MIGRATION
LETTERS

Family, Boundaries and Transformation The International Mobility of Professionals and Their Families

Flavia Cangià[±]
Déborah Levitan[±]
Tania Zittoun[¥]

Abstract

Two dominant images of mobile professionals, also known as "expats", have long been common in the social sciences: on the one hand, they were described as super-mobile individuals, who easily move between places with no time frame in mind, with the openness to engage with diversity; on the other hand, more recent studies challenged the idea of "expat" cosmopolitanism, and investigated the boundaries constituted by these people in the course of their everyday life. The present article brings to the fore the complexity of these individuals' and their families' experiences of international mobility from a combined socio-cultural psychological and sociological perspective. We draw on qualitative research conducted in Switzerland in order to reflect on the role of family in the way these people make sense of diversity across time and space, make and un-make symbolic boundaries between themselves and others, and understand personal and their families' transformation.

Keywords: Expat mobility; boundaries; family; migration.

Introduction

Professionals who often move for their career prospect have become more numerous and diverse (Meier, 2014), and include, among others, workers at international organizations and corporations, diplomats, academics, and researchers. Also commonly known as "expats", these mobile professionals have long been described, both in the literature and in dominant discourses on expatriation, as super-mobile individuals possessing a "cosmopolitan" orientation, and "a willingness to engage with the Other" (Hannerz, 1990, p. 239). Recent studies challenged this image, and brought to the fore the complexity of "elite cosmopolitanism" (Jansson, 2016), and the various socio-cultural boundaries that these people encounter and construct during the course of their everyday life (Fechter, 2007; Smith & Favell, 2006). Some research specifically focused on the lives of professionals' mobile families (Adams, 2014; Coles & Fechter, 2012; Gyger Gaspoz, 2013; Kofman & Raghuram, 2005; Ryan, 2011; Ryan & Mulholland, 2014a; Schliewe, 2018; Willis & Yeoh, 2000;

[±] Flavia Cangià, Institute of Psychology and Education, University of Neuchâtel, NCCR on-the-move, Switzerland. E-mail: flavia.cangia@unine.ch.
[±] Déborah Levitan, Institute of Psychology and Education, University of Neuchâtel, NCCR on-the-move, Switzerland. E-mail: flavia.cangia@unine.ch.
[¥] Tania Zittoun, Institute of Psychology and Education, University of Neuchâtel, NCCR on-the-move, Switzerland. E-mail: tania.zittoun@unine.ch.

Zittoun, Levitan, & Cangià, in press). Recent research showed how openness or closure to diversity depend on the social "sphere" of life (the economic, political, and sociocultural) (van Bochove & Engbersen, 2015, p. 298) in which these people and various family members are involved. Social networks of these families can also change across time, as family needs change (Ryan & Mulholland, 2014b).

The present article by focusing on mobile professionals' families contributes to this research with a special focus on boundary dynamics and through an interdisciplinary perspective[1]. In particular, it explores boundary work as relating to different aspects of intimate life, as well as to the way people make sense of personal and family transformation across time. This article will also contribute to understanding the temporalities and transformative nature of mobility (Griffiths, Rogers, & Anderson, 2013), by considering boundary work both at the spatial and temporal level.

Theoretical Background

Following a sociocultural perspective in psychology (Valsiner, 2007; Zittoun, 2006), we understand migration as a "dynamic, dialectic, and developmental experience" (Märtsin & Mahmoud, 2012, p. 741), which entails various changes at multiple levels: these include the "encounter" with alterity, the ruptures and transitions resulting from relocation, and identity transformations at the intrapersonal level (Greco Morasso & Zittoun, 2014; Zittoun et al., 2013). When moving, individuals physically and symbolically engage with others across differences (Gillespie, Kadianaki, & O'Sullivan-Lago, 2012), and re-position themselves in relation to the new environment. These semantic movements occur both spatially (with new positions people self-identify with in the new environment) and temporally (the self before the relocation, the present self and the imagined future self). These changes make the person not only move between different self positions (Hermans, 2001), but also re-define what in cultural sociology is called "symbolic boundaries", those conceptual distinctions created to make sense of the surrounding environment and of oneself in that environment, "to categorize objects, people, practices, and even time and space" (Lamont & Molnár, 2002, p. 168). Symbolic boundary work is an integral part of the process of defining who we are, emerges as "we constantly draw inferences concerning our similarities to, and differences from others" (Lamont, 1992, p. 11), and is inextricably linked to the process of meaning-making (Dahinden & Zittoun, 2013).

Based on the combination of these theoretical frameworks, we analyse symbolic boundary work in relation to the experience of mobility at two interrelated levels: at the synchronic level, as categorization within a given social and spatial situation; at the diachronic level, occurring at the level of self and other repositioning with regard to the personal and family transformation resulting from the movement. The two levels are mutually dependent: situated categorization processes also relate to experiences and understandings of a changing self vis-à-vis others; at the same time, one's sense of change emerges out of confrontation with others in specific temporal and spatial situations across distance. In the next paragraph, we introduce the context and methods of our research.

The Study

Switzerland represents an interesting context in which to explore the experiences of mobile families, as it has recently become an attractive destination for international newcomers, especially in view of career opportunities and quality of life. Recent transformations in migration policies, as well as the growing number of companies, organizations and research institutes in Switzerland, favour the increase of this form of short-term skilled migration. Although less subject to structural and practical constraints affecting other forms of less skilled migration, international professionals and their families can face some challenges when relocating to Switzerland (Ravasi, Salamin, & Davoine, 2013). The high cost of local life and the limited support from employers in certain aspects of life (e.g., accommodation, childcare, dual career arrangements) have contributed to changing the profile of this population, previously limited to a group of people with higher financial capacity (Cangià, 2018; Levitan, Zittoun, & Cangià, 2018). International associations, social networks and informal gatherings have been proliferating to respond to some of these challenges (Levitan et al., 2018), and together with other daily situations (e.g., schools, partners' networks, workplace), represent the main contexts in which these people interact with others at the local level. Those people who live in small villages can have more opportunities to meet with "Swiss" and permanent residents. Respondents seem to show interest in interacting with the "Swiss". However, they tend to meet often with people who do not hold a Swiss nationality. Family life (i.e., children's education, family care, couple relations, the emotional and practical support from proximate or extended family) can play a role in this regard. Family members' presence and experiences, for example, can represent practical channels for meeting others, in various spheres in which people find anchorage in the course of their daily life (e.g., child-care, schools, networks). At times, parents' participation in children's life can be more difficult (Ryan & Mulholland, 2014b), for example for those parents who face difficulties in networking with other parents, or for

some male accompanying spouses who avoid school's social networks when this is mostly composed of non-working women.

The article is based on a qualitative research carried out with 27 families in different cities and regions of Switzerland, in particular on in-depth interviews conducted with various family members[2]. Participants include scientists, workers at international organizations and multinational companies, diplomats, civil servants, and their families. They were contacted through relocation agencies, personal contacts and snowballing sampling. The interviews (between one and two hours) were conducted by the first author (FC) and held at a time and place chosen by participants (*café*, office, house). Questions focused on people's migratory trajectory, everyday life, social networks, work situation and future plans. Other topics were raised during the interviews, including feelings about migration, ideas about what constitutes "home" and "family", as well as family changes occurred during the relocation.

The interviews represent emotional encounters guiding both participant and researcher's "multiple positionalities" (e.g., gender, parental and professional status) (Cangià, 2017; Nowicka & Ryan, 2015; Ryan, 2015), and affecting researcher's understanding of people's stories and specific life events (i.e. the birth of a child; unemployment). In particular, the personal experience of the researcher conducting the interviews, as a woman and migrant working in Switzerland, helped evoke narration from the part of the respondent, and facilitated exchanges on issues of migration, work and family life.

Here, we draw on the analysis of three interviews with two women and a man, pseudonym Hela, Nathalie and Luke[3]. The interviews were conducted individually, following a person-centered approach (Levy & Hollan, 1998), whereby the interview aims at addressing sensitive topics and evoking narrations that would be differently articulated in front of other family members. These interviews were chosen as they represent extreme cases of the kind of descriptions on "locals" that emerged during the research. These stories are also representative of the different gendered configurations that structure professionals' experience of mobility, also in the context of Switzerland (Cangià, 2018; Kofman & Raghuram, 2005; Schaer, Dahinden, & Toader, 2017): Hela's experience is an extreme case of conventional gendered arrangements of mobility with the woman following a male partner (Kofman & Raghuram, 2005); Nathalie and Luke's stories reflect a more consensual couple mobility: while the male partner was the main mover for work reasons, it was Nathalie that facilitated the choice of destination. Luke, in turn, the main

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[2] This research is based on a combination of methods, including in-depth interviews, participant observation (e.g., with spouses' associations), an online questionnaire and a large survey on migration in Switzerland (http://nccr-onthemove.ch/research/migration-mobility-survey/).

[3] Names of people, places, and any other revealing information have been altered to guarantee anonymity.

mover to Switzerland, is now about to go back to his home-country in order to facilitate his wife's job-search after years of unemployment.

A thematic analysis of each interviews was conducted, in order to identify boundary dynamics through a look at specific aspects in the self-reports, including: descriptions of experiences of mobility, descriptions of friends and social networks, how the respondents differentiates herself and her families from others, and how she distinguishes herself and her families across time (before, after the move, in the future). Common themes and variations among criteria of evaluations of others and of oneself across time and space were then identified transversally through the use of interpretative analysis (Geertz, 1977).

In what follows, we first present boundary work as occurring at the synchronic level with regard to given spatial and temporal situations: the experience of mobility across countries and the temporary status in Switzerland offer specific symbolic markers through which people construct difference and similarity with others. After, we consider boundary work as occurring at the diachronic level, with regard to personal and family transformation in mobility.

The Boundary Work Outside: Mobility as Symbolic Marker between Self and Other

Our respondents make sense of difference and similarity with others, between "mobile" and "non-mobile" people, with regard to the transformative nature of the experience of mobility (e.g., personal change resulting from migration, meeting new people and discovering cultural diversity). According to the majority of respondents, mobility is an occasion to see the world and meet cultural diversity. Mobility and immobility, however, become the main symbolic markers of these people's boundary work when it comes to the spatial and embodied experiences in specific places and in social interactions with others. In particular, when respondents describe the kind of person with whom they associate mostly during their everyday life, they make a distinction between "internationals" and "locals", between "mobile" and "non-mobile" people, as those who move and "have some international experiences" on the one hand, and those who stayed behind, "who never lived in another culture" or "do not want to or need to make friends" on the other. In general, we observed that "experience" represents a recurrent means to differentiate oneself from others. Sharing similar experiences on-the-move (willingness to cultivate new friends, language knowledge, number of countries where people have lived previously) becomes the marker of group distinction. When indicating the criteria through which they constitute their networks and feel different from or similar to others, respondents often draw a line of demarcation on the basis of emotional (Cangià, 2016; Zembylas, 2012), social (Ryan & Mulholland, 2014b), and cultural aspects (Lamont, 1992), relating to a person's capacity to engage with diversity. The

different and unique trajectories and words of Hela, Nathalie and Luke illustrate these dynamics respectively.

Hela arrived in Switzerland in 2014, after following her diplomat husband for almost six years across Europe. On the occasion of the birth of her first child, she quit her work plans, as she was not able to balance working and personal life between two different countries. She faced a difficult period to adjust to her husband's mobile trajectory. During the interview, Hela ambivalently ascribes the way she feels about the new environment to the alteration of her work plans, to the encounter with "locals" and to the lack of social networks. The "international bubble", and the "international culture", represents for her the reference group, which crosses spatial borders and becomes "kind of similar in every country":

> Our reference culture is the international bubble […] we would love to [meet with Swiss people] usually it doesn't work out, cause they are not interested in making international friends who are leaving […] They [Swiss people] don't even say hello […] I find them very distant […] It's the expats who are on the same boat, they also want to and need to make friends, they understand us better.

Boundaries are drawn between the "Swiss" and the "Expat" on the basis of emotional ("being distant" or "being cold"*)* and social attitudes based on the "perceptions of transience" (Ryan & Mulholland, 2014b, p. 259), including the wish to make new friends with people who will move again*,* and being "on the same boat".

Before moving to Switzerland, Nathalie lived and worked in New Zealand with her husband for about four years, when they decided together to get closer to their families in Europe. Her Swiss passport (that she got from her father) proved to be useful to choose their destination. Her passport also helps feel less "precarious", as she explains, compared to their status in New Zealand, and the experience of getting a visa renewed every time when moving to a new place. She tells about their life in New Zealand, where they used to engage with "internationals", as "it was easier to bound with people in the same situation". Nathalie talks explicitly about how moving and in the transient condition of temporarily living in a new country have changed her personally, and contributed to creating a line of separation between her and those people who stayed behind, between migrants and home communities, who, she said, could not accept personal changes occurring in the experience of migration:

> I think migration is a big change, it's a big change from old perspectives, it just changes the way you see the world and also the way people see you because they see that you have changed […] there are still some people that can't handle it. They don't understand why you left […] and they take personally. So it's also good to have an idea of who you wanna

be friends with and what kind of people are good to you and what kind of people are not toxic, but have this attitude that you no longer wanna be associate with.

Connection with the home-country can contribute to altering the way migrants make sense of themselves and home communities. In particular, the feeling of not being understood from those who stayed behind, as well as the expectation to find people back home unchanged (Märtsin & Mahmoud, 2012; Schuetz, 1945; Van Leeuwen, 2008), make Nathalie prefer to "associate with" those who seem to share her experience of migration.

Luke moved to Switzerland with his wife and two children for an assignment with his company. Since his childhood, Luke has been living across different countries, as a result of his father's work first, and of his career trajectory after. He moved for the first time with his family in Switzerland. Also for Luke, previous knowledge about living in an international environment and resulting "cosmopolitan abilities" associated with the spatial and embodied "experiences of travel or displacement, transnational contact and diasporic identification" (Vertovec, 2009, p. 10) come here to constitute a marker of difference between people. Luke makes it clear when illustrating his social networks:

> Initially my wife was friend with some of the women very close to us geographically, neighbours or adjacent building (.) and then those relations worked and didn't work […] we joined the international club of Basel which is largely expats, and because we were in the international school I was really happy with that, because it was about 50% Swiss and 50 % expats and (.) our very close friends are probably a third Swiss and 70% expats but the Swiss we are friends with are almost always married to an expat or someone not from Switzerland […] there is a lot of Swiss people that have also visited other parts of the world and come back to Switzerland but are maybe more aware of the differences between Switzerland and other countries.

He explains how "living in other cultures" and having different experiences worldwide can represent an important aspect for building relationships, for sharing similar stories, as well as for personal "expansion":

> almost all of our friends, they were either living here as a second place they had come to or they have come back to Switzerland after having been in other places. And I find spending time with people like that, you just learn a lot […] people that have lived in another culture and have kind of experiences, the same (.) some of the same frustrations […] you always have good stories, right? There is always something […] I think (.) it builds you up […] it helps you kind of expand as a person. […] For me it would be very hard to stay in the town I grew up in […] I think that world is a little too small for me.

Hela, Nathalie and Luke's words suggested how the very experience of mobility as the occasion for encountering diversity becomes the symbolic marker for constituting boundaries of "experiential cosmopolitanism" (Glick Schiller, 2015), of emotional, socio-cultural and spatial commonality and transiency, between "those who stay" and "those who leave", between "locals" and those who are "on the same boat". Boundary work, and the resulting "opening up" to or "blocking" the encounter with diversity (Gillespie et al., 2012), are also inextricably linked to understandings of personal and family transformation in migration over time, as we will discuss in the following paragraph.

The Boundary Work Within: Mobility as a Personal and Family Transformation

Mobility entails also a transformative and developmental experience (Märtsin & Mahmoud, 2012). When moving, the individual changes and develops as a person by becoming (an)other (Märtsin & Mahmoud, 2012), by re-establishing a sense of "sameness" and identity (Mahmoud, 2008; Märtsin, 2010), or by transforming personal trajectories, plans, beliefs, relations and knowledge along with external changes. We suggest that boundary work occurs in these transformative movements and developmental trajectories, between past, present and future selves and significant others as they develop through time, and can relate to more situated gender identities, cultural values (like in Hela's case) or national categories (Nathalie and Luke). Hela, Nathalie and Luke, like other respondents, put special emphasis on the personal and family transformation allowed by the repeated moves, and by the confrontation with others. The various developmental trajectories of these individuals and resulting shifting roles in and out of the household (e.g., becoming mother, work transitions, couple arrangements) intersect with the encounter with others, and can affect the sense that a person makes of the experience of repeated mobility. Inner boundary work on-the-move can then occur along with transformation in one's view on personal and family life simultaneously. It can be complicated by new arrangements resulting from developmental trajectories in migration (e.g., becoming mother in a new and unknown environment), and the kind of implications that this can have on personal work plans, like Hela's case demonstrates. It can also take place in the way a person changes views on family relations or on other family members' life if compared to what was before the move. Hela, Nathalie and Luke's shifting views on their family life in mobility well illustrate this second point.

Moving can entail a change in personal work plans like in the case of Hela and other accompanying spouses. This can represent a disruptive experience of alteration of occupational identities, yet also an important opportunity for self-exploration and change of values (Cangià, 2018; Cangià, Zittoun, & Levitan, in press). Moving can also disrupt the capacity for personal transformation, and

can affect the way one might feel in a new environment. The transition to motherhood with the consequent alteration of her work plans and change in her occupational identity affected Hela's experience of repeated mobility. Before the birth of her first child, she explains, she easily managed to live across countries, traveling back and forth between the new destination and her work place: "I was going back and forth until I had my first child, […] and we were just fine then". The birth of a child represents a break between a before and an after point in time in her trajectory as a mobile person, between different ways of positioning herself with regard to gendered identities, from being "highly educated" and "talented" in her professional sector, to being a full time mother and a "housewife type" (Schaer et al., 2017).

A distinction is drawn between the past "I" and "we" like those who move for the first time and still have the "euphoria" of moving, versus the present "I" and "we" like "those who move a lot" and for whom the emotional impact of mobility has changed (Cangià, 2017). Her own and her family's transformation comes to be typified through these two main categories:

> […] like those who move a lot, you don't have the six month-honeymoon period when you are over the moon because you don't have this idea that you're gonna change and you're gonna dive into a culture and you're gonna be part of the society […] you feel you can do everything you can to reinvent yourself, but we don't think so anymore, cause we had to do it so much. So you know I am stuck with myself, it's still me, and I don't care so much about the customs, the local ways of life, I don't fool myself into believing that I can dive into it, and adjust, and grow roots, we can't, it would be idiotic to grow roots cause we have to put them out of the soil again.

"Being still herself" represents a barrier that limits her willingness to engage with diversity. Yet, when talking about her children's developmental trajectories, transformation and engagement with other's diversity is still possible: "it's amazing to watch them grow into multicultural […] for them is so natural that people are different, they look different, they talk a bit different, they come from different places". In her imagination, her children in the future can be different from now as a result of years of mobility, and can become more similar to her, with less willingness to constitute new social networks: "Are they going to become tired to make friends as I did, are they going to stop to make any effort because they have to leave anyway?"

Transformation is still possible for Hela though: she explains how she changed her own values regarding family life, and became more open to relationships with, and support from, extended family as a result of mobility. A line between past and present selves is drawn on the basis of cultural markers, such as difference between family values in different cultural environments (i.e., nuclear

family culture in Northern Countries versus multiple child-care in the Mediterranean countries).

In Nathalie's case, a distinction between past and present is made more explicit with regard to intimate relations, when you get out your "comfort zone" and reposition yourself vis-à-vis a significant other:

> we [her and her husband] both changed, I guess as we were together when it happened we just adapted to the other … how the other changes. I think that my husband has changed a lot […] you see how the other one changes and you think – *oh, maybe I am doing that too*!

A distinction between herself before and after moving is drawn in parallel with collective boundaries, between French people "who complain a lot" and the "English way of thinking where you should smile and not complain". Nathalie tells how she became "more positive than before" as a result of migration, because people in New Zealand could not understand "this whining thing".

For Luke, moving represents an opportunity for personal and his children's "expansion". Learning new languages, for example, is a transformation that can make his family different from other "Americans" who normally speak only one language:

> Their language is amazing to me. I mean you hear about children just being able to absorb languages […] One of my proudest moments here so far as a parent was about a week or so before we were leaving, […] we were at a restaurant and my son said to me "*Dad can I order? Can I get the meal? […] I would like to order for the table*" and I "*oh ok, sure you can do that*". […] And the waitress comes and he starts to speak to her in German. […] I don't know if you ever heard the joke about Americans… if you speak 3 languages you're trilingual, if you speak 2 languages you're bilingual, if you speak one language you're American. And there is some truth to it, but to me it is much sadder. America is a great country and there is lots of opportunities there and there is a great diversity of people and kind of environment you can live in […] but I think I have a bit of hunger for adventure I want to see other parts of the world.

By describing his own child speaking other languages and opening up to diversity, Luke engages in a process of self-definition and group categorization on multiple spatial and temporal levels: there is his child who can speak German in the here-and-now of the restaurant; the reflection of his child in the future, growing up and being able to "absorb languages"; there is the other "Americans" over there, who can only speak one language" and to which Luke compares himself and his family over here; finally there is "the striving self" (Gillespie, 2007), that is Luke who wants "to see other parts of the world" in

the future, based on his past childhood of mobility and his present willingness to travel more[4].

Hela, Nathalie and Luke's interchangeable use of the pronouns "I" and "we" (read as family) suggests the shifting and blurred nature of the boundaries between themselves and their significant others in their "multivoiced self" (Aveling, Gillespie, & Cornish, 2014). Boundaries are still drawn between "those who move" and "those who never move", yet these boundary processes take place at the individual level when making sense of the past, present and future, of oneself and one's own families in relation to real and imagined others.

Conclusion

This article has analysed boundary work both as a process of self-identification and categorization in a specific space and moment, and as the understanding of personal and family transformation across time. Hela, Nathalie, and Luke's unique experiences represent variations of the same dynamics with regard to the two levels under exploration. This analysis has showed how family and intimate life play a twofold role in the different construction of socio-cultural and emotional boundaries between self/other: socially, by offering a practical channel to social networking and to socializing with people in a similar environment (Ryan & Mulholland, 2014b); symbolically, in the way people make sense of the importance of diversity in one's life-course as an opportunity for change. Moving to new destinations can be the occasion for living new experiences and meeting "new cultures". At the same time, turning to "internationals" can help find similarity across difference. Other times, personal transformation or a new event in family life allowed by the experience of migration, can affect the way individuals relate to diversity, and make sense of the distinctions between themselves and others.

Considering boundary dynamics through the lens of family and intimate life can contribute to research on (im)mobilities, and to understanding the complexities and tempos of people's migratory trajectories and relationship with diversity. Boundary work can occur on multiple levels and involve a variety of markers of similarity and difference. Openness and closure to diversity are hence not exclusive processes, but more dynamic than usually portrayed: they can represent ambivalent responses to the dialectics of migration (Glick Schiller & Irving, 2015), in the form of both geographic and semantic movements between social and cultural positions (Gillespie et al., 2012), between mobility and immobility (Glick Schiller & Salazar, 2013), between personal and family identities, or, after all, between different moments in one's own life.

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[4] For different experiences in the same family see also (Zittoun, Levitan, & Cangià, In press).

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