"Switzerland Doesn't Want Me" - Work, Precarity and Emotions for Mobile Professionals' Partners

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Abstract

A wide range of professions demands mobility as a requisite for "excellence", success and "good performance". At the same time, more precarious and flexible conditions, ranging from unemployment, to temporary, free-lance and self-employed occupations, now characterize the mobile trajectories of a large number of professionals and their partners. What is the emotional cost of these conditions in mobility? How do mobile professionals' partners feel and deal with feeling rules regarding unemployment and job search when moving? The article examines the case of Switzerland, by exploring the experience of mobile professionals' partners.

Keywords: *mobility; precarity; professionals; emotions; accompanying partners.*

Introduction

A wide range of professions demands employees to move across different countries, as a requisite for "excellence", success and "good performance" (Bilecen & Mol, 2017). The more the employee is able and ready to move, the more s/he is expected to show "adaptability" and "flexibility" to change. In the context of corporate life, international mobility becomes necessary in order to develop transferable skills and "employability" (Smith & Favell, 2006): wherever you need to go, you can work. In the context of academic work, in turn, staying abroad in a new academic environment helps establish transnational scientific networks and "broaden academic horizons" (Schaer, Dahinden, & Toader, 2017, p. 1292). But this comes at a cost. Various working conditions, ranging from unemployment, temporary employment to free-lance and self-employed occupations now characterize the career and life trajectories of a larger number of workers and their families (Bourdieu, 1999; Castel, 2002; Cooper, 2014; Della Porta, Hänninen, Silvasti, & Siisiäinen, 2015; Fudge & Strauss, 2013; Pugh, 2015; V. Smith, 1997). Precarity represents a social and economic condition of contemporary labour-market and now touches the subjective lives of many individuals (Ettlinger, 2007; Neilson & Rossiter, 2005; Standing, 2014). It can also extend beyond work, so as to include socio-emotional relations[1] (Berg & O'Neill, 2017; Biglia & Martí, 2014; Cangià, 2018; Kesisoglou, Figgou, & Dikaiou, 2016; Murgia, 2010; Neilson & Rossiter, 2008; Worth, 2015), livelihoods and belongings (Al-Mohammad, 2012; Butler, 2006; Stewart, 2012; Louise Waite, 2009). The present article aims to explore the interplay between precarity and mobility through the

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[1] In my previous work, I defined precarity as a subjective condition characterized by certain emotions, in particular a sense of disorientation, uncertainty and frustration regarding the future (Cangià, 2018).

lens of emotions. I consider how people feel and deal with feeling rules associated with unemployment and job search when relocating to a new country.

I draw upon research conducted in Switzerland between 2015 and 2018[2], and explore the experience of accompanying spouses, individuals who follow their partners in international mobility, are out of the job market or only recently managed to find an employment. In particular, I ask what is the emotional cost for these people who experience unemployment as a result of the move, and are demanded to reinvent themselves in the context of a new place and labour market? How do they feel and deal with feeling rules concerning job-search and uncertain working conditions in the new destination of migration?

Precarity and Emotions in Mobility

PrecAnthro collective, other members of the European Association of Social Anthropologists and some studies have recently pointed out the importance of considering the emotional dimension of precarity[3] (Cangià, 2018; McKenzie, 2018). This article contributes to this research as well as to studies on precarity in the context of mobility (Anderson, 2010, 2014; Lewis, Dwyer, Hodkinson, & Waite, 2014; Schierup, Munck, Likic-Brboric, & Neergaard, 2015; Waite & Lewis, 2017). It also aims to contribute to recent critical approaches to the study of "highly skilled migration" (Agergaard & Ungruhe, 2016; Cangià & Zittoun, 2018; Hercog & Sandoz, 2018): I challenge the often taken-for-granted category of the "highly skilled" and "highly wanted" migrant, by considering the emotional impact of professional mobility under uncertain and unstable working conditions, for mobile professionals and their families. These families have become more numerous also as a result of the "imperative of mobility" according to which mobility becomes an important element for employees' success. Considering the mobility of professionals and their families becomes extremely important, as the current diversity of experiences in migratory trajectories "reflect the multiple, fragmented, and complex nature of migration today" (Bilecen & Mol, 2017, p. 1242).

While often being viewed as privileged migrants, these people can experience an unprecedented job insecurity and flexibility (Bourdieu, 1999) and risk associated with job loss (Doogan, 2015). The movement around occupational sectors and countries, while being valued as important for a professional trajectory, can for example create fragmented career paths and intensify a sense of job insecurity. In the context of academia, the idea of mobility as equal excellence has been challenged (Ackers, 2005; Bernela, 2016). Mobility rather plays a role in the production and reproduction of various inequalities (Bilecen & Mol, 2017). In the case of mobile professionals' family life, furthermore, the partners following the overseas assignees can experience a rupture in their working life and can struggle to find employment in the new destination (Cangià, 2018; Cangià, Zittoun, & Levitan, in press; Cole, 2011; Harvey, 1995; Lauring & Selmer, 2010; Ravasi, Salamin, & Davoine, 2013). These people can face a variety of emotions regarding their working conditions.

While being inexorably subjective and relative to the specificity of personal lives (Calhoun, 2004), emotions[4] also pervade social life (Jasper, 1998), and are performed and displayed in constant interaction with others and through the engagement with the surroundings (Boccagni &

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[2] This article is based on a larger project conducted at the Institute of Psychology and Education of the University of Neuchâtel (Switzerland), as part of the National Center of Competence in Research NCCR – On the Move, and funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF) (Cangià, 2018; Levitan, 2018; Zittoun, Levitan, & Cangiá, 2018).

[3] In the context of the 15th EASA Biennial Conference held in Stockholm in August 2018.

[4] I define "emotion" as a process of evaluation of an external situation, and of the internal affective state and bodily sensation associated with a specific event (Cangià, 2017; Lindquist, 2013; Nussbaum, 2003; Solomon, 1993). Here I consider the more social and relational character of emotions.

Baldassar, 2015; Milton, 2002; Solomon, 2004). People are "capable of assessing when a feeling is 'inappropriate', and capable of trying to manage feeling" (Hochschild, 1979, p. 557), yet they are also concerned with how they appear to feel (Goffman, 1956). The way people feel and comply with certain "feeling rules[5]" varies across socio-cultural contexts, and is shaped by different dimensions, e.g., gender, ethnicity, and class (Lutz & White, 1986). It can be complicated by movement, and be affected by the experience of migration, both as a past and ongoing experience, and as a future plan. How to feel about job-search, how to act in front of employers, how to negotiate between the way one feels about employment and actual work opportunities, can depend on, and change with, the socio-cultural context where a person lives. Under conditions of constant mobility and unemployment, my respondents mostly express a general sense of insecurity and uncertainty about the future, lack of self-confidence, anxiety for finding a job, yet also conflicting emotions including a sense of "being luck" (for being in a economic situation that allows being unemployed for a while), determination to keep looking for a job, and frustration about the long and unsuccessful job-search.

In what follows, I first present the context of research and methods, and after I discuss the feeling rules and the emotional cost associated with job-search in Switzerland and in the experience of migration to a new country.

"Switzerland doesn't want me[6]": Context of Research

In Switzerland, various cities and regions now attract international newcomers, due to the increasing number of companies and international humanitarian organizations (Cangià, Levitan, & Zittoun, 2018). Also, in the context of the Swiss academic world, a number of international programs attracting people from around the world have been established. International mobility represents a formal requirement for obtaining a professorship or funding opportunities in Swiss universities (Toader & Dahinden, 2018). Switzerland hence represents an interesting context in which to explore the mobility of professionals and their partners. Whereas the choice of relocating to Switzerland can be based on the idea of this country as characterized by a promising labour market where easily find a job, once arrived, a different situation is often reported. Switzerland is described as a place where people do not feel to be welcome with regard to work, as a place where certain feeling rules are more valid than others, and where certain previous ideas about work have to be reviewed for adjustment. It is described as a "closed" labour market with "its own rules" and with less work opportunities than expected, where employers tend to favour "locals" or younger people with "less experience", and where building social network becomes crucial (Cangià et al., in press). The high cost of life in Switzerland can represent an additional concern for these people, who can view their economic contribution to the household as crucial. In the case of female spouses, maternity, while representing a socially accepted reason to stop working, can also work as an additional challenge for the re-integration in the labour market. Other barriers and reasons for refusal from the part of the employers include local language skills, skill mismatch and recognition of educational certificates. As a result, some partners start looking for a job across borders and consider the possibility to leave their family behind.

I have conducted fieldwork in the Western part of Switzerland and interviewed 15 accompanying spouses (7 women and 8 men) of different nationalities across Europe, North and South America, Africa and Asia, who follow their partners working in various professional sectors

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[5] "Feeling rules" prescribe which, as well as when and how, certain emotions can be expressed in social relations.

[6] From one of my interviews.

(i.e., academia and research, multinational companies, diplomacy, civil service). When permissible, I met some of the respondents a second time after one year, in order to follow their life during the period of job-search also on the occasion of concrete events (e.g., birth of a child; internal migration; start of a new job). Participant observation was also conducted in the context of spousal associations and some initiatives regarding local labour market. Interviewees were recruited through several spouses' associations, through the Migration-Mobility Survey 2016 (Steiner & Wanner, 2015) and snowballing sampling. We also contacted participants through an exploratory online questionnaire, circulated through Internet platforms and social networks. These spouses were all highly qualified (graduate and Master levels), they were unemployed at the time of the interview, and they were looking for an employment in the field of their expertise. Three respondents had just recently started working again at the time of the interview (free-lance, permanent and temporary position); another one got a new job overseas during the year between the first and second interview. During the interview, respondents talked about their work situation, trajectory of migration, and future plans. Other topics were also brought about, such as practical concerns about labour market, and ideas on possible future destinations. At times new ideas about alternative job emerged, also during some of the events on how to create a business in Switzerland.

The interviews (each lasting between one and two hours), held at a time and place chosen by participants (at a café or at their house), were confidential and recorded, and were mostly conducted in English. They were guided by a reflexive approach (Ellis, 2003) and an "ethnographic imaginary" (Forsey, 2010), and represented "a moment of engagement, a site of participation in the life of the person" (Hockey & Forsey, 2012, p. 75). My own personal experience proved to be an important methodological tool contributing to understanding social phenomena from a reflexive point of view (Ellis, 2003), as well as to influencing the conduct of field research (in particular with regard to my motivation, the choice of, and the emotional response to, the specific topic under exploration). My being a migrant, a researcher and working in a context (academia) commonly recognized in Europe as being highly precarious (Lempiäinen, 2015; Schaer & Dahinden, 2017), helped me on various occasions to share similar experiences with my interlocutors, as well as to reflect about the emotional impact of job insecurity in mobility.

I analyse the various interviews transversally through an interpretative and ethnographic perspective. I explore the content of peoples' narratives and their voice tone and externalization (e.g., utterances, vocal and facial expressions, hesitation, silence) (Levy & Wellenkamp, 1989), and consider: how a person explicitly and implicitly expresses personal emotions; how a person talks about feeling rules and the normative expectations on how one should feel and display (Goffman, 1956; Hochschild, 1979); how a person talks about the contagion of real or imagined others' feelings (Hatfield, Cacioppo, & Rapson, 1993; Jasper, 2014) (e.g., other "expats"; the local labour market), as well as about the emotional ambivalence regarding uncertain working conditions. This is what I discuss in the remainder of the article.

Feeling rules and the others

There is the way the person feels, and the way s/he expresses feelings in front of employers while looking for a job in the new destination of migration. Looking for a job after some time can create "frustration" and a form of "anxiety" in sending job applications only for the sake of job-search. Often people start loosing self-confidence. Jerome[7] followed his wife relocated with her company in Switzerland. He is now unemployed after years of professional work, and takes care of

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[7] All names are pseudonyms.

the family. After some time of unsuccessful job-search, he starts searching in other countries and thinks about going back to his home-country. Jerome expresses concerns about how his qualification is not recognized in Switzerland, and resulting lack of self-confidence:

> *I'm feeling less confident because after a certain point I'm starting thinking "what's wrong with my profile or with my experience, with my knowledge?" etcetera. [...] When I started looking, I was much more confident about the fact that I would find a job [...] So I don't know, I don't know how it will continue.*

He also hesitates and expresses uncertainty about how the situation could evolve (I don't know, I don't know how it will continue).

Feeling in a certain way, however, comes to be in tension with the feeling rules governing labour market, and affecting the interview with employers (as an emotional space where emotional display can affect the results). This can have an impact on the person's emotional state, as well as on one's own sense of being part of, and feeling "wanted" in, the new environment:

> *The point is that when you are less confident, you have less chance to get a job. Because during the interview you show this. And I'm afraid, I'm really afraid of that. I'm afraid that I'm showing I'm less confident, I'm less self-confident and that I'm a little lazy. But I'm lazy, but not all the time, let's say. I'm lazy because I don't find a job [...] Sometimes I have this impression that nobody wants me in this country, from a professional point of view, of course. And when I say that to myself, it's really hard. It's hard because you also- you feel but you also show it again when you have this- if you have contact with people, you will show it [...]. And I don't want myself to be like this because I've never been like this.*

To complicate this picture, there are other people who moved to Switzerland in the same working situation, whose feelings can be contagious. Contagion can be strong when a person is surrounded by those to whom s/he feels affinity (Jasper, 2014). Some respondents, like Jerome, need to keep distance from people in a similar situation, like other spouses looking for job without success, who can be viewed as not supportive, other times as simply in a different (and more privileged) economic condition.

Laure followed her husband working temporarily in academia in Switzerland. She recently started working again in her professional field on a temporary contract. While "feeling fortunate to have found this job", she says, she realizes how overqualified she is here in Switzerland if compared to her home-country for the very same job. Each time she would go through an unsuccessful interview, "it was like a huge failure". She explains how back then when she was still unemployed she used to maintain distance from other "expat moms" who have given up searching for a job:

> *I was a member of this forum and there would be people who were um, organized coffee and play days [...] I would do those at the beginning but um, yeah I mean there was mostly women who had come to Switzerland to follow their husbands. [...] So these were people who weren't looking for a job. Either they were here temporarily or you know they looked and hadn't found anything and had given up.*

Laure describes a general sense of "un-satisfaction" among these women from which she prefers to maintain distance. Others, she says, are those who live of their husbands' salary, people hence from which she differentiates herself and her own economic condition: "you know women whose husbands had very high level well paying jobs, whereas my husband was a post doc". In

order to deal with the difficult time of unemployment, Laure draws a boundary between herself and these women:

"I was just uncomfortable with the sense of desperation amongst some of the women [...] they weren't working but they had nannies to help them with the cooking and the cleaning and um, I was barely managing my daily life".

Getting to the "other side[8]": when the labour market doesn't feel the same way

Then, there is the way an imagined other - the local labour market - feels. While the person can feel to be capable to "do lots of great things", "the market doesn't feel that way" (from one interview). Once on the "other side", when the person finally starts working again, s/he could realize what the rules in the new country are, accept them or not. Una and Kian have both gotten to "the other side" with their new jobs, but they respectively take a different approach towards the Swiss labour market. Una has recently found a job back in her home-country, after following her husband working as a civil servant across two different countries. Now she commutes to see her family in Switzerland. She expresses conflicting feelings regarding her status as an accompanying partner, and especially regarding her choice to quit her job to move. When talking about this choice during our first interview, Una stops and leaves the room. Once back, she remains in silence, hesitates for a moment until I proposed to change the subject if she feels more comfortable. Later, we go back to the issue of job-search. She now describes vehemently these years in Switzerland as "exhausting and depressing", especially being rejected and not getting feedbacks, but only "a standard response: *'other candidate's profiles were better than you'* and end, you don't get any- so you don't know what to do basically". Like for Jerome, there is uncertainty about what to do and what comes next, yet there is this ambivalence, where "you calm and prove, you are in this darkness and you try to find a job". For Una, Switzerland remains a place that does not support migrants' willingness to reinvent them in the local job market. She thought about starting a PhD, but how, differently from other countries where she used to live, Switzerland would react to her new idea:

when I went to the university in New Zealand and I said like, "Well, I might be thinking of, um, doing something here, maybe writing a Ph.D., working for you." They said like, "Oh, yeah. We have these positions coming up, please apply". [...] I went to see a couple of universities here [...] The first answer I get here is, "Well, you know it's very difficult to do up here. To come into the program here, you have to be really good." [...] It's these limiting views sometimes, that people always unconsciously, it's part of the culture. It's not something they do because they want to do it, but [...] they are constantly stopping you.

Kian also "got to the other side": after following his wife in Switzerland and being unemployed, he decided to change field of expertise, study for a while and then he could finally manage to find a job. He explains how other unemployed spouses feel about Switzerland:

There is always the same discourse, which even I had when I was looking for the job, which is like "Switzerland doesn't want me." You know, and you just have this feeling, "Switzerland doesn't want me" [...] I felt like I had to break this barrier. But then it's funny when you're on the other side, you'd feel like there is no barrier. It's something you completely create for yourself. [...] Once you get a job and once you're here [...] there is no barrier.

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[8] From my interview with Kian.

This barrier, according to Kian, refers to the constant rejection from the part of the employers, the lack of consideration in not even being called for an interview. And that's when "you start to realize that here the network […] it's important everywhere, but it's just so crucial here". But how to break this barrier?

"You have to start from day one and being the most outgoing, the most uh, ready for failure person you've ever been. And that's the only way you'll ever get a job".

From feeling "depressed" in network meetings with people, when a common feeling would be "*Oh no, I don't wanna go to these meetings, they-they're tedious, you know, the people there are boring, um, nobody wants to talk to me*", then by managing one's emotional reaction something can change:

"one day, you know, you go, and it's depressing, and it's hard, and you have to motivate yourself, but just that one day you will meet the person who you can connect with, and that's the day".

These people navigate the ambivalence between the various ways they feel, the expectations and costs of constructing, and then thinking about breaking up with, one's own career; of wandering across different countries, physically and symbolically, between their home-country or previous destinations of migration, an apparent "privileged " place like Switzerland (where they thought they could easily find a job), and any other possible place they could imagine themselves and their families in the future.

Mobility as Precarity

A larger number of professionals, in and out Switzerland, now navigate precarious conditions and insecurity about their next assignment, with possible repercussions on their family life (Schaer & Dahinden, 2017; Schaer et al., 2017; Toader & Dahinden, 2018). The mobility of professionals can have an impact on their partners' plans and working life. Accompanying partners' adjustment to migration can be harder if compared to the employee, who generally continues to rely on the workplace as a possible anchorage of security in the host country (Ravasi et al., 2013). And yet employers keep considering spouses' emotional and practical support as a relevant aspect in assignees' effectiveness (Harvey, 1995; Lauring & Selmer, 2010). Therefore, these individuals' professional adjustment and the emotional cost of their work transitions become a crucial aspect in the making of assignees' mobile trajectories and career paths.

Like Jerome, as a result of unemployment after migrating, some partners can start putting into question their professional profile and losing self-confidence. Like Una, many experience ambivalence concerning job-search in a new place, where "you are in this darkness and you try to find a job". Many, like Laure, seem to be also very much influenced by the way others feel about the same situation, yet they try and manage their feelings about the uncertainty of working life, keep distance from others in the same condition, stay "calm and prove" to cross the "barrier". At times, like for Kian, this "barrier" of constant failure in job-search can be crossed, and a new employment arrives. For many of these people, however, job-search does not have borders anymore: many seem torn between staying and leaving, between leaving the country and leaving their work field altogether.

I explored the emotional dimension of precarity as the very space where these tensions concerning the consequences of mobility on a person's career and personal trajectory come to the fore. How can mobility help create "excellence" and success in professional life if people can start

feeling insecure about what they have constructed, and uncertain about what comes next, as the very consequence of moving? Far from levelling inequalities of different kinds, mobility can produce and reproduce inequalities among different people in general (Bilecen & Mol, 2017), within the same family (Riaño & Baghdadi, 2007), or within the same person, by creating a form of ambivalence and unbalance between personal and professional priorities, plans, fears and dreams (Cangià, 2018). Mobile professionals and their families can find themselves in privileged positions during and after mobility, yet they can also experience more disadvantaged positions as a result of living abroad (Guth & Gill, 2008).

Further research is needed on the mobile working lives of the most "privileged" and "wanted" migrants, on the different precarious conditions affecting various professions, as well as on other cases in the European context. The dimension of family in this regard is an important aspect that needs further exploration. As a matter of fact, dual career couples in mobility become now the rule for many professionals. Spouses' career at times becomes part of the economic value of the international assignment. Further attention should be given in work and migration policy-making as well as more specifically in employers' business strategy to the emotional impact of mobility in the lives of these professionals and their families. Mobility can be seen as a form of new precarity in itself, insofar as it contributes to making the work paths of professionals and their families unsure, fragmented and unpredictable, like never before.

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