MIGRATION
LETTERS

Temporary international mobility, family timing, dual career and family democracy. A case of Swedish medical professionals

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Abstract

The article, based on 43 narratives of Swedish physicians and molecular biologists on temporary work abroad, discusses how these professionals articulate and negotiate ideals of "Swedish" family life, dual careers, equal gender contract and a respectful parenthood, and how they motivate and legitimize exceptions from those ideals. A proper family timing was regarded as a crucial factor for making international work mobility possible, as family life was pictured as basically sedentary, creating a kind of inertia and requiring a lot of considerations, negotiations and logistics. However, international mobility was also considered to be beneficial for the family; e.g. a great opportunity to learn about new cultural and social contexts – even if it required to put the equal gender contract and "family democracy" temporarily on hold. The suspension of the - otherwise cherished - ideals and considerations for reasons of mobility was legitimized as a necessary prerequisite of the professional's work or grounded on the new country's characteristics; it was regarded as a parenthetic, and thus more acceptable, exception.

Keywords: Sweden; medical professionals; highly skilled mobility; family; gender; parenthood.

Introduction

For highly skilled professionals, moving to work in another country is a complex and seldom frictionless process, in which private life and family situation are important factors due to the professionals' cultural and social embeddedness (Kofman & Raghuran, 2005:149). This article aims to contribute to the expanding field of research on highly skilled mobility (e.g. Ackers & Gill, 2008; Nowicka, 2007; 2008; Povrzanowic Frykman et al., 2016; Jansson, 2016), especially in relation to gender and family issues (see for example Coles & Fechter, 2008; Kraler et al., 2011; Fechter & Walsh, 2012; Doherty et al., 2015;

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van Bochove & Engbersen 2015).[1] As Körber and Merkel (2013: 6) point out, family is continuously imagined and made; it is negotiated, symbolically generated, and affirmed through everyday practice, but it can also change along with legal frameworks etc. Also, family mobility, as Doherty et.al. (2015: 195) stated, relies on a mental work of imagination, projecting lives into new places of possibility. The imagining and daily "making" of a family could be challenged when planning to move and when living abroad, in "other" places, with sometimes radically different "geographical imaginations" (Gregory, 1994, cf Riaño, 2015; Riaño et al., 2015).

An important factor in our analysis is the (imagined) Swedish context of gender equality and family politics. Similar to other Scandinavian countries, Swedish state politics promote social and gender equality and an ideology of equal opportunities and responsibilities for both men and women (Borchorst & Siim, 2008: 222; Hirdman 1998: 43). There is a strong norm of dual careers and a "gender equality contract"[2] even between spouses or partners (Lundström, 2014; cf Hirdman, 1998, 2002; Evertsson, 2004; Borhorst & Siim, 2008). Professionals with higher education tend also to have a partner with higher education and a personal career, and they need to negotiate and compromise whether to move, where to and for how long (see e.g. Acker & Gill, 2008: 91; Green, 1995; Sonnert & Holton, 1996; Wagner, 2006; Eisenhart & Holland, 2001). So, how does a temporary international mobility from an area of high gender equality affect family ideals, dual careers and equal gender contract? Are these reinforced, questioned, strained or put on hold? There is still a need for more empirical studies on this subject. This article aims to contribute empirically to this gap, and in general to research on expatriate mobility, by looking at specific cases of professionals seldom studied (doctors and medical researchers) and with special focus on temporalities in family mobility – what we previously (Wolanik Boström & Öhlander, 2016) named "family timing"– as well as gender contract and parenthood. We take results from a qualitative study,[3] based on extensive interviews with highly skilled Swedish medical professionals, as a point of departure for our discussion. The aim is to analyse how these professionals narrate their family considerations, temporalities and

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[1] See also Pessar and Mahler, 2003; Mahler and Pessar, 2006; Melin, 2003; Shinozaki, 2014; Scott, 2006; Teichler, 2015; Varrel, 2011, Wagner, 2006; Walsh, 2008; Pettersson, 2011; Wolanik Boström & Öhlander 2015 a,b, 2016.

[2] We use the term "gender contract" as coined by Hirdman (1998, 2002) and used by Lundström & Twine (2011) and Lundström (2014) in relation to "white migrations" of Swedish women. In the development of the Swedish welfare state, Hirdman (1998, 2002) distinguishes a shift from "household" or "housewife" gender contract between 1930-1960 to an individualistic, "equality contract" between 1960-75 and "the equal status contract" and "gender equality contract" after 1975. The Swedish equality contract was founded on a dual-earner model, a strong public sector, affordable public child care, 16 months of parental leave etc. (Lundström (2014:18).

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practicalities in moving, the (implicit) images and ideals of gender contract, family life and parenthood, and how these images and ideals are maintained, negotiated, or challenged during a temporary international mobility.

Method

The study is based on ethnographic method, primary 43 in-depth interviews, conducted 2014-2016, with medical professionals who returned to a Swedish workplace after their stay(s) abroad. The professionals were in their thirties to sixties, living in different parts of the country and with various family situations. The stays were self-chosen for professional reasons; they ranged from some weeks to two years and mostly included a planned return to Sweden. There were three subcases: 1. Physicians who had worked for international help organisations like MSF/Doctors Without Borders, the Red Cross, Operation Smile and other NGOs outside the Western context (16 interviews). 2. Specialized physicians who had worked in other Western clinics and research centres, which was encouraged, but not an absolute requirement for a career (15 interviews). 3. Medical molecular biologists, much more depended on international mobility for a successful research career (12 interviews). The interviews were transcribed verbatim and subject to thematic narrative analysis (Kohler Riessman, 2008), with a special focus on family and gender roles. The empirical examples in this text were chosen to summarize and illustrate three prevalent themes: the importance of choosing the right time and place to move abroad, the problematics of dual carer and gender equality while on the move, and the notion of maintaining respectful relations and negotiations within the family – a kind of "family democracy" – in relation to mobility.

Proper family timing, proper family places

In the study, we found that family timing (cf Wolanik Boström & Öhlander, 2016) and a safe and inspiring place, in line with the family's geographical imaginations (cf Riaño, 2015), were considered crucial factors in international mobility – indeed, often making it possible at all. The interviewees told us about the dilemmas in finding the "right" time and place to go, with respect to family members' life course, career and social bonds.

In the interviews, reasons for going abroad varied; it could be seeking access to resources and methods not available in Sweden, a need for personal development, a wish for applying one´s competence to do some good in less privileged regions, a desire to see the world, longing for adventure etc. Researchers preferred longer stays. These dreams and motives required some work of negotiation with the family, mostly understood as partner and/or children, but also elderly parents. The cost for family's social life might weigh heavily and lot of logistics and preparations could be a prerequisite, as securing the economy for the stay or a proper childcare. The decision to work abroad

was thus seldom straightforward and often required some negotiation with the partner or children. For example, Johan used to work a lot abroad, in Norway, USA, Africa and Great Britain. He had worked for several years at a well-known clinic in London and lived in one of the clinic's apartments. His Swedish partner had used to "follow" him and had herself a job that required a lot of travelling. Some years ago, the couple had a child and moved back to Sweden. When Johan again got a "fantastic" job offer in a London, he declined. His wife was establishing a career in Sweden, and he could not expect her to once more "break it all up" for him; neither did he want to be away from his child. He said he had matured to realize that "it was not worth it".

For most of the interviewed NGO doctors, an assignment meant a *separation* from their family. It was perceived as almost impossible to bring the partner or children along into catastrophe areas, because of the doctor's work burden, sometimes profound hazards in conflict-ridden regions, rudimentary living conditions (or living in compounds reserved for the "expatriate" team), lack of infrastructure for childcare or school, etc. The doctors said that they consequently chose to travel during "openings" in the life-course – e.g. "between relationships", before having children, after the children had grown up, or going on shorter assignments. The norm of being together with one's family seemed very strong, however much they supported the good cause of the NGOs. Fabian said that his dream of working for MSF had been so strong that he had gone on an assignment for six months while his partner had been expecting their first child, but he regretted it much and would have never put her through it again. Marie, married and a mother of a toddler, said that some years ago she had made a difficult decision: by starting a family she had put her engagement with the MSF on hold for many years. Anna, who used to go on shorter Operation Smile assignments, said that even a two-three weeks' absence required a lot of negotiations at home, with the husband and teenage children muttering and protesting and only grudgingly giving their approval.

However, bringing the children along to *safe* areas in the Global South was considered possible and very educational, if still rather controversial. Susanna and her husband, both physicians, had taken their children with them for a several months' long clinical assignment in a town in a rural region of India.

> It is interesting that people [in Sweden] said 'Oh my God, how will you manage, and the children, with school and *everything*!'. Well, [I said]: 'How many children do actually grow up in that town every year? Pretty many, and it is obvious that they do OK. People live there and they manage, so of course we will too, even though it will be a change'.

In spite of relatives' and friends' worries it had worked out well. True, there had been heavy traffic, crowds, loose dogs, and in any park or playground, they would become a centre of attention from the local people; the blond children

touched, cuddled and photographed. But it had also been very enlightening to have experienced such a different way of life together, according to Susanna.

While regions of the Global South were named as difficult or controversial to bring the family to, moving to locations in the Global North was narrated as unproblematic and the stay as an overall positive and useful experience. The family could safely accompany the doctor, given economic possibilities, the effort of planning and logistics and adjustments to the family members' life course. The choice of place was important. For example, Stefan said he had established research contacts in the U.S. and before the move, he and his wife had gone on a reconnaissance trip; checking the working hours, living conditions, possible apartments etc. Stefan's wife had been on a long maternal leave and had been very positive about the stay in a well-known university town. "If we went to the University of Nowhere then I don't suppose she would be equally positive. Honestly."

Filip had been on a two-year long post-doc in New Zealand; his prime choice would have been a country in Asia, where his research would have got better economic conditions, but he and his wife had agreed that New Zealand was a better place to bring the children along. They got a lot of advice about nice residential areas and proper schools with good teaching quality. Still, they had to fix the housing and school details, the detailed and time-consuming physical examinations required for insurance, appointments for a working visa etc. "Moving was a very complicated process", Filip concluded. New Zealand had felt like the end of the world from Sweden, which had become painfully apparent when one of their close relatives at home had got ill. But the overall impression was still: "Very beautiful, pleasant people and good language-wise".

Anita had got an offer to stay in a research institute in Harvard. She said she was not extremely career-oriented, but she wanted to do some meaningful research. As she was divorced with a young child, her mother had come along to help out. Later Anita had learned about a program for single mothers. "I applied and got stipends, and I got a nanny, which I *never* could have had [in Sweden]. So, it was a full-time job, without interruption." Her daughter had been well taken care of and had attended an excellent-quality school and Anita had thrived.

While for the doctors, mobility was more optional, the molecular biologists were expected to participate in longer international stays, preferably in state of the arts research environments. It was considered crucial for their knowledge and skill development and future career. The interviewees expressed that Swedes in general were not very internationally mobile. The senior researchers said they always tried to encourage their PhD students to go on post-docs abroad, despite their possible family situation. Also for this group, a returning topic was how to organize a reliable child care while working outside Sweden.

Within the Swedish system, they could always rely on good public child care. With two work-oriented adults, it was one of the reasons why some of the interviewees had decided to return, from both European and overseas countries. For others, the stay had prompted more focus on the family, learning how different school systems worked, helping the children with homework and regarding it as a family adventure.

In our examples above, the geographical imaginations of places varied, especially between Global South and Global North, and Sweden was implicitly referred to as the best and safest place for a family – though seeing a bit the world was a positive thing. The experienced quality of family life was described as being of great importance for how an international stay was experienced. If it worked fine, it was a great, invigorating and educational adventure. If the children or partner were miserable, even a professional dream or well-planned logistics fell short. In the next subchapter, we will discuss how the ideals of egalitarian relationships and dual careers were narrated in relation to the mobility experience.

The implied norm of egalitarian relationship and dual career

The equal and egalitarian relationships are an integral part of the ideal image of the Swedish society as modern and enlightened, even though women still tend to take a larger and more "traditional" responsibility concerning family and children compared to men (cf Melin, 2003; Pettersson, 2011; Bernhardt & Goldscheider, 2006; Evertsson, 2004; Kaufman *et.al*, 2016). Some interviewees told about how the stay abroad challenged the ideal of an equal relationship, dual careers and a respectful parenthood, which were implied as a self-evident norm in their Swedish life. Such stories were told in modus of humour, bewilderment or a metareflection, indicating an exception from the "Swedish" norms – but, as the stay was temporary or "parenthetic" (Wolanik Boström & Öhlander, 2016), the experienced deviation from a Swedish gender script seemed acceptable. In the following, we shall give some examples on how the implied norms were sustained and negotiated.

As mentioned above, Susanna and her husband worked in India for several months. They had employed a Swedish au pair, who had proved invaluable as both parents had been working in the clinic. The au pair was a nice, responsible and flexible person; the children adored her and Susanna was nostalgic about the luxury of not having to rush to the kindergarten after work (as previously in Sweden). The family had lived in a compound of flats among other expatriates and had tried to maintain their "usual" household routines: cooking meals, doing the cleaning and washing, playing with the children and helping them with their homework.

While Susanna and Peter could thus successfully sustain the dual career contract, this seemed harder in the case of those interviewees whose spouse could not get a work permit or a work opportunity, and had to negotiate a more socially conservative and economically vulnerable life-style (cf studies of Coles & Fechter, 2008; Lundström & Twine, 2011; Klekowski von Koppenfels, 2014; Lundström, 2014; Doherty *et.al*, 2015). Filip's wife had no work permit in New Zealand and it felt very unusual for her to just stay at home. At first, she had thought she had been doing "nothing", but soon she had learned that being a housewife meant she had been taking care of "everything!", as the housewife concept had been both accepted and respected over there.

The expectation to re-establish "home" and family in a new place prompts a lot of practical and emotional negotiation. The persistent gendering of expatriate lives and the perplexity of educated and previously working women who, while becoming "trailing spouses" of expatriate professionals experience a breach in their career, get "domesticated" and meet fundamentally different expectations of appropriate gender performance, have been pointed out by many researchers (see e.g. Coles & Fechter, 2008; Walsh, 2008; Lundström, 2014).

The medical biologists in our study were usually supposed to find successful research groups, laboratories with the right equipment and to orient themselves towards expected career paths and priorities. With the researcher as an expected nomad, also the partner and family tend to be affected, as previous studies have shown (cf. Pettersson, 2011, 2016; Mahroum 2000; Gill, 2005; Kofman, 2007; Hoffman, 2009; Delicado, 2010). The participants defined the partners willingness to go abroad as crucial for a successful post-doc. Susan had involved her husband very much in her career planning. "The partner must be with you when you choose to be a mobile scientist", she said. Stina mentioned the negotiation: "I think, you talk about it, first in a little bit of fun way, and you'll see if anyone [in the family] is interested." She said it was easier because they all liked new challenges. "We are not rooted anywhere, so that's why we've [moved] several times now. We know that we can". Mark referred to his short-term-stays as both inspiring and painful, since his partner and child had not been able to go with him. He chose short stays, not to be separated from his family for too long.

The interviews resonate with what in public debates in Sweden is considered as "common sense" (especially among the educated middle class): that dual careers and gender equality is the best alternative for relationships (cf Lundström, 2014; Kaufman et al., 2016). Though the interviewees treated is as an implicit ideal, mobility seemed to enhance more traditional gender roles or career constraints for a partner – which was mentioned as problematic, but temporary and thus excusable. Childcare was solved with the help of a (female) relative, nanny or au pair, or by a partner being on parental leave. However, upon return to

Sweden and the institutionalized day-care for children, the implicit norm was again the equal gender contract and dual career- relationship.

The notion of respectful parenthood in relation to mobility

In the interviews, the children's (lack of) influence in the decision to move and their well-being during the stay abroad seemed a somewhat uncomfortable subject. With smaller children, before the junior high, the decision was motivated by the move being both exciting and educational, an adventure that the children would learn to appreciate, even if they could not understand all the benefits at first. Still, things had not always worked out perfectly.

The NGO doctor Susanna said that her children had difficulties adjusting during the stay in India and counted the days to get back home; the school had been rather shabby and they had had language problems while playing. "It was toughest for the children, they did not at all get friends in the same way as they used to". Susanna said that if they had planned to stay longer, they would definitely have invested in the children's social relations more seriously or would have gotten an English-speaking nanny. As it were, they had not been overly concerned but had considered all the problems as transitory. And even though Susanna regarded the experience as very valuable, she did not think they would move abroad again, because of the children's social bonds in Sweden.

Filip and his wife were excited at the prospect of moving to New Zealand for "a big adventure", but when they had told the children, the ten-year-old son and his younger sister had rushed to their rooms crying loudly and also the youngest had then started to howl. "Well, it was no hit", Filip said, indicating a (humorous) discomfort. The children had had some tough time in the beginning in the English-speaking school. But eventually, they had settled, had found new friends and had learned really good English.

Smaller children were supposed to more likely accept the move as inevitable and also "for their own benefit". Christina, a molecular biologist, said that when she, her husband and their children had been about to move to the US for six months, they just presented the fact for the children. "We did not put it exactly as a question". The children had been excited at first, later had found it tough to move away from Sweden, but the parents had persisted: "We will do it because it is funny and developing and everything". However, by the time of the interview, Christina and her husband wanted to go to the US again. The children were 10 and 14 years old and Christina expressed an acute dilemma: "It is very difficult; how do I motivate this? They are going to be very distressed, they do not want to move, and still we have to move." She said that it became more obvious to her that the children should also have a say and they expected that their opinions should be considered. "I realize that now, that everything we do in the future must be negotiated." They had discussed pros and cons

together, and she had hoped that the children would finally understand their arguments. "But then, they may wish we worked as postmen so we never had to move…"

Christina was amazed that her concern for the children's opinions and feelings gained no understanding among her US colleagues, when she discussed the matter with them on one of her visits to the US:

> It just seemed a non-question to the Americans, how the children react, not at all. 'It is not their business' or 'It will be fine, why should you dwell on that!' While here in Sweden, you can talk forever about how the children are feeling or what they think about it. It is a great difference.

In all cases, the members of the family were given the right to express their opinions and to negotiate family mobility in a kind of "family democracy", where even the children were supposed to be met with respect. Several informants pointed out that it was easier to move when the children were young; then they were not considered to know their best or to have a very important social life. For pre-school children, there were no school curricula to regard. Even among the interviewees who thought mobility was a good cultural experience for the children, there was a kind of guilty awareness if the children struggled to cope with a new school environment, language and new social contexts.

Discussion

In this article, we have discussed how ideals of equal gender contract, dual careers and respectful "family democracy" were presented as being self-evident in Sweden, but as questioned, strained or put on hold in relation to international mobility. Divergences from the "Swedish" norms were legitimized with professional requirements or by the stay(s) being temporary and thus parenthetic in the family's life course. For successful mobility, proper geographical locations – in line with geographical imaginations of "safe" and suitable places (cf Riaño, 2015; Wolanik Boström & Öhlander, 2012, 2015a) – and a good family timing (cf Wolanik Boström & Öhlander, 2016) were considered crucial. "Vulnerable" periods in a family's life course were a serious obstacle, if staying in Sweden was a viable professional option.

The interviewed professionals expressed some conflicting ideas. On the one hand, the educational potential of moving abroad and the prospect of a "family adventure" were raised. On the other hand, strong norms of a sedentary stability and objections to disturbing the career or social life of other family members by "dragging" them abroad were implied. There seemed to be an idea of "family democracy"; negotiating the professional dreams and plans with them and, ideally, reaching an understanding about the benefits overriding the costs. The partner had to accept the move and maybe an economically

dependent position during the stay (cf Coles & Fechter, 2008; Walsh 2008, Doherty et al. 2015). The children's well-being was an important factor, especially if mobility caused them distress and trouble to adjust. Thus, the professionals presented themselves as resourceful at work, but uneasy when encountering social and material frictions of moving, if the family was reluctant.

As a contribution to the field of international migration of highly skilled professionals, the article underlines that decisions, considerations and practices of mobility cannot be understood with a focus solely on economic and work aspects; they heavily relate to family matters and the sociocultural context of family life. Gender contract and parental roles are affected by the practices of mobility – just as the practices and possibilities of mobility are affected by family life. With some notable exceptions (see e.g. Ackers & Gill, 2008; Coles and Fechter, 2008; Lundström, 2014; Doherty et al., 2015; Povrzanowic Frykman et al., 2016, Povrzanović Frykman & Öhlander (eds.), forth.) these aspects are still under-researched in the field of highly skilled migration. Therefore, this article also contributes to the literature on equal gender contract in general; showing how this strong cultural ideal might be considered as place- and context-specific, negotiable and possible to be put on hold.

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