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Deterritorialized careers, ageing and the life course

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ABSTRACT

The pursuit of a deterritorialised career profoundly influences how the life course unfolds. In this article, we examine how geographical mobility within global organizations influence the stages and transitions that make up the adult life course. Drawing on a British Academy funded study, we have analysed the biographies of corporate executives and UN-professionals at different stages of their careers and life course. The ways that these transnational actors interpret their past, present and future at different stages of the life course – early adulthood, middle-age and approaching retirement – sheds light on the relationship between deterritorialized work practices, ageing and significant life transitions. We argue that deterritorialized careers promote a compartmentalised approach to life whereby each 'compartment' – employment, relationships, family, and home – poses a distinct set of logistical problems to be solved and requires significant reflexive capabilities. Since the responsibility for reconciling these discrete compartments across time and space is individualised, 'windows' of heightened mobility create immediate and long-term challenges for transnational actors that can be cumulative rather than resolving over time. Thus, an initial decision to pursue a deterritorialized career can have repercussions that are not only immediate but shape successive stages and transitions of the life course.

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Introduction

Relocation for a job or employer is one of the most significant ways that employment shapes a person's biography, relationships and social milieu. By the early twenty-first century, it had therefore become a prerequisite of jobs in an increasing number of sectors. In this article, we examine how geographical mobility *within* global organisations can shape the stages and transitions that make up the adult life course. We argue that the pursuit of a deterritorialized career profoundly influences how the life course unfolds. The metaphor 'to compartmentalize' refers to a capacity to act in one domain of life, typically work, without being inhibited by other domains. Given the emphasis upon geographical mobility within global organisations prior to the pandemic, we contend that the capacity of transnational workers to exercise 'identity agency' – that is, their capacity to fulfil short-medium term career goals and milestones – was enhanced while their 'life

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course agency' was constrained (Hitlin and Elder 2007). Thus, deterritorialized work practices promote a compartmentalized approach to life, which poses a distinct set of logistical problems within work and non-work domains that do not necessarily resolve over time.

Although the travel restrictions brought about by the Coronavirus pandemic are re-shaping employment-related mobility in multiple ways, historically certain jobs within global organisations have been considered to require *co-presence*, in particular the work of UN-professionals studied here. The material presented draws on fieldwork conducted a decade ago between 2009 and 2011 about how transnational mobility affects the biographies and careers of UN-professionals and corporate executives employed by a global bank. Our focus on the life course here sheds light on an emergent theme from that material which continues to have repercussions for our research subjects but had not been directly analysed. Since the global pandemic is reshaping the ways that transnational institutions operate, we note that our data is an artefact of the epoch in which it was collected; nonetheless, our analytical focus on the life-course underlines the enduring biographical consequences of early-mid career choices.[1] It therefore seems timely to tackle these ongoing concerns.

Highly skilled and qualified workers who routinely cross borders for their jobs have been variously described as mobile professionals, intra-corporate transferees (ICTs), transnational elites, expatriates and highly skilled migrants (Amit 2007; Beaverstock 2005; Fechter and Walsh 2010; Smith and Favell 2006). In this article, we describe them as transnational professionals to recognise that we are comparing actors who have engaged in intensive employment-related travel – as well as relocating across borders for different organisational agendas.[2] One consequence of an organisational mandate to be mobile is that it encourages employees to relegate their non-work concerns – such as, establishing a relationship, having children, caring for ageing parents and preparing for retirement – to an indeterminate future. The knock-on effects of this process have meant that the policies and practices that govern mobility within organisations have had profound consequences that extend far beyond the workplace (Amit 2007; Bergström Casinowsky 2013; Gustafson 2014; Smith and Favell 2006; Walsh 2008). By analysing the biographies of transnational professionals at different stages of their life course, we demonstrate that an initial decision to prioritise mobility in their careers has had repercussions that are not only immediate but can shape successive stages and transitions of the life course.

From the beginning of the twenty-first century, mobility has been identified as a new paradigm that distinguishes between the powerful and the powerless (Canzler, Kaufmann, and Kesselring 2008; Elliot and Urry 2010; Urry 2007). Mobility characterised the 'project-oriented' regime of the new spirit of capitalism (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005, 169); being able to manage proximity and distance effortlessly is a quality of 'the ideal type' of worker in this late modern scenario (Canzler, Kaufmann, and Kesselring 2008).

By taking as our analytical point of departure transnational actors' biographies in a multinational corporation and a UN agency, we acknowledge that these contrasting global organisations provide the infrastructure and systems that underpin much transnational mobility. While the rationale for global mobility within corporations has been expansion into new or 'emerging' markets and resultant profits (Bozkurt 2006), in inter-governmental (UN) and non-governmental organizations, cosmopolitan and altruistic values are thought to inspire the movements of their employees (Cook 2012; Fechter and Hindman 2011). Nonetheless, international UN roles are prestigious and attract a distinct class of applicants who have typically accrued the requisite social, cultural, symbolic and economic capital prior to securing their posts (Fradejas-García and Mülli 2019). UN workers are, therefore, comparable with other transnational professionals – not least because they embody the 'practical' (explicit) and 'tacit' (implicit) knowledge that enable processes of globalization (Beaverstock 2002, 528). Moreover, whilst the pursuit of a deterritorialized career shapes the stages and transitions of the life course of corporate executives *and* UN professionals, we have found that the distinctive nature of UN careers and systems make the biographical consequences of their mobility more profound and intractable.[3]

Mobility research requires appreciation both of – what Hannam, Sheller and Urry (2006, 15) call – 'the inter-relational dynamics' between the imaginative, informational, virtual and physical aspects of mobility and, equally importantly, of the fixed infrastructural and institutional nodes that configure and enable mobilities. These nodes include headquarter 'hubs' and peripheral bases within organisations, as well as airports, hotels, residences and shopping malls in global cities. We argue here that just as mobility takes many forms, moorings too are multiple and need to provide anchorage on a number of fronts. For migrants and other transnational actors, these moorings or 'footholds' comprise personal spaces to live, to relax and to maintain relationships in, family bonds and friendships with co-ethnics and locals, in employment as well in religious or ethnic associations (Grzymala-Kaslowska 2018). Yet unlike conventional migration trajectories that involve moving from country A to country B, gaining employment, establishing households and perhaps raising children in a destination country, transnational professionals' careers involve undertaking short-term projects or longer-term assignments in multiple countries over time – hence accruing credentials which consolidate their expertise. Episodes of working and living in a new country are determined by organisational agendas, hence often preclude the social and convivial aspects of migrating that are associated with integration (Kennedy 2004). Transnational professionals have to work to create temporary but moored spaces that they can comfortably occupy by mastering intersecting systems. Despite their elite credentials, prestigious jobs and lifestyles, transnational professionals were often required to subordinate their residential choices and preferences to organisational agendas and the geography of their organisations (Devadason 2017). In addition, their itineraries routinely involved long-haul flights and remote working, hence lengthy absences from their homes and families. Fulfilling these conditions, essentially, granted them access to the prestigious roles that they held. Thus, the professionals in this study – regardless of age – all occupied elite positions because of the credentials and experience required to be employed in their fields internationally.

Deterritorialized work practices can involve virtual strategies that do not necessarily coincide with physical movement (Aneesh 2015) – yet they also depend on the heightened mobility of professionals who become conduits for harmonising processes, information and 'know-how' across borders within organisations (Beaverstock 2005; see also Kesselring 2015). We emphasize deterritorialized practices here rather than transnational ones *per se* because the term foregrounds the delinking of work from specific territories, rather than ongoing connections between two or more nation states. As Aneesh (2015) observes – based on his analysis of the Indian call centre industry – processes of globalization not only create new connections between distant places, but also serve to disconnect people from their (natal) territory, language, and culture. Deterritorialized work practices include: relocating across borders, the more everyday itineraries of business travel, and virtual interactions. They clearly influence many aspects of employees' everyday lives. We argue here that the ways working roles are spatially and temporally compartmentalised from other social roles and obligations becomes particularly acute over time in global organisations. We have found that when transnational professionals reflected on their futures, the disparities between their career plans and personal life aspirations were profound and often enduring.

Acknowledging that, we draw on Kallinikos's (2003) construct of 'modular agency' to explain how compartmentalisation is normalized in transnational institutions. Gellner's (1996) concept of 'modular man' captures the way that human beings are seen as interchangeable in modern society. Human beings are construed as 'assemblages of independent behavioural modules' in various domains of society – work, family, community and public life (Kallinikos 2003, 595). Thus, human agency in the modern workplace and other institutions involves 'roles' that are *divisible* rather than engaging complete persons (Kallinikos 2003, 604–5).

Gellner's conception of modularity is rooted in the nation state and in specific national cultures; it focused on the wave of population movement that came with modernisation. These movements disembedded workers from their local regional culture in exchange for access to the

benefits of education, mobile careers and civil society. But his model does not engage with international mobility. Thus, in this article we set out to examine how workers are affected by the delinking of work from specific territories, *deterritorialized work practices*. These practices depend on complex transnational systems, and workers who perform them – moment to moment, every day *and* over the course of a life.

Kallinikos develops the concept of 'modularity' within contemporary organisations. In modern societies, modular humans mobilise 'segments of themselves' in order to respond to the demands of work, family and community in what he calls 'a piecemeal fashion' (Kallinikos 2003, 597). Building on his argument, Abdelnour, Hasselbladh, and Kallinikos (2017, 1780) emphasise that institutions constrain and enable the agency of individuals through the roles and social positions that they occupy. Although Abdelnour, Hasselbladh, and Kallinikos (2017) focus on the agency of individuals *at work*, this process has inevitable repercussions for agency *outside the workplace*. Relatedly, Hitlin and Elder (2007, 185) model of agency underlines how the 'temporal horizons of actors' in different contexts inform the kinds of agency that they exercise. Our analysis demonstrates how the mobility of transnational professionals was compelled by their roles within transnational institutions such that there was no alternative, except by opting out entirely. Thus, applying Hitlin and Elder (2007) typology, we contend that actors' capacity to exercise 'life course agency' was diminished within transnational institutions – given their focus on career goals and milestones – while their 'identity agency' was enhanced. Their deterritorialized working lives had been subdivided into discrete compartments that evoked different modes of agency across time and space. The responsibility for reconciling compartments to make deterritorialized everyday lives manageable was diversified and individualised.

The balance of this article comprises five parts. First, we begin by briefly introducing existing research on transnational employment and the systems of mobility that facilitate and endorse mobile lives. Second, we consider the dissonance between the ideal and the messy reality of global work and the myth that characterises mobility as the route to 'the good life'. Third, we introduce the study's methods and data; we draw on 17 biographical interviews with corporate executives and UN-professionals, and 'open' responses from an online survey ($n = 138$), to examine the ways that they perceive and describe different stages of their lives, past, present and future. Fourth, we draw on this material by introducing our argument about how the unfolding of the adult life course is profoundly challenged by mobility. Our analytical approach centres on the subjective framing of the life course as it unfolds over time (Neale 2015): early adulthood, middle age, and approaching retirement. We argue that deterritorialized careers have unforeseen consequences *for* adulthood; they shape the ways that workers live, relate to others, parent, and deal with ageing and death. Our analysis illustrates how transnational employment shapes the life course in fundamentally life-altering ways – both by structuring professionals' everyday working lives as well as delimiting their imaginaries about the future. Each biography illustrates the complexity introduced by different stages of adulthood whilst pursing a deterritorialized career. Fifth, we conclude by explaining how deterritorialized careers and work practices promote – what we call – a compartmentalised approach to life whereby each 'compartment' – employment, relationships, family and home – requires a distinct set of tasks, personal qualities and logistical problems to be solved.

Deterritorialized work and the life course: living mobility, living the dream?

In studies of work-related mobility, the challenges of relocating for employment are thought to shape a person's character (Sennett 1998, 2006), their domestic responsibilities, relationships and homes (Bergström Casinowsky 2013; Walsh 2008), and their careers (Bozkurt 2006). Yet the life-course consequences of pursuing a deterritorialized career have received limited scholarly attention to date. Life transitions and stages have been neglected in organisational studies about

professional mobility, as well as most sociological and anthropological research about highly skilled migration (Kou et al. 2015 and Ryan and Mulholland 2014 are exceptions here). Moreover, existing research focuses on highly skilled migrants who belong to specific ethno-national groups, hence explores the ways that cultural norms and expectations affect the migrants' life outcomes or choices (Kou et al. 2015) but does not engage with the category of transnational professional we are studying here.

Since transnational organisations and systems have implications for the ways that workers relate to others, parent, and deal with ageing and death over time, our aim in this article is to begin to redress this omission. Analytically, our focus on deterritorialized work emphasises the spatial context of social relations and the life course draws attention to the importance of contextualising experience in time as well as space. The timing of choices and transitions, and their significance, varies depending on the stage of life an individual is at as well as their perception of their capability to influence their lives. In their theoretical model of agency, as Hitlin and Elder (2007, 185) observe: 'Action problems orient actors toward immediate, routine, or long-range goals that implicate different attentional and self-processes'. That is, 'temporal horizons' inform the modes of agency that actors exercise in the 'flow of responses' to different situations. Thus, our analysis demonstrates that deterritorialized careers instigate (often unforeseen) lifelong processes because the choices, relationships and contexts of earlier life stages continue to shape what happens, biographically, as a person ages.

Specific mobile systems are created by organisations in order to structure and facilitate mobility in ways that fulfil their organisational agendas (Cresswell, Dorow, and Roseman 2016; Kesselring 2015). The workplace systems that enable mobility must provide housing, transport belongings, relocate partners and children and facilitate the work activities and teams that fulfil their organisational agendas. Yet inevitably the support systems that facilitate relocation are often found wanting; they tend to be outsourced to mobility specialists or, by default, depend on the initiative of the individual and, in some cases, their spouse (Devadason 2012; Ryan and Mulholland 2014). Existing systems focus on smoothing the frictions that impede mobility – perhaps enabling or, at least, funding the relocation of a spouse and family – yet the personal 'side effects' of mobility that cannot be outsourced have long-term repercussions for the individuals who relocate, as well as for those they are close to. These will be examined in the following case-studies.

The construct of the hypermobile lifestyle as glamourous and attractive, as a normative ideal, has been problematized by sociologists and others questioning the relationship between mobility and success (Canzler, Kaufmann, and Kesselring 2008; Elliot and Lemert 2006; Forsey 2015; Cohen, Hanna, and Gössling 2018). In their case studies, Elliot and Urry (2010) find parallels with Boltanski and Chiapello (2005) description of a new spirit of capitalism that lionises adaptability, mobility and networking. But at the same time, they caution that there is some indication of dissonance between this 'spirit' and the more muted lived, embodied reality of the personal lives of the mobile. Elliot and Urry (2010, 82) surmise: 'To navigate these professional and personal complexities, globals employ *mobile life strategies* to create novel connections with their own identities, the lives of others and with the wider network society' (emphasis added). The development of these life strategies involves determination, imagination and reflexive work, yet this aspect of mobile work and the individual dilemmas underpinning it tend to be privatised and hidden from view. It is the hidden face of aspirational mobility.

Methods and data

This research was conducted between 2009 and 2011 for a British Academy fellowship award held by Ranji Devadason at the University of Bristol. An online survey was launched in two global organisations – a UN agency and *Cartwrights* Global Bank in 2010.[4] The survey was designed

to address the following themes: employment, mobility and work history; family, friends and social networks; and identity, attachments and values. This data thereby provides evidence about multiple social fields and the interplay between personal and professional facets of employees' lives. Participants were recruited via an invitation email that was circulated to 230 international assignees who were either currently, or had recently been, working away from the headquarters in different country offices ($n = 138$). The corporate executives were based in a number of *Cartwrights'* offices, globally, including the London headquarters, Madrid, New York, Dubai, Johannesburg and Hong Kong as well as less prominent regional offices in African and Northern European countries. The UN international staff were based in 16 countries including the headquarters in Geneva, regional bases in Jordan and Kenya, as well as 'hardship duty stations', Afghanistan, Pakistan and Sudan. These bases did not necessarily delimit the geographical parameters of professionals' work, however, since some jobs based at the headquarters and other offices often required regular travel to further sites, typically in the Global South.

Subsequently, 17 biographical interviews were conducted with professionals – who had taken part in the survey – based at four sites: London, Geneva, Dubai and Johannesburg. 15 interviews were face-to-face and two were conducted by telephone. Participants were selected to represent the range of transnational professionals in the two organisations by age, gender, citizenship and employment experience. This research was carried out in accordance with the British Sociological Association's (2002) ethical guidelines; these centred on protecting participants' from harm throughout the research process.

The interviews were semi-structured and covered participants' education, early careers, choices and opportunities that had enabled them to develop transnational careers. They were then asked to reflect on the challenges of working internationally and what they liked and disliked about their jobs, more generally, as well as their hopes or plans for the future. From the outset, participants were encouraged to reflect on the relationship between the personal and professional domains of their lives, and many of them did so. Devadason selected interviewees purposively, depending on their willingness and availability to participate as well as their locations – to enable face-to-face interviews when possible, within the constraints of her limited research budget. Therefore, we do not claim that their experiences are statistically representative of the entire sample. Nonetheless, their accounts serve to illustrate patterns that resonate across both organisations, and hence suggest generalizability to a wider set of transnational actors.

Our focus in this article is the 17 biographical interviews since they shed light on how transnational actors interpret different stages of the life course and transitions. The sample comprises 12 corporate executives and five UN professionals, aged between 26 and 57. Of these seven were women and 10 men. It was only possible to recruit two female UN professionals to take part in interviews – although 21 participated in the online survey – perhaps because of the particular pressures of their careers and deterritorialised working lives, which some were managing alongside childcare commitments. Thus, the UN interviewees were all over 40 and two (Samuel and John) were nearing retirement. The corporate executives were aged in their late 20s to 40s – the youngest participant was aged 26.

Of the ten male interviewees, seven were married and one was cohabiting with his partner who he had met on an international assignment. Three out of the seven female interviewees were married and/or in a cohabiting relationship, and four were single. While these numbers in themselves are not statistically significant given the sample size, this pattern resonates with the survey data since out of 138 respondents a striking fifty per cent of women in both organisations were single, whereas less than a quarter of the men were not in a relationship. Notably, three of the male executive participants who undertook the most intensive levels of business travel had young children, whereas none of their female counterparts had children.

Overall, these transnational actors represent groups of highly educated and skilled workers since two thirds had postgraduate or professional qualifications, and a remaining quarter had

first degrees. Two thirds of the participants held citizenship in countries of the so-called 'Global North' (for example: Britain, North America and other European countries), whereas one third held citizenship countries in the 'Global South' (such as India and Zimbabwe). They comprise an ethno-nationally diverse sample, which limits the identification and analysis of standardised, historical 'cohort' effects (Elder 1975, 166).

The unfolding of the de-standardised and deterritorialized life course

Age, ageing and transitions through life stages are central to the construction of social identities. In this article we adopt a microdynamic approach to the study of the life course, which 'foregrounds the subjective framing and crafting of life journeys across time and place' (Worth and Hardill 2015, 28; Neale 2015). We have analysed how transnational professionals interpret their past, present and future at different stages of the life course to shed light on the relationship between deterritorialized work practices, ageing and significant life transitions. We thereby examine how transnationality affects the everyday lived experience as well as the future imaginaries of professionals. Since they do not belong to a single country of citizenship, identifying patterns – where they exist – requires engagement with the multidimensional character of transnational biographies (see Kelly 2013).

In the following analysis, we examine three stages of the life course of transnational professionals to explore how the onus on them to be mobile informs their subjective framing of the life course.

Early career: young, free and single?

The young single professionals readily conform to the 'ideal type' of the mobile worker. They were unfettered by the constraints of partners or children and, as a result, could single-mindedly pursue their ambitions. In other words, be mobile without compromising. Work intensity is a theme in these accounts, exemplified by Lucy, a 31-year old British executive, in her account of her first international assignment in Dubai. She described long-hours work culture as an integral aspect of the 'expat' contract:

> You do end up working quite hard, because you don't have all your friends and family from home, and creature comforts. To a certain extent that's what you're almost required to do when you accept that contract there, for specific reasons, and paid as an expat, you know *I'm not out here to have the time of my life*, I'm out here to make a difference.

Lucy's ambitions spurred her to prioritise work and fulfil the demands of long-hours work culture in the present, yet as she thought about the future – her ambivalence about this way of life comes through.

> So here, I guess, I'm working at the moment pretty long hours, so part of me likes working so much [part of me] doesn't …

Lucy's account reflected her ambivalence about her work-life balance, or rather lack of it. Towards the end of her interview she commented on whether she wished to continue working at the same pace:

> Sometimes I just think is it really worth all this? You work for however much of your life, and you earn a certain amount but if you're working literally all of the time, where's the fun? And when are you able to spend the money you worked so hard for?

This reflection on the constraints that are linked to mobility are not just about the shrinking of 'personal time' but the intrusion into private life. Having begun her international career as a single person, then having met her partner whilst she was on assignment – she did consider the 'disruption' caused by work to her relationship and her life outside work.

For Leilah, a 26-year old executive this exchange is consciously embraced:

> … you definitely miss on everything else that's happening in your life and you cannot compromise. You cannot. People with families can compromise by going back on the weekend and spend the time with the family [but] I can't I just miss on everything … So for me, for example, my priority it's to build my career and I am not as concerned … I haven't taken my vacation in years and I am not bothered or upset. And I don't want to – because I am keen to get as many things done as soon as possible.

Leilah initially joined the corporation through their global leadership scheme. She travelled extensively for her work mainly to Egypt, Kenya and Zambia and occasionally to the headquarters in London. She had relocated from Cairo to Dubai and had been employed by the corporation for two years. Like other executives, Leilah's career narrative is characterized by ambition and drive. Work was the focus of her life; significant others (family and friends) were peripheral to her account and only mentioned in passing. She commented on her age and life stage several times in the interview and explained that for her relocating was 'easier' as a single person. Nonetheless, she clearly framed her work intensity – one consequence of pursuing a deterritorialized career – as time delimited. After three years getting 'exposure' – as she put it – to new places and industries, she envisaged settling down and getting married in her home country, Egypt:

> I think I have given myself another three years for me to probably go back home, settle down, and get married and take care of my personal life before that –
>
> one or two more years – I would love to explore other options or go to a new place or another industry. I think this is the time to learn and after some time it becomes very difficult to be mobile …

The transition to forming a long-term relationship is one that underpinned the hopes and social expectations of many young and single transnational professionals. Yet work intensity, and the imperative to keep on moving in order to progress in their careers and organisations, as well as the ordinary challenges associated with meeting a partner, restricted opportunities to do so at this critical life stage.

Adeyemo, a 31-year old Zimbabwean executive based in London, reflected on the challenges of forming a relationship whilst pursuing a transnational career:

> The hardest thing with moving around has been trying to maintain steady relationships (romantic and friends). I am constantly conscious of the fact that I will need to leave again so probably guarded in how I engage with women because I don't want to end up in a difficult emotional position.

Adeyemo's narrative about his past career transitions from school to employment were characterised by ambition and drive, yet when he reflected on his immediate situation and future relationships the disparity between his desires and employment options emerged. Moreover, non-British executives employed by the London-headquartered multinational corporation, such as Adeyemo and Leilah, had limited capacity to negotiate about their assignments, hence their mobility and future options tended to be more constrained than their British counterparts. The value of their (inter)national identities in the corporation appeared to centre on their capacity and willingness to be mobile (see Devadason and Fenton 2013; Devadason 2017); in contrast with Lucy and other British executives who anticipated returning to the UK when it suited them.

The young and ambitious professionals who took part in this study were resolute in their early careers and determined to progress often at the expense of other domains of their lives. For them, the *present* centred, almost exclusively, on advancing their careers; thus, compartmentalization involved relegating the domains of relationships, family and home to another time and space. Having said that, as they focused on broadening their personal horizons, as well as professional opportunities, some had opportunities to meet partners in different countries (two interviewees in this study had met their partners on assignment). Yet as Adeyemo and Leilah's accounts illustrate, some found the pool of 'eligible' or like-minded persons that they met on the move to be limited, and intensive work-travel regimes precluded opportunities to establish and sustain relationships. Their 'moorings' became the somewhat sterile spaces of serviced

apartments provided by institutional systems. Thus, while transnational institutions attempted to manage the practical 'frictions' that deterritorialized workers encountered, they tended to neglect concerns relating to personal aspirations, relationships and homes when co-ordinating global mobility. We argue that the construction of material homes reflects deeper ontological and emotional concerns about identity and belonging. Notably, Lucy, Adeyemo and others referred to missing familiar 'things' and the mundane practices that they associated with home. Although early careers flourished when mobility was embraced, other defining features of adulthood were constrained and deferred.

Mid-career and Middle-aged

While UN professionals and corporate executives embarked on international assignments in their early careers with a desire 'to see the world', broaden their horizons and/or more instrumentally gain 'exposure' to new markets, relocating with a partner and/or children creates additional challenges as the careers and preferences of partners and educational provision for children become more pressing concerns. Tensions emerge in the accounts of both single and married transnationals as familial ties – ageing parents and children – often conflict with youthful ambitions.

Eva, a 46-year old UN professional, began her international career inspired by a desire to see the world. Yet having relocated eight times in over two decades, in her interview she emphasised her desire to return to her home country:

> I would like to have my base in one place. I think I'm older, my family is more important to me – people always say to me, 'because you're single its easy you can go around the world' – [but] you know, its not easy, in some ways it is, but it's not really easier because you go to a place and you don't know anybody, you start every single time from scratch all alone so I'm a bit tired of that.

Eva noted – in an open response to a survey question – how working internationally in her early career had inhibited her chances for developing 'a meaningful relationship with a partner'. She went on to describe her first international assignment as isolating due to working in what-she-called a 'closed community'. A long-term relationship, as discussed above, is perceived by many professionals as an integral part of the 'good life' yet it can be difficult to establish and sustain in tandem with a deterritorialized career. Eva's account resonates with aspects of Leilah's and Adeyemo's narratives about the challenges of maintaining friendships or relationships when working internationally.

What is clear as adults enter their middle age, often in tandem with being mid-career, is that many are less willing to relegate their personal concerns to the background. Annika described spending extended periods with her ageing parents, and working remotely, soon after she commenced her new job with the corporation because her mother was diagnosed with a critical illness. When asked about the future – following her mother's death – she emphasized that she needed to take care of herself, not only her career:

> Find new job, new responsibility and if you want me to do it, I'm happy to do it, and actually it's quite an interesting step, career wise. But further than that, I've just given myself a break a little bit.

Moreover, while career prospects may continue to be a concern for many middle-aged transnational professionals, for parents, the education of their children becomes a priority. James, a corporate executive with two young children, described how schooling in Dubai was inadequate and for that reason he and his wife anticipated returning to London to secure them places in elite primary schools.

James' account underlines the tensions between family life and deterritorialised work practices, since his wife undertook the lion's share of childcare in order to facilitate his intensive work-travel schedule. James, a 45-year old, senior executive, was on his second international assignment in Dubai when he participated in the study, and clearly regarded it as an instrumental step

'to add value to his career' and to facilitate future progression. Yet having been very successful in his early-to-mid career in the financial industry in the UK, he did not have a strong investment in continuing to work and live internationally. The challenges for him (and his wife) in reconciling deterritorialized work and raising a family would be resolved, partially, by returning to London (although, at that time, he envisaged business travel continuing to be central to his role).

James described how the quality of their family life was compromised by his intensive work-travel schedule; a weekly schedule that regularly involved long-distance travel simply did not accommodate the daily routines of family life as he described, at length, here:

> I'll give you a very simple example. I landed yesterday morning, I got about an hour's sleep on the plane because just, the timings are not great and all of that stuff, so I was dog tired by the time I got home last night so she's been dealing with the children on her own for three days and I come back dog tired at 8 o'clock at night … So it does, I think potentially the business impacts more on my private life than it should, but the business doesn't care I don't think.

James' account underlines how two aspects of deterritorialized work practices affect the life course: first, everyday family life is disrupted and, secondly, planning for one's future career in tandem with children's education raises additional tensions.

Alejandro, a 46-year old UN-professional, embarked on his international career in order to see the world and use his language skills. Although he had relocated a number of times with his family when his children were younger, he had also lived apart from his wife and children for lengthy periods, in order to avoid disrupting crucial years of their schooling, while he undertook assignments to 'non-family' duty stations. Like James, he reflected on the costs to the family and himself: 'the family will suffer and the staff member will suffer because of this separation that will have to occur'.

Notably, when asked about their future career plans, the reflections of these fathers centred on opportunities for their children – at different stages of their education – rather than focusing on their own career progression. Nonetheless, it is clear that the gendered division of labour within their households enabled deterritorialized work to continue, largely unfettered by the everyday itineraries of childcare and schooling. We discuss this consequence of compartmentalization further in section 4.

Both single and married transnationals described 'windows' of opportunity (before 'settling down', before secondary school, before ageing) that enabled them to compartmentalise, to pursue progression relentlessly before the (imagined) next stage. Yet, as their accounts illustrate, it was unclear whether the next stage would provide opportunities to adopt a more balanced approach to life and work. Compartments of time ('windows') – in their biographies – that separated work from the rest of life precluded the kind of balance that they desired.

Anticipating retirement

The metaphor of the compartmentalised life takes on another dimension for transnational professionals who are nearing retirement: the temporal 'compartment' of retirement is imagined as distinct and entirely separate from the immediate intensities of working life. Even so, challenges about how to manage the transition to retirement, for some, are intertwined with decisions made and opportunities taken in their earlier careers that involved (and could continue to demand) heightened mobility.

When asked about his future, John, a 57-year old senior UN-professional stated decisively: 'I'm going to retire, I'm going to be very happy'. He had been making preparations for some time, as he and his wife had bought a house in Spain and planned to move to live there on his retirement in two years. In stark contrast to his arduous work-travel regime, which he described in some depth, John's imagined future is carefree and pleasurable:

> I have every intention of spending my time doing the garden rather than paying gardeners to look after the garden … I will minimise travelling and maximise health and pleasure and non-work activities.

Having worked for the UN for two decades and relocated nine times, he was clear about his desire to prioritise autonomy and pleasure during retirement: 'Want to spend my time doing what I want to do rather than being driven by the institution'. For other UN professionals and corporate executives, retirement is imagined as a time to offset the troubles of their immediate working lives. Jake, 45, an American executive who was based in London, looked forward to returning to the USA on his retirement to be close to his family and enjoy a better quality of life. Having relocated eight times in his career, Jake noted in response to an open question in the survey that working internationally had led to a divorce. As in Samuel's account below, his experience underlines how work intensity in tandem with hypermobility cannot be compartmentalised from the private sphere.

For other transnationals the transition to retirement is not perceived as entirely unproblematic. Having relocated several times during their careers, some older UN-professionals described feeling detached from their 'home' countries (countries of birth and/or citizenship), such that, decisions about *where* to retire when the time came – with their parents/siblings and adult children living in different countries – were less clear cut. The complexity of retirement choices facing many migrant workers link both legislative structural constraints and imagined belongings and identifications (Ramji 2006).

Beyond these practical and logistical considerations, Samuel, 56, a Senior UN Officer who was based in Geneva at the time of the interview raised more fundamental questions about life and death post-retirement. He described himself as being based in Geneva reluctantly, as he would have preferred to be 'in the field'. The 'field' in UN terms refers to bases in a less-developed countries, typically, close to a humanitarian crisis. Since these bases tend to be non-family duty stations, Samuel described them emotively as 'divorce places'. Having begun working as a volunteer in his home country, Malaysia, he had worked for the organisation for twenty-two years and relocated more than twenty times during that period.

As he was anticipating retiring in four years, Samuel reflected back on his working life within the organisation and told tales of some of the challenges and the rewards of working in crisis situations. One of the negative consequences of working away from his family during his early career was getting divorced from his first wife.

> I went through a divorce … it's just that I was not there and I don't blame [my first wife] for getting really pissed off at me for not being around at all times. I didn't see my kids growing enough I think. Those are the sacrifices that we made.

The way that Samuel compartmentalized his relationship with his first wife and family from his account of his fulfilling working life in the interview illustrates the orientation to mobility that we aim to capture here. By accentuating how his biography was aligned with that of many of his peers, he implies that divorce was an inevitable consequence of his immersion in 'the field'.

For Samuel, having happily remarried, he reflected back on his earlier career with a hint of nostalgia and without regrets. Nonetheless, thinking about the future, he expressed uncertainty about his approaching retirement. He went on to describe how many of his colleagues died soon after their retirement, especially people who had worked in the field. He speculated:

> Maybe it's because we've been so hyped up all along doing … doing and pushing … pushing ourselves out there in the field and when we stop we are not able to unwind … But then there are some who have actually retired and made it.

His wife and he had planned to go travelling on his retirement and, implicitly, take up new projects to help to guard against a premature death.

Samuel's biography and others illustrate that the dilemmas of a deterritorialized career can be cumulative, they raise social, psychological and physical concerns that change over time, but do

not subside. The relentless burden of mobility that the UN professionals undertook appeared to take a heavier toll on them personally than for their corporate counterparts. The corporate executives in this study anticipated being able to fulfil personal and professional aspirations whilst on the move and, if necessary, opt out. Yet that is not seen as a viable option for the UN professionals in this study; their repeated relocations and career paths appear to act more decisively to disembed them from their former geographically bounded lives.

'Windows of opportunity' within the compartmentalized life

Deterritorialized work endorses the individualization of the life course because transnational professionals are separated spatially and temporally (through time zones as well as, potentially, life trajectories) from their families, peers and communities of birth. Life is therefore divided into discrete compartments – each of which poses a distinct set of tasks and logistical problems. Since these compartments – work, relationships, family, and home – are not easily reconcilable, actors either develop innovative strategies in their attempts to integrate separate domains or relegate their non-work concerns to a future imagined time and space.

The metaphor of the 'window' in the life course resonates with our overarching metaphor of the compartmentalized life. Each life stage is associated with 'windows' of opportunities: *before* finding a partner, having children, children going to school or starting secondary school, ageing and, eventually, retirement. Yet as Kallinikos (2003, 606–7) observes, the isolation of work from 'the rest of a person's life' may be impracticable. The metaphor of the window is delimited in time; it frames and sheds light on a particular facet of existence, but it does not and should not detract from the fabric of the building, that is, the life course. Thus, the construct of the window does not accurately reflect how deterritorialized lives unfold, in practice. Our case studies' biographies suggest that a window of hypermobility, in tandem with work intensity, in one's early career may preclude the very life transitions that transnational professionals wish to make – in their relationships, families, homes and communities.

Conceptually, a focus on agency is useful here for analysing the influence of mobility on different life stages and transitions; it also enables us to consider how the consequences of early-mid career episodes of mobility unfold in later life as many transnationals aspire to living a more geographically settled existence as they age. Hitlin and Elder (2007, 185) model of four types of agency helps us, analytically, to anchor abstract 'theoretically-oriented' aspects of the concept in 'lived realities' and empirical research. Two types of agency, 'pragmatic agency' – dealing with everyday decisions – and 'identity agency', are both linked to temporally proximate goals that are underpinned by institutional contexts, but some actions are 'attempts to exert influence to shape one's life trajectory' hence entail 'life course agency' (182). The actions of the professionals in this study seem to exemplify 'identity agency' par excellence, having successfully pursued their careers across borders over time. But we contend, the complexity of deterritorialized careers, the delicate moorings and distanced responsibilities linked to compartmentalization, invariably challenge life course agency.

Our case-based comparison of transnational professionals employed by a multinational corporation and a UN agency illustrates how institutional contexts interact with age, gender and ethno-national identities to shape careers and life trajectories. We extend Kelly's (2013) thesis on intersectional analyses of migration here to apply to the life trajectories of transnational professionals. She argues that various categories of difference (namely, class, race and gender) 'coalesce in the life trajectories of migrants' (70). She continues 'a person that actively moves from one context to another, can provide great insights into the ways in which opportunities are structured differentially and intersectionally across space' (71). Our analysis indicates how gender, ethno-national identities and age intersect to produce parallel, yet distinct life outcomes for transnational professionals in their respective fields. We discuss each of these in turn here.

Gendered expectations about raising children, and the constraints experienced by women – typically – as caregivers may mean that they eschew careers involving heightened mobility in their mid-late careers. Although a comprehensive intersectional analysis is beyond the scope of this article, it appears that the capacity to sustain a deterritorialized career alongside parenthood often depends on the support of a 'trailing spouse' or at least one less-mobile parent. Alejandro's and James' deterritorialized working arrangements illustrate how traditional gender roles within their households facilitated the heightened mobility associated with their roles. For them compartmentalization entailed being routinely separated from their families, households and associated responsibilities, albeit reluctantly. The institutional context and, relatedly, professionals' perceived 'choices' framed their career strategies as well as their future imaginaries (Devadason 2017).

Of the female transnational professionals interviewed, those in their mid-career were single without children or younger women in a relationship who were yet to start families. Lucy and Leilah speculated about the challenges of pursuing a career in tandem with having children; both desired proximity to parents at that stage of their life course, thus, suggesting that – at least for some women – deterritorialized careers might be abandoned if or when they had children (see Bergström Casinowsky 2013). Given our small sample of interviewees, these findings are indicative, yet contextualising these interviews within the wider online survey data helps to confirm some of the gendered patterns identified from our individual case studies.

Notably, since the transnationals in this study do not belong to a single cohort or have one shared culture it is important to explore how differential expectations and opportunities play out for women and men of different nationalities as their life course unfolds in their respective fields. Devadason and Fenton (2013) previous analysis illustrates how established global hierarchies in the London-headquartered corporation informs the perceived 'choices' and strategies adopted by – what we called – *emerging markets' executives*, relative to British and other *established markets' executives*. Similarly, our analysis here indicates that challenges facing non-European transnational actors – for whom pursing their career has involved moving continents – appear to be more complex and daunting than for British and other European transnationals at different stages of the life course, as they enter middle age and approach retirement. The resources necessary to deal with the practical constraints of negotiating residency are not evenly distributed. Distance from families and the milieu of their home countries exacerbate the challenges they face reconciling the different domains of their lives.

Finally, the opportunities that transnational professionals embrace willingly in their early careers – typically, without partners, children or elderly parents – become less attractive as they age. Thus, as Kelly notes (2013, 75), a temporal focus on the life course illuminates 'how subjectivities evolve over time'. Our analytical focus on early career, mid-career and late-career transnationals shows how they adopt different 'mobile life strategies' (Elliot and Urry 2010, 82) to manage their careers in tandem with the priorities and concerns of their particular life stage.

Women and men in their early careers describe the relentlessness character of international assignments, which requires an uncompromising orientation to work. Younger transnationals – especially men – tend to minimise (or ignore) the future challenges that reconciling deterritorialized work with a relationship and family life might entail. Transnational institutions endorse agentic action that foster strong work identities – as each of our subjects' narratives and biographies illustrate – yet the temporal horizons of organizations do not encompass the life course. Institutional objectives in both corporate and intergovernmental spheres (UN) tend to be immediate and medium-term as markets and humanitarian situations are unpredictable and often in a state of flux. Thus, for transnational professionals, an emphasis on exercising 'identity agency' often results in compromising friendships, relationships and lifestyle considerations; as Lucy evocatively put it: 'we're not here to have the time of our lives'.

Yet while ones' early career can be conceived as a time-delimited 'window of opportunity', a crucial stepping-stone that will yield future success, the narratives of older professionals in their

mid and late careers, indicate that expectations to be mobile do not necessarily subside within institutions as they age. Instead, mid-career transnational professionals found that tensions between caring for ageing parents and, potentially, raising children whilst pursuing a deterritorialized career became more acute.

Late-career transnationals having relentlessly pursued transnational careers – due to ambition, opportunity and/or necessity – imagine futures free from the mandate to be mobile. Nonetheless, decisions about where to settle following itinerant careers posed challenges for some, especially for those with children on one continent and elderly parents/siblings in another.

Conclusion

In this article, we set out to examine how geographical mobility for employment affects the life course. Our analysis suggests that transnational professionals anticipated key life transitions with some trepidation – finding a partner, having and raising children, and retirement – and that these transitions became less predictable as they moved. When asked to describe their career paths to date, the *past,* our individual case studies – corporate executives and UN-professionals – were able to chart their pathway to mobility in detail and with ease. These accounts are impressive in terms of the scope of decision-making, involving movement from continent to continent, from culture to culture and – in terms of the pursuit of clear goals – through education, training and first career steps. All embraced mobility as positive, and many identified personal qualities that meant they were particularly suited to being mobile: being open to other cultures, willing to compromise, to adapt and to learn. Their accounts resonate to an extent with the characterisation of mobility as a worthwhile endeavour in itself and, importantly, an endeavour that signifies success.

However, our analysis demonstrates the many messy and difficult aspects of mobile lives behind the scenes. The quality of their reflections is more nuanced and uncertain in relation to the more personal difficulties of lives constrained by the expectation to be mobile in the *present*, as well as their imaginaries of the *future*. Their choices become less clear-cut and often incur personal costs of one kind or another. An example might be Alejandro, the UN professional and father, choosing a difficult remote posting because he knows he will be able to spend a week with his family every six weeks rather than every nine, or Leilah, a corporate executive, uncompromisingly pursuing her early-career ambitions in her twenties, whilst neglecting her life outside work. Transnational professionals calculate, negotiate and balance the costs and benefits of mobility – in ways that emerge, sometimes inadvertently in their narratives – yet despite their careful calculations, mobility shaped their biographical trajectories in often unforeseen ways.

Prior to the global pandemic, research on highly skilled migrants, intra-corporate transferees and self-directed sojourners flourished; their skills, networks and employment trajectories have been analysed, as well as how gender, nationality and class inform their working lives. Our analysis demonstrates that transnational biographies are not *only* characterised by these social categories, they are also differentiated by age and stage of life. Deterritorial work practices separate workers from the rest of life temporally as well as, often, geographically and socially. How is one to establish an independent home, to meet a suitable partner, to provide children with security or to care for ageing parents? These mundane questions call for ad hoc, creative and individual life strategies since the systems that support global mobility do not, meaningfully, engage with the life course.

The temporal dimension of the life course has been neglected analytically and theoretically in much research relating to transnational mobility and organisations. In this article, by comparing professionals' accounts of *past, present* and *future* at different life stages, we shed light on the disparities that emerge and accrue over the course of a career. Using Kallinikos's (2003) theorization of modular agency, we emphasize how the separation of roles from persons within global organisations has profound biographical consequences. *To compartmentalize* is the capacity to act in one domain, typically work. We argue that deterritorialized careers promote a

compartmentalized approach to life whereby each 'compartment' – employment, relationships, family, and home – involves a distinct set of tasks, personal qualities, and logistical problems to be solved. Making these domains intersect, even temporarily, in order to reconcile organisational imperatives to be mobile with significant life transitions requires determination, imagination and reflexive work 'behind the scenes' by those who are expected to perform their mobility effortlessly.

Notes

1. There are challenges involved in reanalysing data, especially when new questions are posed of archived material (Mauthner, Parry, and Backett-Milburn 1998). However, the analysis we present here is a continuation of analytical work that has been ongoing since the completion of the fieldwork (albeit with unavoidable gaps due to new work commitments and Ranji's parental leave). Our collaboration as co-authors since 2015 shed new light on the material, through opportunities to discuss and revisit material collectively, nonetheless, the analysis presented here addresses questions which were integral to the framing of the original project.
2. Many transnational interviewees in this study had relocated for their jobs to the headquarters of the corporation or UN agency, based in London and Geneva, respectively, or to regional offices and routinely undertook long-distance travel to other regions to fulfil their international roles. Their reflections on deterritorialized work practices therefore included accounts of the personal and professional consequences of everyday short-term mobilities as well as long-term assignments outside their countries of birth.
3. For the UN-professionals in this study, mandatory rotation to bases in different countries for periods ranging from two to five years was a fundamental aspect of their employment within the organisation.
4. Pseudonyms are used to protect the identities of the organization and individuals here.

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