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The Golden Handcuffs? Choice, compliance and relocation amongst transnational professionals and executives

People who routinely cross borders for their jobs are often cast as beneficiaries of globalization. But in a world of economic downturns, un- or underemployment as well as political unrest access to an increasingly global market becomes the personal and organisational solution to a host of unwanted happenings. In these circumstances, it therefore becomes less clear whether the heightened mobility of transnational workers is a benefit or indeed a choice. This article examines the onus placed on employees to be geographically mobile for their jobs. Relocation enables organisations to operate in expanding transnational markets and fields; it is therefore a prerequisite of jobs in an increasing number of sectors. Through systematic comparison of the attitudes to mobility of highly skilled employees in a ‘market’ (corporate) and a ‘moral’ (UN) case-study organisation, this article makes a contribution to our understanding of work orientations in transnational institutions. It interrogates the myth of choice of highly skilled movers and identifies the aspirations, contradictions and dilemmas that are associated with relocating for their jobs. Analysis of biographical interviews in tandem with online survey data elucidates the complex ways that the competing repertoires of choice and compliance are woven into transnational narratives.

Keywords: transnational professionals, choice, mobility, organisations

Introduction

[This organisation] is a constantly metamorphosing entity, it’s constantly changing...and to the extent that it does that, part of my future is caught up in those changes...but I understand that I’ve got to take control of my life, I’ve got to drive my agenda.

The words of one corporate executive interviewed for this study capture the tension between individuals and employers that this article seeks to address. Do transnational executives and professionals succeed in aligning their interests with global organisational agendas or instead endure working and living in places that they would

rather not be? The golden handcuffs is a metaphor that is typically used to describe prestigious careers and generous benefits that - in effect - entrap employees in less-than-desirable employment. This article examines what choice entails for corporate executives and UN professionals when the geographies of their organisations inform their moves and ultimately shape their career paths. Whether mobility represents enhanced freedom of choice or new forms of control in the workplace is a critical question here.

What it means to live a mobile life has captured the imaginations of sociologists, human geographers and management theorists in recent decades. An elite business class of frequent fliers – the presumed beneficiaries of globalization – are thought to somehow escape the constraints of place and place-bounded existences and to present a challenge to sociological analyses that remain defined by nation states and borders. Professionals and executives who routinely cross borders for their jobs have been variously described as mobile professionals, transnational managerial elites, expatriates and highly skilled migrants (Amit 2002; Beaverstock 2005; Fechter and Walsh 2010; Smith and Favell 2006). In his account of the Transnational Capitalist Class, Sklair (2001) presumes a synergy between the goals of transnational corporations and the executives that they employ, such that mobility is advantageous and desired by both. In Sklair's definition the TCC include, corporate executives, globalizing bureaucrats, media elites, politicians and professionals. Executives and professionals alike are employed by corporations that drive globalizing processes. Similarly, Beaverstock's (2005, 250) research on inter-company transferees (ICTs) casts them as the agents and beneficiaries of economic globalization since they are able to capitalise on taking their 'knowledge, skills and intelligence' across borders. As such, their experiences tend to be analysed separately from those of conventional labour migrants whose migration trajectories are

understood to be more linear. The latter are assumed to be subject to immigration restrictions, under-employment in new labour markets and have access to fewer resources – in terms of economic, social and cultural capital – than their ‘elite’ counterparts.

However, highly skilled migrants do not necessarily belong to the ‘elite’. They include significant numbers of ‘middling’ or ‘ordinary’ transnationals (Conradson and Latham 2005) – people who relocate independently or within organisations – and do not conform to the stereotypes of being either ‘elites’ or ‘proles’ (Favell, Feldblum and Smith 2006). Middling transnationals encounter immigration restrictions, as well as the challenges associated with transient living arrangements, long-distance relationships and the uncertainties of operating in globalizing organisations and labour markets (Bozkurt 2006; Chakravarty 2006; Favell 2008).

The agency of these transnational actors is questionable. It is often presumed that they are able to make choices about not only where, but how they live, taking advantage of decadent ‘expat’ lifestyles in far-flung locations across the globe (Hannerz 1996; Leonard 2010). However, this perception of choice can be somewhat illusory, as Vered Amit (2002) concludes in her study of mobile professionals in the Cayman Islands and Canada. She describes them as inevitably ‘structurally dispensable’ – despite their sought-after skills and experience. From the perspective of mobile professionals themselves, Amit (2002, 158) observes:

Easier surely to see temporary contracts as bureaucratic formalities, easier to assume that how long you work and stay in the Cayman Islands, given the demand for your skills, will be your choice, and a shock to discover that it is it not.

She continues:

And fast on the heels of this discovery comes the realization that national, regional and highly local boundaries continue to be features of the global organization of labour, that there may be no going back to the job or employment market you ‘escaped’ from, that here too the choice may not be yours.

Whether or not choices fit or conflict with or conflict with organisational agendas may also depend on the type of organisation these actors are employed by, yet this has been less often studied. In their study of European managers employed in a range of sectors, public and private, Andreotti, Le Gales and Moreno-Fuentes (2015, 113) point to the co-existence of choice and constraint in their narratives, such that it is ‘difficult to disentangle’ how these two factors drive mobility. This article extends these studies’ findings by showing how highly skilled movers navigate their respective organisational fields by drawing on the competing repertoires of choice and compliance.

The biographies of both sets of transnational actors are shaped by organisational structures and policies on global mobility. Comparison sheds light on the ways that different types of organisations frame and influence transnational actors’ ‘choices’ with respect to mobility. Whilst the work, practices and networks of executives have been studied in some depth (Andreotti et al. 2015; Beaverstock 2005; Miller and Salt 2008), the limited research on international development workers has tended to focus on their lifestyles and values (Fechter 2012; Nowicka 2007) rather than their positions within global labour markets and organisations. By comparing UN professionals with corporate executives – in keeping with Sklair’s definition of the TCC – I examine how actors in different types of organisation adapt to the heightened mobility that their jobs demand. Through systematic comparison of the attitudes to mobility of highly skilled employees in a ‘market’ (corporate) and a ‘moral’ (inter-governmental, UN) case-study organisation, this article makes a contribution to our understanding of work orientations in transnational institutions. It interrogates the myth of choice of highly skilled movers

and identifies the aspirations, contradictions and dilemmas that are associated with relocating for their jobs.

The rest of the paper is comprised of four parts. The next section draws on sociological theories about choice and compliance; it considers the relationship between a person's perception of having choice and their capacity to exercise agency in a given situation. This section concludes by introducing the tension between choice and compliance that emerges in the subsequent analysis of interviewees' narratives. The second section introduces the empirical study and methods. The third and fourth sections examine corporate executives' and UN professionals' perceptions of choice, drawing on both online survey data and in-depth biographical interviews. Finally, the conclusion explains how executives' and UN-professionals' orientations to mobility are informed by their career aspirations, personal priorities and organisational agendas.

Theorizing choice and compliance

Sociological theorists have engaged with choice in two main ways. Choice has been dismissed as a meaningful way of understanding action – along with rational choice theory – given an emphasis on the habitus, as the locus of internalised dispositions which stem from family, class and place (Scott 2000). That is, subjects internalise the norms, values and culture of the habitus to form enduring, pre-reflexive dispositions that – in turn – inform their actions, hence the choices they make about particular courses of action (Bourdieu 1977). Conversely, Archer (2007) argues that as a result of a conceptual bias towards habitus, theorists have neglected the personal power of agency, that is, a person's capacity to actively shape their own life outcomes by making choices. She contends that 'the fast-changing social world makes it incumbent on everyone to exercise more and more reflexivity in increasingly greater tracts of their lives' (Archer 2007, 5). Archer's take on reflexivity has been challenged by Akram and

Hogan (2015) among others who argue that her theorization neglects the routinisation of everyday life; they argue instead that reflexivity operates *within* rather than *outside* the habitus.

Setting aside these theoretical distinctions because they are beyond the scope of this article, empirically, researching choice poses challenges because a person's perception of having choice may or may not coincide with their actual capacity to exercise agency within a given situation. Thomson et al (2002, 339) contend that there is likely to be a relationship between the way a person interprets and describes events in their life and their capacity to take advantage of them; that is, a person's ability 'to tell a story in a certain way' may be a reflection of their perception of a significant life event that, in turn, has practical consequences. However, it is difficult to establish what the exact nature of the analytical relationship is between the 'life that is lived' and the 'life that is told' (Thomson et al 2002, 351). Moreover, a person's choices are inevitably delimited by what Stephen Ball (2000, 39) describes as their 'horizons of action' – that is, an awareness of 'what is not possible in a world of possibilities'. Similarly, based on their analysis of young people's career choices, Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997, 32) note that 'external influences and opportunities are integral to the decision-making process'. Their theory of decision-making usefully explores the dialectical relationship between opportunity structures and individual practices to build a theory that incorporates 'serendipity' and 'turning points' in the life course:

Career decisions can only be understood in terms of the life histories of those who make them, wherein identity has evolved through interaction with significant others and with the culture in which the subject has lived and is living. (Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997, 33)

Choices cannot be separated from the context in which they are made because: ‘No one can step outside their habitus’ (Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997, 33). Although they are reluctant to apply their theory beyond the empirical field of career decisions, Hodkinson and Sparkes’ research has relevance for the choices about mobility facing transnational actors in this study whose ‘significant others’ are likely to be fellow transnationals, and whose ‘culture’ cannot be geographically defined but is instead framed by a global organisational culture and nodes within transnational networks.

Thomson et al (2002) counterpoise choice with chance in their analysis of young people’s narratives; however, I argue that for transnational executives and professionals their careers, mobility and choices are likely to be shaped by organisational agendas and demands, rather than chance per se. I draw on Etzioni’s (1975) typology for conceptualising compliance in organisations in the analysis in order to distinguish between interviewees’ instrumental and affective orientations to mobility. These are characterised by corresponding *power-means* or incentives within their fields that are typically, though not exclusively, *material* for corporate executives versus *symbolic* for UN professionals.

Negotiating access, methods and data

Transnational professionals are a hard-to-reach group precisely because of their geographical mobility and the intensive work-travel regimes many of them undertake. An online survey was designed as the most appropriate tool to access employees who were geographically dispersed across the world. The survey addressed the following themes, employment, mobility and work history; family, friends and social networks; and, identity, attachments and values. This approach generated a rich medium-sized data set (n = 134 in two organisations) that provides evidence about multiple social fields and the interplay between personal and professional facets of employees’ lives.

*Cartwrights*¹ global bank and a humanitarian UN agency were selected as case studies because they exemplify contrasting organisational agendas, market and moral.²

An online survey was launched in these two global organisations between June and September 2010. Participants were recruited via an invitation email that was circulated to 230 international assignees that were either currently, or had recently been, working away from the headquarters in different country offices. As a result, employees' participation in the survey was dependent on two factors: (a) selection by the gatekeeper and (b) the willingness and availability of the individual to participate and respond. Although this data is not based on a statistically representative sample of executives and UN professionals, it does present a unique insight into patterns of mobility, transnational orientations and characteristics across corporate and humanitarian sectors.

The corporate executives (n=87) were based in *Cartwrights*' offices in 17 countries, globally, including London, Madrid, New York, Dubai, Johannesburg and Hong Kong as well as less prominent regional offices in Northern European and African countries. The UN international staff (n = 47) were located 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 their work, however, since some jobs based at the headquarters (in London and Geneva) and other offices required regular travel to further sites, typically in the Global South. Subsequently, 17 biographical interviews were conducted with executives and professionals who had taken part in the survey; these interviewees were based at four sites, London, Geneva, Dubai and Johannesburg. Fifteen interviews were face-to-face and two were conducted by telephone.

Interviewees were selected to represent the range of transnational worker in each organisation by age, gender, citizenship and employment experience.

These employees represent two groups of highly educated and skilled workers; two thirds have postgraduate or professional qualifications, and the remaining quarter have first degrees. The gender balance is even in the UN agency whereas in the multinational corporation two thirds of the transnationals are men. There is a wide disparity between the age-profiles of transnational staff in the two organisations since almost three quarters of the UN staff are in the 40-59 age-category, whereas only a third of the corporate executives are over 40. Fifty per cent of women in both of the samples are single, whereas less than a quarter of the men are single. Just under a third of transnationals in each organisation had dependent children living with them. Three-quarters of the executives have citizenship in countries of the 'Global North' (over half are British and the rest are from other European countries, North America, Japan and Singapore); the remaining quarter have with citizenship in countries of the 'Global South' including, India, South Africa and Zimbabwe. There is no predominant citizenship amongst the UN professionals, although those with citizenship in the Global North comprise 60 per cent of the sample.

The analysis that follows begins first by describing the extent of mobility amongst the two subsets of transnationals, as defined by the number of times they have relocated in their careers. Second, their reasons for relocating are examined in order to highlight variation between instrumental and affective concerns. Thirdly, narrative interviews with corporate executives and UN professionals are analysed to demonstrate how they frame choice with respect to their experience of mobility. Triangulation between the survey data and interviews here sheds light on the ways that choice is

understood by different transnational actors depending on their organisational agenda (market or moral) as well as their individual aspirations and priorities.

Choice, frequency and reasons for relocating

Table 1 shows the number of relocations (of three months or more) that these actors had undertaken for work, either in their current organisation or for a previous employer. It highlights the difference between the two groups, since UN professionals had on average more than twice the number of relocations than the corporate executives. This variation is in part due to the age profiles of the two samples, as two thirds of the executives were aged under 40, whereas almost 80 per cent of the UN professionals were aged between 40-59. More importantly, the mandatory rotation policy for international staff within the UN agency invariably increases the number of relocations that UN professionals undertake (see below).

Table 1 shows that there is a clear divergence between the corporate executives and UN professionals, in terms of choice about countries of employment, since 40 per cent of executives felt they exercised a high degree of choice relative to only 13 per cent of employees in the UN agency. Although, notably, a quarter of employees in both organisations felt that they had little or no choice (aggregating the two low-choice categories). Bi-variate analysis by age, gender, job tenure and line-managerial status in both organisations shows that none of these categories significantly affected the likelihood of employees having choice about their countries of work or not.

<Table 1>

Notably, the mandatory ‘rotation’ policy in the UN agency – whereby staff postings to particular ‘duty stations’ depend on their experience and the station’s ranking within a hierarchy of hardship or comfort based on a number of quality of life

factors – means that the degree of choice they can exercise about a location is limited even for senior members of staff. Moreover, a high proportion of the UN professionals are living apart from their partners due to the insecure locations in which many of them work (e.g. Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iraq). One interviewee described these particular ‘non-family duty stations’ as ‘divorce places’ thus highlighting the profound affect that relocation can have on UN professionals’ biographies (Devadason 2012). Conversely, the movement of staff in the corporate bank is less systematic; international assignments are not explicitly mandatory. Corporate guidelines acknowledge that relocating can be difficult, but these assignments are generally perceived as a privilege and opportunity.³

The analysis shows that three quarters of executives and professionals in the survey thought that they had a fair-high degree of choice about where they relocated to. Yet subsequent analysis of biographical interviews and responses to open questions in the survey suggests that their interpretation of ‘fair’ often encompasses rather constrained choices. It appears that international assignments are contextualised within the decision to pursue transnational careers, whereby reluctant moves – that reflect a lack of choice – are downplayed in the survey responses of executives who are ambitiously striving to make their way in competitive transnational organisations and labour markets. In contrast, for UN professionals, their perception of having a fair degree of choice – in part – appears to stem from the systematic application of the agency’s rotation policy within the agency. *Fairness*, rather than an individual capacity to exercise much choice about assignments is a critical aspect of the system for them. Turning to the reasons transnationals used to explain their mobility, the online survey asked: *What were your reasons for accepting your most recent assignment?* Respondents were given a number of possible reasons – including: immediate career advancement; future career advancement; income; a generous benefits package; gaining

professional skills; seeing the world and travel; experiencing living and working in different countries; to make a difference to society; a lack of alternatives or choice. And a number of non-work responses, such as: to live near/with my partner or family and to live in a particular country that I like.

Table 2 shows the mean scores of executives and UN professionals' responses based on a 4-point Likert scale (0 = 'not at all important' and 1 = 'very important'). The most important reason for accepting an international assignment amongst corporate executives is *gaining professional skills and experience* (selected as 'very important' by 72%) and the next most important reason is *future career advancement* ('very important' for 61%). The most important reasons for relocating amongst UN professionals are *making a difference to society by improving people's lives* ('very important' for 55%) and *professional skills and experience* ('very important' for 45%). Only 27 per cent of UN professionals selected *future career advancement* as 'very important'. Only 14 per cent of corporate executives and, more significantly, 26 per cent of UN professionals stated that they accepted their most recent assignment due to *lack of alternatives or choice* (aggregating their responses 'fairly' or 'very important').

Table 2 shows that *professional development* is important for both sets of highly skilled movers. Yet whilst for executives this reason is commonly associated with anticipated *career advancement* for UN professionals it is linked with the opportunity to *make a difference to society by improving people's lives*.⁴ This variation suggests that for executives the pursuit of their individual careers is the factor underpinning their decisions about mobility, whilst for a high proportion of UN staff fulfilling the aims of the organisation is more important. This divergence corresponds with Etzioni's (1975) distinction between - what he calls - *calculative* (instrumental) versus *moral* (affective) compliance with organisational directives.

<Table 2>

Based on responses to the question - *How much choice would you say you had about the country or countries that you have moved to for your job?* – respondents can be divided into those who responded that they had limited choice (aggregating ‘no choice at all’ and ‘not much choice’ responses), a ‘fair degree of choice’ and a ‘high degree of choice’ about the countries they had relocated to for work (see table 1). In the next section, these responses are contextualised within the narrative accounts of executives and UN professionals in order to understand how they interpret and frame choice in their biographies.

Interpretive repertoires of choice and compliance

A repertoire is a sequence of practices or symbols that through repetition on different occasions and in different contexts engender a degree of skill and competence.

Interpretive repertoires are the beliefs and discourses that people use to make sense of the world and their personal circumstances. Wetherall and Potter (1988, 169) define repertoires as the ‘building blocks speakers use for constructing versions of actions, cognitive processes and other phenomena’ (1988, 172). Their analytical approach recognises that people’s accounts are not literal or neutral. Instead, by describing their actions, thought-processes and social worlds, speakers reveal the norms and values of the culture, society or subculture of which they are part. This may, in the case of transnational actors, reflect their organisation or profession, their ‘home’ or ‘destination’ country, an international milieu or a specific domain. Moreover, rather than presuming that an individual comprises a ‘coherent, consistent unit’, competing repertoires within a narrative reveal the ‘shifting, inconsistent and varied pictures’

within a person's social world (Wetherall and Potter 1988, 171). Interpretive repertoires vary according to the function they fulfil at a particular moment in time, in a particular context, for example: to defend or to justify one's actions or beliefs.

The young executive quoted at the beginning of this article highlights his awareness of the tension between the contemporary onus on the individual to be in control of his own destiny (Bauman 2001) and the practical requirement to comply with the ever-changing demands of his organisation. His account illustrates how the competing repertoires of choice and compliance are woven into transnational actors' narratives. Their accounts include contradictions between presenting themselves as agents with choices *and* as subjects who have to comply with organisational agendas and systems at critical junctures in their biographies. The analytical focus here is not how much choice transnational actors *had* in their careers but their *perception of choice*, that is, whether they use 'choice' as a 'cultural resource' to explain their mobility (Reynolds, Wetherall and Taylor 2007, 332). This – in turn – is indicative of their orientation to mobility and the directives of their organisation in that respect.

Interviewees were asked about key turning points in their biographies, such as: going international in their careers, accepting their most recent assignment, and their anticipated moves. This focus on turning points, and the ways that executives and UN professionals account for them, serves as a way of reducing the data and sheds light on the variation within repertoires with respect to choice. This section draws on the repertoires that seven interviewees use to describe their mobility. These accounts have been selected to illustrate the contradictions and dilemmas within transnational actors' narratives. The repertoires of each individual – presented in italics – attempt to capture the ways that they explain their own mobility. The ways that these repertoires deploy 'choice' as a cultural resource (or not) further underlines tensions between personal

aspirations and organisational agendas, as well as variation – within and between individuals and organisations – in how transnationals seek to represent themselves.

Limited choice

The preceding analysis of survey data demonstrates that there was no clear cut relationship between transnationals who responded that they had limited choice about the countries they relocated to and seniority or job tenure within their organisations. In fact, in some cases, seniority could result in a limited number of options as specialist skills may be more difficult to allocate to international assignments than generic or early career roles. James, Leilah and John each responded that they had ‘no choice at all’ or ‘not much choice’ about the countries that they moved to for their jobs.

If you want to earn the money – that's what you have to do.

One hopes that the pecuniary rewards, whatever turns you on, is worth it. None of us signed up for [the] 9 to 5, so that's fine.

The words of one senior executive, James, a 46-year old British executive, who travels extensively for his job highlight the process of ‘offsetting’ that reflect the decision-making calculations of many executives. As a senior executive, James is ambitious and successful, ‘winning’ on multiple levels – materially and symbolically – from the opportunities that transnational working gives rise to. Nonetheless he was acutely aware of the costs of relocating and the domestic pressures created at home by his intensive business travel for himself and his wife, as parents of two young children.

For James, his post in Dubai is a stepping stone to career progression. He describes the city disparagingly as ‘not somewhere I would otherwise have wanted to live and work’. James is more cynical about the way the business deploy staff than many of his

counterparts. He describes how his current assignment in Dubai had reinforced his view that the business is ruthless:

...businesses in general, and *Cartwrights* is no exception, are particularly ruthless when it comes to their people, so if they need us they will have us, if they don't need us they will get rid of us...if you happen to work in an area where they don't need you any more – you become non-core or whatever happens – they will get rid of you. That's the way the organisation works.

His perspective is based – in part – on his experience in Dubai. He uses the passive voice explicitly here to accentuate the 'involuntary' moves (that is, dismissal) of his colleagues and describes – what he calls – the corporation's 'phraseology' with scepticism:

I've seen other people *exited*. I'm on my fourth line manager in two years, and my previous line manager just, you know, he was one of these where they [told us] 'We decided it was time to part company' – kind of thing ... I know they weren't voluntary.

Nonetheless, in response to a direct question, James initially suggests that he does not feel vulnerable:

Author: How does that affect you, I mean do you feel vulnerable?

James: No, I think it's a fact of life so one accommodates a fact of life but what it means is, I'm very loyal to *Cartwrights* but I'm only loyal as an employee, I wouldn't necessarily do anything for *Cartwrights* that was overtly detrimental to me.

His account of accommodating a 'fact of life' here suggest that he is prepared for fluctuations in the business that may affect his own career prospects, and hints at a back-up plan should he find himself surplus to requirements. James exuded confidence – no doubt inflected by his upper middle-class, male British identity (Devadason and

Fenton 2013; Leonard 2010) – that suggests he is not particularly vulnerable. Yet towards the end of his interview he admits: ‘Sometimes you have a slight feeling of helplessness, or not being in control’. When speculating about future restructuring within the bank, he acknowledges that ‘choice’ could be taken out of his hands.

It was the right time, the right opportunity

Leilah, 27, a young Egyptian executive had joined *Cartwrights* relatively recently and had a very different perspective on mobility to James; she describes a perfect fit between her aspirations and the opportunity offered to her within the corporation. As a young executive, she is extremely ambitious and is prioritising ‘learning’ and getting what she describes as ‘exposure’ to different countries, industries and types of organisation at this phase of her career. For Leilah, having limited choice does not relate to any problems she has with being relocated to Dubai – unlike James – but a happy coincidence of her preferences with the opportunity that was offered to her.

For Leilah, mobility is central to her identity. She states, ‘I take pride in being very mobile so I didn’t want to commit to a place and have a long-term lease and then buy furniture and so on’. Here she describes her decision to rent a furnished apartment in Dubai, although her initial plan had been to rent an unfurnished apartment and buy furniture. This seemingly mundane decision is imbued with particular significance that emerges later on in her interview. Since Leilah prides herself on being mobile she does not appear to be perturbed by her decision, given her aspirations and her identity. However, when she refers to it again, she acknowledges that volatility within the organisation makes it difficult for her to plan for the future, and that this is unsettling:

...after the crisis, [Dubai] is very challenging, a lot of people are leaving, its not stable but you are always on the move. We can't make plans for the future because you are not sure...I couldn't even lease the house or buy furniture because I am really not sure how long I am going to be staying here.

This contrasts with her account earlier in the interview when I asked her about the extent of staff turnover in Dubai questioning whether this creates an insecure environment. She downplays these changes and instead frames mobility as a routine aspect of working in a multinational corporation,

So there is always this movement back to the centre, to the headquarters down to the countries, within countries, a lot of people coming on other secondments and different leadership programs – so it's always dynamic – but nothing major as the restructuring or as the downsizing [after the crisis].

These contrasting accounts reveal a tension between Leilah's preferred account of herself as a well-qualified mobile professional who is able to make choices about her future that fulfil her aspirations and a person who is subject to vagaries of markets and organisational changes.

Going where the need is

John's account has parallels with Leilah's and James' repertoires; his job is 'the right opportunity' for him, and he, like James, pragmatically accepts the organisation's agenda (though without James' cynicism). Yet as a senior officer at the UN agency his repertoire encompasses a normative orientation to his work. His 'choices' about relocation have been constrained because of the mandate of the UN agency to protect vulnerable people. This mandate often necessitates relocation to countries that are not deemed safe for families and, in John's case, involves intensive business travel. He explains and rationalises the organisation's system of rotation as follows:

Author ...and what's your view of the rotation policy?

John Good, essential, for all the reasons that I said, it's important that we do rotate, apart from gaining experience that will be useful in identifying those staff members who are suitable for more senior management positions

Author And you personally when you were moving between these countries did you have much choice about what you did and what about the countries that you moved to? Were you open to going where the need was?

John I was open to going where the need was. But you do get a choice, you apply for the posts, and when you make an application you should do so knowing that you might get assigned to that post. So even if it's not your first choice, when you're trying to balance the individual interests, career aspirations and everything else with the institution's interests, it may be that occasionally you get your first choice but more often than not you'll get your second, third or fourth choice, but there is an element of choice in it. So yes, that's how it works and I don't have any problems with that.

For John his motivation is to do humanitarian work and – in contrast with other UN interviewees – he does not refer to his personal circumstances or preferences about location at all. Moreover, in the above extract, he speaks from the perspective of the organisation in generic terms rather than about himself as an individual subject. This account perhaps reflects his seniority within the UN agency as a director who is involved in making decisions that seek to balance ‘the individual’s interests’ with the ‘institution’s interests’. Since the agency enables him to fulfil his ambition to help vulnerable people, he willingly complies with the system by which relocation is managed. He sees mobility as an integral aspect of his job; the onus is on him to adapt to the system rather than expect the organisation to adapt to him. His perspective may – in part – be shaped by his military background prior to joining the UN, and his stage in his career, anticipating retirement in two years. He does not have the concerns about raising young children – unlike Charles and Alejandro (see below) – or forming a future partnership (Leilah). Moreover, since his compliance involves a normative

commitment to the aims of the organisation he does not appear to question or evaluate what mobility entails for him personally, although he does describe how gruelling intensive travel can be.

A fair degree of choice

Charles, 40, a British senior executive and Alejandro, 47, a Chilean, senior administrative officer with the UN agency both responded that they had a *fair degree of choice* regarding the countries they had relocated to. Yet the reasons informing their perceived choice appear to be quite different.

Going to far flung places to conduct business...

Having been based in Dubai for two years, Charles was anticipating and preparing for his next move with confidence, noting in reference to the corporation that it may be ‘internally or externally’ but either way it should be the right role with sufficient ‘empowerment’, since he was at the top of the scale in Dubai. He describes how just ‘going back to the UK ... would be a backward step’ and continues by saying that at the very least his role should involve ‘going to far-flung places to conduct business’. In addition, he sets out the following criteria and presumes that if the right international assignment was not available he would secure an appropriate role in London. Since his children are at primary school, he sees the next couple of years as a window of opportunity to be mobile:

So, there is still an opportunity, I think, you know, to be fairly mobile because they are young enough without it being too disruptive and so with that in mind, I am kind of open to actually undertake a role as long as (a) it’s the right role, (b) it’s progression and (c) my family, you know, are safe and well catered for. So I wouldn’t be rushing to move to Pakistan, for example, compared to somewhere one or two countries in say, Africa, like Botswana or even Western Europe or even

the US – so fairly open in that – but it would have to be a balanced with my family and what I would get out of it professionally.

He and his wife are happy to experience living in different countries, and he is confident about their fall-back position should things not work out, ‘[if] something didn’t quite work out, “Right, ok, we’ll just go back to the UK”’.

Charles’ orientation to mobility seems to reflect significant transitions in his early career, since he describes his moves between roles and companies after completing university as smooth and untroubled.

Continuing on the mobility train

Charles’ account of his decision-making process is in stark-contrast with Alejandro’s. Alejandro, like Charles, is anticipating an immediate move. Having been based in Geneva for four years, within the UN agency’s system this will involve a move to a lower-category duty station (that is, one that is in a less-developed country and, potentially, not suitable for families). Since his children are nearing their final years in school, it is likely that he will relocate without his wife and sons:

We have two boys, two sons – so it would be very disruptive and likely a big mistake if we go somewhere else all together now. Because that means for them, in the last three years or so of the school, starting somewhere new, that wouldn't be advisable, so they'd rather stay here and I go by myself to a non-family duty station. So this is obviously a negative aspect of that, but because of the system you also end up somehow trapped that you need to rotate but the family will suffer and the staff member will suffer because of this separation that will have to occur.

This tension between his personal priorities - in this case – to make sure his children get a good education and the UN system looms large throughout his interview. He describes the system of mandatory rotation at length within his interview, and describes employment within the UN agency more generally as a form of ‘entrapment’:

...it's very hard to get out, because you tend to lose sight of the outside world. The private, the corporate world is very different from UN system...so the more you get into [UN agency] the less you're likely to get out, so it's like you're trapped. And of course you're detached from your home country precisely because you're moving around to different places so even if you go back home . . . you also feel like a foreigner, so it's very hard to fit in unless you continue in the train that you're riding.

The metaphor of the train Alejandro uses here to describe working within the UN agency evocatively illustrates how making individual choices had become increasingly difficult. He made several references to the 'corporate world' within his interview, suggesting that he had not internalised the UN system but retained a keen awareness of how things might have been otherwise had he chosen a different path earlier in his career. His account of the turning point in his biography when he took a job at the agency is particularly telling in this respect, 'why I started, why I chose [UN agency], I don't know, it was a matter of chance'. Since Alejandro graduated with a degree in Business, his career path within the UN was not self-evident.

Comparing the contrasting accounts of Charles and Alejandro here reveals that what they mean by a 'fair degree of choice' is informed by their contrasting organisational agendas. Alejandro's next move is likely to be a non-family duty station, such as Afghanistan or Sudan, whereas Charles' readily dismisses the prospect of going anywhere that his family would not be safe. Moreover, Alejandro reflects on the costs that relocation has for himself and his family – seeking to balance the personal and the professional. His *calculative* (instrumental) account contrasts with John's *moral* (affective) orientation to the UN agency's system of rotation (Etzioni 1975). Although Alejandro values the opportunity 'to help people' through his work, he also stresses that leaving the UN becomes too risky, financially, as he could not expect to secure a similar salary or benefits working in 'the corporate world' having been employed by the agency

for most of his career. His desire for financial security thereby contributes to the sense of entrapment he describes.

A high degree of choice

The transnationals who responded that they had a high degree of choice about the countries that they had relocated to for their jobs, paradoxically, did not appear to have more power within their organisations than their counterparts. Rather it seemed that their career aspirations aligned with the opportunity to relocate or ‘go international’ in their respective fields. Being recruited or headhunted for an executive role with *Cartrights* may have influenced Jack’s and Gabriel’s perspectives on mobility. Their repertoires resonate with Leilah’s – *the right time, the right opportunity* – since they describe their recent relocations as opportunities that fitted with their aspirations to progress in their careers or extend their experience by working in different regions; they thereby demonstrate an instrumental orientation to mobility.

International experience is a prerequisite for progression

In his open survey response about his reason for relocating, Jack – 36-year old, British executive in Dubai – expresses his reason for relocating in straightforward instrumental terms, ‘Most advertised senior executive positions require international experience as a pre-requisite’. His answer here almost suggests a reluctance to relocate, had he not been required to do so. Nonetheless during his interview Jack reveals a penchant for travelling and learning about different cultures and countries.

Jack’s account of his experience on relocating suggests that it had not fulfilled his aspirations, since he was not given sufficient ‘empowerment’ to make changes within the team that he was appointed to. He had clearly found this frustrating and, following a stellar career in London, he believed that he had reached a ‘plateau’ in

Dubai. Jack is effusive about opportunities that he had held within the corporation that involved considerable influence, line-managerial responsibilities and the opportunity to ‘add value’ to the business. On returning from a career break, he explains:

I was told that if I wanted to progress in the organisation then I needed international experience and hence why I was – I wouldn’t say *sent* – I was given the *option*, a few different options. But the head guy for audit said he’d like me to come to Dubai, hence why I ended up here. And the other thing to note is that . . . [having] lead a couple of huge programmes of work then I was expected to basically be a business auditor.

Jack’s account here suggests a mismatch between his sense that his contribution to the organisation was valued, and being allocated to a role that he did not think was appropriate for his experience. His emphasis on being given ‘options’ rather than being ‘sent’ here is quite telling, since it indicates a reluctance to be framed as a pawn within the organisation. In practice Jack’s account of relocating is not dissimilar to James’ more-pessimistic account, despite his survey response that he had a high degree of choice about relocating. Towards the end of his interview, Jack reflects on his post in Dubai, as follows: ‘I feel if I hadn’t come here I would have gone somewhere else, and it would have been a lot better move. I feel I’ve been...I don’t feel I’ve been treated very well to be honest’.

The difficulties Jack had encountered in Dubai perhaps strengthened his resolve to ensure that subsequent international posts would enhance his career:

There’s lots of jobs in Singapore, so I think for me the future is really, really bright and I’m going to keep an open mind about it. I think the thing is I just want to feel like I am progressing again...

The confidence Jack expresses here about his future moves is similar to the accounts of other executives, since he accentuates opportunities that are open to him rather than constrained choices.

Having a global identity

Gabriel, 33, is a Singaporean, MBA graduate who was recruited onto a global leadership programme that entailed rotation within the corporation. He had relocated several times in his career prior to joining *Cartwrights* within South East Asia. Mobility is central to Gabriel's identity, and he describes himself as being able and willing to go anywhere:

I'm location independent. I think there are very few people who are willing to sort of move anywhere and settle down anywhere. I guess that is my experience because I've worked in, lived in a number of countries, but I'm comfortable going into a new country and knowing that I don't know anybody there but I do know how to get about knowing people, I do know how to integrate within the society and then - pretty much - the world is your oyster.

He notes that he has the requisite 'special' qualities that enable him to work effectively in different cultures. Accordingly, he is unperturbed by the regular relocation that his position entails; indeed that is why, in part, he accepted the job. Gabriel's perspective is similar to Leilah's since his professional identity is based on his capacity to be mobile; yet he goes a step further than Leilah by suggesting that his willingness to go anywhere means that the 'world is his oyster'.

Gabriel describes himself as having a 'global identity' rather than aspiring to return to a 'home country' unlike many of his executive counterparts. And like others (Leilah, Charles, James and Jack) he is keen to relocate 'when the right opportunity works out'. Since mobility is integral to his identity Gabriel's compliance with the

programme of rotation at *Cartwrights* corresponds with his individual career aspirations. Whereas respondents with partners and children reflect on the ‘windows’ of mobility that they have before their children reach a particular school age (Jack, James, and Charles) as a single, executive Gabriel conforms to the ideal of the unfettered, adaptable, mobile worker. Yet significantly he appears to be the exception rather than the norm amongst his peers.

Conclusion

By identifying the repertoires that corporate executives and UN professionals use to explain their mobility, we can see that there is a distinction between those who acknowledge how their choices are constrained, those who accentuate their agency by describing a fit between their individual preferences and available opportunities, and those for whom global mobility is central to their identities.

Yet contradictions within each of these individual accounts suggests that however turning points are framed in their narratives, choice is always contingent upon organisational agendas and shifting demands, both market (corporate) and moral (humanitarian). The extent to which transnational actors acknowledge that their choices are constrained varies for UN professionals and corporate executives. Executives Leilah, Jack and Gabriel, for example, are keen to accentuate the options open to them as they ambitiously pursue mobile careers, rather than stress uncertainty within the corporation and the onus on them to comply with external demands. John, Alejandro and other UN professionals accept the UN agency’s system of rotation – to varying degrees – even though it does not allow them much scope to make individual choices about where they live and work.

Since these repertoires do not coincide in a straightforward way with the transnationals’ perceived degree of choice in either the corporation or the UN agency,

this analysis suggests that choice is interpreted in nuanced ways depending on the individual's priorities and their organisation's remit. Triangulating between the survey data and the interviews reveals that there are different ways of interpreting choice that are not entirely captured by Likert-scale survey questions. Career aspirations, personal priorities and organisational agendas inform the ways that choice is framed and experienced. A lack of choice is perceived as legitimate as long as professional goals are fulfilled, as in Leilah's and John's cases. For executives who are strategically engaged in pursuing their careers, constrained choices about mobility are accepted to increase one's 'exposure' to different countries and business sectors – in Leilah's terms – and to facilitate career progression (Charles, Jack and James). Where there is dissonance between a person's priorities and the opportunities which are open to them, reluctant compliance with the requirement to be mobile is evident, as in Alejandro's case. And for Gabriel – for different reasons – mobility is a defining feature of his identity; indeed, from his account it seems that staying in one place would be antithetical to his sense of self.

The discourse of globalization is often imbued with the assumption that people face an increasing number of options – geographically and socially – as they make significant life choices. This perspective tends to downplay the place of employment and organisations in people's lives, and instead accentuate individual aspirations to see the world and embark on cosmopolitan adventures. Yet corporate executives and UN professionals who embark on international careers find that their career paths and life choices are channelled, if not driven, by their organisations via routes and destinations that are often not of their choosing. The analysis presented here shows that these transnational actors navigate their respective organisational fields offsetting the negative aspects of mobility - such as, distance from one's family, uncertainty about the future,

intensive work-travel regimes and difficulties forming and maintaining relationships – with benefits that are both material and symbolic. They reconcile themselves with the constraints they face, as highly skilled movers, through reference to symbolic rewards that are intrinsic to their jobs as well as extrinsic material benefits. These incentives, for many, signify the ‘golden handcuffs’ since they constrain fundamental choices about where to live and work as they pursue high-status careers.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1. Pseudonyms are used to protect the identities of organisations and interviewees here.
2. Since they are headquartered in the European cities of London and Geneva they enable comparative analysis about how organisational dynamics vary for employees at the ‘core’ (headquarters) versus those based at ‘peripheral’ offices within organisations (see Devadason and Fenton 2013).
3. Nonetheless, in response to open survey questions, a small number of executives also commented on the negative effect that undertaking international assignments had had on their capacity to sustain long-term relationships.
4. In SPSS, correlation matrices were used to identify associations between reasons for accepting assignments.

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Table 1. The number of relocations (> 3 months) of corporate executives and UN professionals and their perceived degree of choice about the country or countries they relocated to for their jobs

	Corporate executives		UN professionals	
	No.	%.	No.	%
<i>No. of relocations</i>				
1-2 relocations	28	32	5	11
3-4 relocations	38	44	3	6
5-9 relocations	18	21	26	55
10 or more relocations	3	3	13	28
	87	100	47	100
<i>Median no. of relocations</i>	3		8	
<i>Degree of choice about country of work</i>				
No choice at all	6	7	1	2
Not much choice	17	20	12	25
A fair degree of choice	27	33	28	60
A high degree of choice	33	40	6	13
	83	100	47	100

Table 2. Reasons for accepting international assignments in the multinational corporation and a UN agency (mean scores where 0 = ‘not at all important’ and 1 = ‘very important’)

	Corporate executives (n = 85)	UN professionals (n = 42)
Immediate career advancement	0.62	0.41
Future career advancement	0.84	0.59
Increased income	0.51	0.33
A generous benefits package	0.49	0.32
Gaining professional skills and experience	0.90	0.78
To make a difference to society by improving people’s lives	0.47	0.81
To experience living and working in different countries	0.74	0.52
To see the world and travel	0.66	0.51
To live in a particular country	0.46	0.33
To live nearby (or with) my partner/family	0.32	0.44
A lack of alternatives or choice	0.20	0.26