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“We live a life in periods”
Perceptions of mobility and becoming an
expat spouse | Julia Büchele[‡]

Abstract

Deploying organizations strongly support their employees' relocation with their spouses and children under the premise that families guarantee a social and practical support system (Kraimer et al. 2016). Expat spouses I have interviewed in the course of my qualitative data collection were sure that their migration experience differed significantly from their employed spouses. While for themselves relocation was a (repeated) interruption of the “normal pace of life”, they assumed that their spouses were provided with a “ready-made life” because they started work right away and were thus integrated in a local social setting. This paper explores different perceptions of expat spouses' mobility and argues that expat spouses learn to be expat spouses through repeated relocations and “mobility work” (Mense-Petermann and Spiegel 2016).

Keywords: Narratives, mobility; migration; expat spouses; Uganda.

Introduction: studying the *reasons* behind migration strategies

This article is based on the analysis of narrative interviews with expat spouses who come from various parts of the world and lived in Kampala, Uganda, during my research from 2012 to 2014. Like other capital cities in Africa, Kampala is a regional hub for international development agencies, transnational companies and foreign governments. Different though they are, these organizations have something in common: part of their staff are expats, who are sent for temporary job assignments and usually move to Kampala with their families for the entire time of their contract. The places expats are sent to are classified according to standard of living such as security, housing, international schools, availability of consumer goods etc. In this hierarchical system, Kampala is considered a safe post and a family friendly destination, especially praised for security, number and quality of international schools, touristic attractions, grocery stores, restaurants and last but not least the mild climate. Nevertheless, it is considered a developing country and most employers compensate expat employees and their families for their assumed “hardship” (Hindman 2007). Employers usually also take care of work and residency permits, thereby safeguarding the legal status of expats in the host country. Compared to other migrants, such compensations and support make expat families a financially privileged and legally secure group of people on the move.

[‡] Julia Büchele, Centre for African Studies, University of Basel, Switzerland. E-mail: j.buechele@unibas.ch.



Therefore, in contrast to scholars who count all “highly-skilled migrants” or “mobile professionals” (Coles and Fechter 2008) as expats, I solely consider employees and their families who are sent abroad as expats, in order to highlight the role deploying organizations play by providing a stable institutional context.

In a broad sense, this article contributes to the sociology of migration. In particular, I follow recent research on expat mobility, in line with Favell (2003) who argues for a differentiated perspective on labour migration by also taking restrictions and boundaries into account when studying expats. As Fechter (2007: 34) has pointed out, literature on expat migration is “often suffused with a rhetoric of flows, which assumes that these people, who are seen to embody a globalized world, lead frictionless, unbounded lives”. In this sense, I consider the temporality of expat spouses' mobility an experience marked by ruptures, transitions, and continuity. This paper explores different accounts of mobility, and argues that they represent a continuum in the learning process of becoming an expat spouse. This paper contributes to current research on “expat wives” (Hindman 2013, Fechter 2008, Arieli 2007, Lundström 2012, McNulty 2012, Stadlbauer 2015, Cangià 2017), while keeping in mind that not only women accompany their employed husbands (for an example from a gender perspective including interviews with male and female expat spouses cf. Braseby 2010 or Cole 2012). Expat spouses emphasise that their experience of “accompanying” differ significantly from that of their employed husbands. They have to build their social environment and a sense of every-day routine every time they relocate. Research ranging from anthropology (Hindman 2013, Coles and Fechter 2008, Fechter 2007) to business administration (Kraimer et al. 2016) has demonstrated that organizations strategically deploy entire families because they are thought to provide a social and practical support system, and thus employees are less likely to renege on their contracts (*ibid.*)¹. This institutional integration of spouses into the deploying organization including financial and administrative assistance has been framed as “the incorporated wife” (Ardener and Callan 1984) or “quasi membership” (Büchle 2017). Nevertheless, by taking care of the highly gendered tasks of relocation and settling into a new place, spouses indeed often take on the bulk of “mobility work” (Mense-Petermann and Spiegel 2016).

Fieldwork

I conducted narrative interviews in German and English with over 40 women and men whose spouses worked in the development, private, and diplomatic sectors in Kampala. I included only interviews with women in my core sample (25 selected interviews), in order to account for a range of different perceptions

¹ The assumption of high failure rates among expat employees and thus the need for a spouses and families to provide stability has been criticized as not sufficiently warranted (cf. Harzing 1995 and 2002).



of mobility among expat wives rather than ascribing such differences to gender. Further research from a gender perspective and with an intersectional approach is certainly needed and would shed light on the experiences of the increasing number of men who accompany their employed wives.

Some of my informants have lived in other cities before, a few were expat children who lived abroad with their parents, while for some, moving to Kampala was the first time to move as expats. I used narrative analysis inspired by Barbara Czarniawska (2004) for all interviews, which vary in length between 30 minutes and three hours. Additionally, discourse analysis as developed by James Paul Gee (2011) proved helpful to unpack the meaning of mobility in these narratives.

All informants described a sense of urgency they felt to minimize the “relocation phase” and create continuity. They sought to make “a home” (cf. Gordon 2008, Hindman 2013, Walsh 2008), despite anticipating another relocation in a few years’ time. For some informants, moving to Kampala was a break from their familiar life (what I will call “rupture”), while more experienced expat spouses described relocation as a “routine” process. In what follows, I will describe the two different experiences of relocation (“rupture” and “routine”), and conclude the article by arguing that expat spouses become expat spouses by doing, i.e. learning to be an expat spouse, and by gaining practical knowledge through repeated relocations.

Mobility as rupture

Expat spouses described moving for the first time as a singular event with a strong effect on their self-perception. The possibility to move to Kampala filled some with fear, while others embraced the idea of moving abroad. For some it was a troubling interruption of their familiar life or their career, while others perceived it as an opportunity for change, a fulfilment of a longstanding wish to travel, or an adventure:

“We actually wanted to experience this, to be in Kampala or in Africa, just because it is an adventure, new people, new friends and new environment. That’s always exciting”.

This excitement evokes Bauman’s (2011: 29-30) figure of the tourist: “In the tourist’s world, the strange is tame, domesticated, and no longer frightens; shocks come in a package deal with safety.” Here, mobility becomes a positive connotation of uncertainty. While uncertainty is most often considered problematic or difficult, in the “safety package” (ibid.) of a touristic experience, it is not avoided or overcome but rather actively sought. Certainly, speaking of relocation as adventure does not render all aspects of an expat life uncertain. Rather, financial and legal security may provide the opportunity to embrace uncertainty in other realms of life. The unknown is unknown in its specific

form, but predictable in the sense of *what aspects* of life would be new. In this sense, I suggest that privileged circumstances and relative stability in some parts of life allow a person to frame expected future experiences as adventure. With the exception of the notion of “life-style migration” (cf. O’Reilly and Benson 2009), the pleasure of moving to other places is largely neglected as a possible motive for migration within migration studies. As my interviews have shown, mobility is experienced as a joyful variation to the routine of everyday lives. The anticipation of “newness” makes relocation simply a fulfilment of the desire to see and explore new places around the world.

However, other informants depicted their husband’s request to move as an imposition. The following quote uses direct speech, which suggests how clearly she recalls:

“It was never my wish to leave [home country] and it was never my wish to go to Africa. Also, I had never been to Africa before [...] He [my husband] wanted to spend more time with the family [...] He was looking around for a new professional challenge. And one day he came and said, how about Uganda? I looked at him and said: Uganda? Where the heck is that? Well, in East Africa. Well, I said, and what is happening there? An interesting job offer. Mmmh, then go, I will stay in [home country] with the kids. I will certainly not go to Africa”.

Another woman recounted a similarly strong reaction. Her husband’s proposal was a shock to her:

“About a month before we got married, he dropped a bomb, the Uganda bomb, on me and he said, listen I think we need to open a branch of our non-profit in Kampala. And I freaked out, I have never been there and all I’d ever heard was Joseph Kony, LRA², war. Like never heard anything positive about Uganda and I didn’t know, I hadn’t even seen a picture, like I didn’t know what the climate was.”

One informant recounts moving from her home city in Western Africa to another African country, which did not seem to be a promising foreign assignment:

² In 2012, the US organisation “Invisible Children, Inc.” launched a world-wide campaign to pressure political leaders to put an “end to Africa’s longest running conflict led by Joseph Kony and his Lord’s Resistance Army” and to “protect thousands of families from violence and exploitation by Kony’s army”. They produced a video to illustrate the horror caused by the “rebel group” in Northern Uganda and neighboring countries, with a focus on children abducted as soldiers. This video was shared online over two million times in the first few weeks (www.invisiblechildren.com). Though it generated both donations and involvement, as well as fierce criticism, it received international media attention and made Joseph Kony and his army famous throughout the world. During those weeks, Uganda was associated with child soldiers and the government’s reluctance to overthrow a marauding murderer (www.theguardian.com, March 8 2012).



“Initially it wasn’t what I expected [laughter] you know moving from one African country to the other. [...] Why do you have to go to Uganda of all places? Cause back home you know when we actually see this part of [the] continent as war inflicted and in a way telling people you’re going to Uganda they’re like are you ser[ious]!?! They like pity you. [laughter] [...]. Like it was lesser assignment you know”.

Here, going to Uganda was a geographical relocation from her home and career, but more importantly, she perceived it as downward social movement. Many informants recalled their initial resistance to accede to their husband’s assignment in Uganda and how they weighed their reluctance to move against other factors. They remembered juxtaposing their own apprehension against their certainty that the family should stay together and eventually prioritised co-presence. Importantly, many felt that moving to Uganda did not hold equal opportunity for both spouses. For some it meant transitioning from what some informants called a “career woman” to “only” a spouse. Mobility was not necessarily experienced as moving on, but rather the opposite: a “standstill”; an interruption of the life she had chosen for herself. Moving could create an imbalance between spouses, as the employed expat would develop his career, but she would move in order to be “there for him”. Narratives, which depicted mobility as “standstill” resemble the “liminal” phase of a “rite of passage” or “transition”. Turner highlights the aspect of “liminality” when he draws on van Gennep’s description of “rites of passage”, which are “marked by three phases: separation, margin [...], and aggregation.” At the margin, the individual is in a “liminal” phase and in an ambiguous state; it is when the individual “passes through a cultural realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state” (van Gennep in Turner 1969: 359). In the case of relocation, this is experienced as being no-longer-here-but-not-yet-there. In this sense, there is a rupture which expat spouses perceive as losing their “normal” pace and activities of their everyday life. At the margin, they have given up their jobs, memberships in various groups and social clubs, they have packed their boxes and bags. Unlike their employed husbands who start work when they arrive, expat spouses have no social position in the places they are moving to. Looking for “meaningful things to do” was mentioned as one important task in order to bridge over the rupture created by the new experience of mobility.

Mobility as routine

When people are relocated regularly, “post-migration” is always also “pre-migration”. Experienced expat spouses thus spoke about living their life “in periods” and that they had identified a rhythm in their mobile lives.³ “Living in

³ Relocation processes in many transnational organizations are standardised. In the case of the diplomatic service, there is usually a “shuffle” every few years; a specific time during which open posts are announced and employees are allocated to their next one (Niedner-Kalthoff 2005: 20-31). Employees are asked to

periods” enabled but also required to organise one’s life according to predictable repetition. Over the years, the new had become the “same old new” or “just another new”. Thus, moving had lost much of its excitement and different places had become interchangeable. For some, relocation had become tedious, but they had also acquired habitualised⁴ ways of organising their moves.

The crucial time of mobile lives is the time in-between two “posts”, when one has to ensure that life is fully lived. The following excerpt conveys a striking sense of urgency:

“So, that's every few years. And then you have to hang around and wait for your stuff to come and when it does come you have to unpack it and then you are okay, [...]. But you get good at it, you do. You get good at having a list of what has to go there and what you have for that and seeing that this is packed properly and yelling at this person because he hasn't packed your beds or your furniture properly or making sure the boxes are marked. And then you arrive at the other side and then within a week or two unpack the house. It's very quick because you want to get on with your life. You want to make this period very short. Because you find a house and while you are waiting for your container to come you are thinking, ah I put that cupboard there and a chair there and I'll buy this extra there [...]. And then by the time the stuff comes you just sort it out within two weeks and you moved on. You get on with your life [laughter]”.

Routine knowledge and management competencies are used to mitigate the chaos of this stage. The staggering pace, the precision of sequence, the strict supervision, and emotionality (“yelling at this person because he hasn’t packed your beds or your furniture properly”) underlines what is at stake: life! Or to put it less dramatically: it is about the everyday life, which paradoxically stands still in this moment of mobility, while people are no-longer-here-but-not-yet-there. Only “[a]s long as the routines of everyday life continue without interruption”, write Berger and Luckmann, “they are apprehended as unproblematic” (1991 [1966]: 38).

Experienced expat spouses narrated the imperative to relocate quickly as a personal desire. To bridge the liminal phase (cf. Turner 1969) of moving, expat spouses used their cumulated knowledge. The abstract and generalised nature of this kind of knowledge made it broadly applicable and allowed my

provide a list with their most preferred posts. However, as one woman told me she and her husband had been trying to be relocated to the USA. In the meantime, they have had postings in the UK, Iran, Ghana, and Australia before they were sent to Uganda. She felt that she had not much choice, as “it would be career-suicide” to reject an offered post.

⁴ The interruption of the everyday life can be integrated into “the realm of functioning normality” with “recourse to familiar problem solutions” (Soeffner 2004: 23).



informants to repeatedly constitute what they perceived as the order of their everyday lives. This is what sociologists have called the “construction of normality in the everyday” (Soeffner 2004: 22) or “typification of habitualized action” (Berger and Luckmann 1991 [1966]: 72), which is, according to Soeffner, established through “the repetition of tested and familiar modes of action” (Soeffner 2004: 22-3). These modes of action - or habituations - can be deployed any time, and carry “with it the important psychological gain that choices are narrowed” (Berger and Luckmann 1991 [1966]: 71). Expat spouses’ practical knowledge enabled them to develop modes of action which they could deploy routinely to mitigate interruptions and establish continuity despite frequent mobility.

Expat spouses emphasised that they did not merely “accompany” their husbands. They ascribed to themselves an active role in the relocation process and their expat life. Both partners contributed in different but equally important ways as teammates, and together they embarked on their journeys. Some said that they as spouses “rely on each other”, they felt they were “all in this together”, or would “take each other’s company to extreme”. The narratives emphasise the equal contribution of both spouses to the organisation of their mobile life. Or, to put it differently, mobility was part of their marriage arrangement. One informant described her contributions in realms where she suggests her husband is unskilled, or helpless: “I know exactly what will happen if I’m not here. If I just go away for a week [...] to visit family [...]. He doesn’t eat properly to start off with”. It was her accomplishment as the self-proclaimed “relocation expert” and “family manager” to set up and run the household, which she saw as a prerequisite for their expat life-style. Sociologists describe expat “mobility work” as gendered division of labour which is (often implicitly) expected by deploying organisations (Mense-Petermann and Spiegel 2016) with the main trajectory to provide continuity. Many informants felt that adapting to a new place and creating an everyday life was solely on their part. As anthropologist Heather Hindman (2008: 42) succinctly writes: “If it is male labor that brings the couple abroad, it is the women’s job to erase the move.”

On the other side of the coin of moving to new places is of course leaving a place: mobility entailed farewells. It “is really something to make new friends, leave people, say good-bye again” one informant said. Distance from relatives and friends meant missing a support system and often feeling foreign and misunderstood. Many expat spouses told me that they felt like their families back home were not able to imagine how they lived, even if they had come to visit them. One woman described it as mourning: “You sort of live a life of grieving because you move”. Experienced expat spouses described their emotional effort to repeatedly build new relationships. The absence of friends and relatives made their marriage ever more important, as it had become the (only) constant element in their mobile lives.

Becoming an expat spouse through relocation

To sum up, those who relocated after a long time or for the first time described their move as special anecdotes in their narratives, and structured their accounts into phases of “before” and “after” the move. Whether they embraced relocation as a once-in-a-life-time-opportunity or perceived it as interruption of their lives that made them “miss out”, all first-time movers experienced relocation as a big change. On the other hand, mobility had become integral part of life for experienced expat spouses. They organized relocation in a routine process as they had learned to move quickly and “get on with life”.

I conclude this paper by suggesting that the two different perceptions of mobility (i.e. “rupture” and “routine”) represent two phases of a learning process through which the women I had interviewed “became” expat spouses. Relocation initiated my informants’ self-understanding as expat spouses. As other scholars have pointed out, expat spouses grapple with gender stereotypes (cf. Stadlbauer 2015), as many feel that they have to work hard to be identified as a person in her own right and as more than simply “accompanying” her husband. Experienced expat spouses described how their idea of going abroad in general and to Kampala in particular had changed because they had gained practical knowledge about moving and starting their lives in a new place. They had learned how to present themselves and were aware of the importance of their “mobility work”, despite stereotypical assumptions of the hedonistic “gin-and-tonic-drinking-lady-by-the-pool-side”, as one informant put it. In this sense, “mobility work” goes beyond organizational and practical tasks. It must therefore include “emotional work” (Hochschild 1979) involved in the experience of being mobile and becoming an expat spouse in this context.

Expat spouses saw their role in providing stability and continuity, which requires practical knowledge about the steps of relocation and about when and how to be flexible. Deploying organisations demand and enable expat families to be mobile, and at the same time, employers request continuity. Flexibility and continuity are not mutually exclusive. Rather, flexibility is the prerequisite for the continuity of everyday life in different and unknown places. All of my informants saw their mobile life-style as a transient phase in life and planned to eventually settle down (in their country of origin). The perception of their mobile lives was in this sense always connected to a permanent home in a particular place, a stable family, or an ongoing career in the future. Supporting their husband’s career which required them to be mobile, was thus seen as a temporary task, even after decades of relocations. Nevertheless, mobility did not lead to a tentative mobile lifestyle. To the contrary: expat spouses put a lot of effort and care into establishing their homes; they bought furniture, decorated the house, and planted their gardens. The need to be flexible in order to ensure stability can be read as a self-disciplining and highly productive tool which enables expat spouses to manage family life and relocation, but also



ensures stability for the deploying organisations. Thus, narrative analysis of expat spouses' accounts on their mobility suggests that what started as rupture can best be described as the beginning of a learning process about how to be mobile in general, and how to become an expat spouse in particular.

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54 *Perceptions of mobility and becoming an expat spouse*

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