, such gender-specific norms and views about caring for one's parents or small children were only reproduced by female scientists. The issue of children and their education, on the other hand, was also brought up by male scientists who already were fathers.

Conclusions

It has become clear that the issue of how mobility is gendered is rarely considered with respect to highly qualified individuals from Western Europe who move across borders. Highlighting the biographic embeddedness of migration and mobility aspirations, is useful in this respect. The empirical project based on the strategy of Grounded Theory presented here demonstrates that the borderlines between short-term mobility, circular mobility, transnational lifestyles and migration are fluctuating phenomena. Interpreting the interview data and the graphic drawings result in a reconstruction of shifts between these forms of mobility. Such shifts can only be adequately understood as biographic events that are embedded in a specific social and gendered context. If intervening circumstances (such as offers of employment or finding a partner of a different nationality), the choices of mobility might be viewed in a different light and thus lead to changing mobility perspectives. In Mrs. Jungwirth's case, the opportunity to teach and do research in more than one place – together with her close, private social relations with her family in Austria, her social relations and her husband in the USA – have guided her to forge a transnational mode of living that involves diverse insecurities but also a high degree of choice.

In order to perceive and capture such creative and fragile social realities, methodologies are to be adapted that allow a certain openness vis-à-vis the research field. As discussed elsewhere (see Scheibelhofer 2005), the so-called brain drain debate is mostly based on hypothesis-testing empirical studies. As research has long failed to consider transnational working and living modes, these issues have not yet been thoroughly discussed. The reconstruction of individuals' self-perceptions and aspiration must therefore be taken into consideration in an attempt to explore forms of social organization that have not yet been recognized in the scholarly discussion. The triangulation of methods has proved to be helpful. Combining PCI with interviewees' graphic drawings helped us to gain complex insights into the interconnections between interviewees' social relations and their future mobility aspirations. We have to consider these relationships as gender-specific, as demonstrated by the case of Vera Jungwirth.

This approach allows us to acknowledge in what ways gender gives shape to mobility and migration in social milieus initially not considered when reflecting on the theme of gendered mobilities. Clearly, young researchers who decide to leave Austria in order to work in the USA are in a structurally advantageous position as compared to other low-skilled migrants (cf. Kofman 2000; 2004 as discussed above). Future research needs to compare mobility experiences of female scientists and their male colleagues, applying a qualitative approach that takes biographic events and their social embeddedness into account. Against this background, we can assume that we will be confronted with gendered differences that produce social hierarchies in this field. The empirical research discussed here demonstrated that female scientists were far more burdened with issues of child care, partner relations and caring for the elderly in their families than male scientists. However, male scientists had also to organize their family lives while living abroad. We therefore argue that physical presence to provide care work is still very likely to be expected from women – irrespective of their high qualifications and successful careers.

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