Work-life balance for transnational skilled workers in Sweden

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ABSTRACT

In the context of globalisation, increased mobility and transnational travelling, long-distance friendships, romantic partnerships and family ties are becoming more and more common.

Against this backdrop, this article focuses on highly skilled employees coming from Romania to Sweden and how they construct their work-life balance there. It analyses the work-life systems of highly skilled migrants in relation both to their co-present and long-distance bonds and overreliance on work networks of contacts, as well as investigating the relation between a particular work-life balance and highly skilled transnational workers' adoption of serial or circular migration. In doing so, this research asks how the work-life balance of highly skilled migrants can be understood from a life-course standpoint. The originality of this article comes from the interest in the work-life of transnational workers of both genders and of different family configurations, when most research on the topic of work-life balance still focuses almost exclusively on women and tensions between professional demands and traditional family lives.

KEY WORDS

skilled migration, knowledge workers, work-life system, bonds, life course

Introduction

The so-called 'brain drain' has been documented to have a favourable impact for receiving countries on a series of indicators such as innovation, positive selection, interethnic group cooperation, trade flows and entrepreneurship (for a synthesis of this literature, see Nathan, 2014). On both economic and social criteria, the presence of

expats[1,2] is highly likely to be beneficial for the receiving state and, on a smaller scale, for the particular organisation where they are employed. Shifting the focus from the societal and organisational perspective to the experience of the transnational skilled employee, studies starting from the 1990s have already discussed how expats often regard their jobs as steps in acquiring skills and work experience which allow them to move again, often to a new country (Salt, 1988; Beaverstock, 1996). As Larsen et al. (2005) point out in their widely cited article, for skilled migrants the decision to apply for a job and move to a country is not only motivated by economic reasons, but by a transnational frame of mind, in which new experiences, contact with a new professional setting, but also learning the habits and norms of a foreign society are valued.

In this vein, three main categories of factors are typically seen as influencing individual decisions about preferred locations for living and working: hard factors, such as the state of the labour market (Florida 2002); soft factors, which may range from the local development of the creative class (Florida 2002), to the city environment or the perceived level of tolerance in a certain location (Murphy & Redmond, 2009); and personal networks and trajectories (Musterd & Gritsai, 2012; Martin-Brelot, Grossetti & Eckert, 2010). Similarly, Mulder and Hooimeijer (1999) distinguish migration factors derived from the individual or household (the micro context) from factors that are created externally (the macro context) in decisions to migrate.

Besides their momentary importance, the factors behind the initial decision to move reflect a set of expectations and priorities which are likely to have an impact on the migrant's life after migration as well. In situations of work-motivated migration, there is by definition a clear pre-eminence of hard factors and a willingness to prioritise them. Nonetheless, movement will mark an inherent change both in the spatial and temporal structure of one's bonds and in the division between personal and professional aspects of one's life. In other words, transnational employees find themselves living in a geographical setting to which they are bound strongly, if not exclusively, by their work. A significant part of the multiple ties which constitute 'life' as distinct from 'work' or sometimes all those ties, are geographically separated from the subject as a result of the decision to get a job abroad. This context creates the basis for a very specific work-life system (Munn, 2013) for transnational workers, one which is radically different from that of domestic workers.

Against this background, this article sets out to explore two main questions: first, how do Romanian knowledge workers in Sweden experience their transnational work-life system? and second, how, if at all, is their current work-life system linked with envisioned life trajectories and distinct stages of the life course?

To address the first question, the article will discuss two main aspects: the professional advantages the informants see in Sweden as a destination for

1 The term 'expat ' is used interchangeably with transnational worker and it is the term which the informants in this study preferred.

2 The category of highly skilled workers is used according to the frameworks of OECD and the European Commission, to designate those who have completed tertiary education and/or are employed in roles requiring such qualifications.

work-motivated skilled migration; and life outside work. To understand life outside work, three types of social ties are tackled: first, co-present close ties developed after migration; second, close ties to people (usually family members) travelling together with the interviewees; and third, non-co-present ties maintained at a distance.[3] Based on the various life-work systems presented by the participants, and based on their varying levels of satisfaction with the situation in which they find themselves, the last part of the article looks into how transnational work-life conditions are negotiated and managed through a life-course lens and through planned (im)mobility. To summarise, the article explores how the so-called 'new transnational habitus' (Nedelcu, 2012) translates into the work-life problematic and how social actors may incorporate it into their broader life trajectory.

The analysis draws on narrated experiences gathered through a set of interviews with Romanian knowledge workers who had lived in Sweden for at least three months and who at the time of their arrival held at least tertiary educational qualifications. Migrants who had lived in Sweden for more than ten years were not included. My focus was either on those who moved with a pre-established work arrangement (be it a new contract, or a transfer within the same private company for which they had been working in their previous country of residence), or who had moved to study and found jobs during their studies or afterwards.

Understanding work-life balance

A large number of scholarly analyses of work-life balance have been produced over the last 20 years (Auer & Welte, 2009; Bagger, Li & Gutek, 2008; Cousins & Tang, 2004; Fleetwood, 2007). Work-life balance is a topic which emerged and was developed within feminist literature, with some of the typical focal points being parental leave policies, domestic work and responsibilities, and the gendered construction of child and elderly care (Fine-Davis et al., 2004; Crompton & Lyonette, 2006; van Echtelt et al., 2008; Maume, Sebastian & Bardo, 2010).

Yet, an important element which Özbilgin et al. (2011) were noting at the beginning of the 2010s was the tendency of work-life literature to focus on a narrow group of employees and on a certain family structure. In their systematic analysis of articles written on the theme of work-life from 1990 onwards, Özbilgin et al. (2011) revealed that, even studies with a critical rather than positivist approach, were strongly inclined to limit the understanding of 'life' to domestic responsibilities derived from heterosexual nuclear families. Furthermore, the emphasis was on gender, with other social variables being overlooked. In other words, while feminist preoccupation with work-life balance was already well established in the 2000s (Albrecht, Björklund & Vroman, 2003; Brown & Jones, 2004; Watts, 2009; Holt & Lewis, 2011), other dimensions of inequality were notably less present.

This critique is still relevant today, but it must be acknowledged that research on work-life balance has now also gained an intersectional perspective. This has opened up

3 Ties created through working and studying are included in the co-present section of life outside work as long as the interviewees felt the bond was closer than was typical for a professional network.

new avenues for research into the different layers of inequality and how they are intertwined with gender in the making of work-life balance. Faithful to the black feminism from which the notion of intersectionality originated (Crenshaw, 1991; Hill Collins, 1990), recent studies have focused on the work-life balance of African American mothers (Haskins et al., 2016) and on the perception of fairness regarding work-life policies by women of colour (Hamidullah & Ruccucci, 2017).

When it comes to migration and how it shapes life outside work, one aspect that has received considerable scholarly attention is that of managing distant family ties (Bryceson & Vuorela, 2002; Schans, 2009; Baldassar & Merla, 2014; Marino, 2019). Focusing specifically on skilled migration from a work-life perspective, Kofman and Rughuram (2005), Meares (2010), Kraler (2011) and Kofman (2014) have researched how gender disparities play out in the context of demands for mobility and the personal commitments of transnational careers. To counter what they viewed as 'a tendency to underestimate the human face of elite migrants', Ryan & Molholland (2014) also investigated family life and networking. They did so by highlighting the role of the wives of highly skilled migrants in London in developing a reliable web of ties.

Another example of research dealing with work-life balance in a transnational context is Pillay and Abhayawansa's (2014) comparison of work-life balance between migrants and locals working in Australia's university system. Their conclusion that locals are likely to have a more strained work-life balance than migrants does not, however, account for the fact that the work-life system of migrants, highly skilled or otherwise, is in itself different from that of locals (e.g., they may have fewer responsibilities outside work, but also fewer of the ties from which those responsibilities arise). Another example of research into the work-life balance of highly skilled migrants is Kyoko Shinozaki's (2014) exploration of work-life balance in dual career couples engaged in transnational work. Other research on work-life balance comes from management and organisational studies, but not so much from other social sciences. Furthermore, most of the studies mentioned above still problematise work-life balance through the lens of responsibilities, roles and expectations of everyday life at work and in the traditional family; they understate the specificities derived from the status of being a skilled migrant and the processes by means of which the challenges which emerge from this status are dealt with.

On the other hand, a focus on spatio-temporality (and temporality in particular) is often brought into highly skilled migration research through a life-course perspective. Robertson (2014) highlights the importance of understanding migration in general according to the different modes of temporariness (Rajkumar et al., 2012) which generate circular or staggered movement or provisional settlement in Australia. However, the empirical reality these authors discuss is one where policy constraints, citizenship and legal frameworks generate the provisional character which in turn impacts life trajectories. Griffith, Rogers & Anderson (2013) analyse temporary and permanent settlement in similar terms. Emphasising the cultural more than the legislative aspects of migration through life course, Kõu et al. (2015, 2017) and Kirk & Janssen. (2017) respectively discuss the temporary work-related mobility of young highly skilled Indians in Amsterdam as a specific moment in a life trajectory, and as a period of liminality. Adding to these approaches, Bryceson (2019) examines the

different stages of settlement which mark global migration trajectories in relation to family ties and care life cycles.

These (relatively recent) works emphasise the specific spatio-temporalities of short-term or uncertain migratory experiences in terms of liminality, forms of temporariness, family life cycle, perpetually provisional stays (Ryan, 2018). How such ideas may inform our understandings of the work-life systems of skilled transnational workers (a topic which is itself still quite new) has not been sufficiently discussed yet. To fill this gap, this article aims first to contribute to the practical grasp of transnational everyday work-life balance and contemporary forms of personal ties, and secondly to further the theoretical conversation between work-life balance and life-course research through the lens of skilled migration.

Methodology

I begin this section with a discussion of the category of the highly skilled migrant. As stated above, the study draws on interviews with Romanian skilled migrants who came to Sweden with a work arrangement or to study. My choice was motivated by the fact that it is common for educational capital to become devalued through migration, which would result in an analytically distinct category of migrants with higher educational qualifications, who are not actively employed on the basis of their education.

The country of origin is Romania, one of the European member states which, together with Poland and several Baltic states, has the highest numbers of migrants in Sweden. Due to the rights of free movement within the borders of the EU, the lack of need for work permits and the geographical compactness of Europe, the experiences of the informants in this study are likely illustrative of broader intra-European migration, which is typically characterised by 'circular and temporary free movement, informal labour market incorporation, cultures of migration, transnational networks' (Favell, 2008: 701). However, while the common legal framework of open labour across the European Union may generate similarities in migration trajectories and experiences, these similarities will always be filtered through the specificity of the migrant's place of origin. In this sense, the sources of variation are multiple, and may range from certain duties and expectations of the Romanian extended family as compared to others, situated understandings of work ethics, informal interactions, norms related to life course and the meanings Swedes associate with coming from Romania, rather than a different European country. Thus, while it is likely that some of the findings in this study are relevant in relation to highly skilled intra-European migration more broadly, the life-work systems and trajectories of Romanian skilled workers remain the main focus.

I interviewed men and women with a range of family configurations (married, in civil partnerships, single, having their families cohabiting in Sweden, or apart). This allowed me to capture the variation in patterns of work-life systems of expats. At the same time, most of my interviewees were serial migrants, either having moved to Sweden from another country or planning to move from Sweden to a different country soon.

The methodological framework I employed is that of grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1994). The reasons for making this choice were multiple, but the overarching

principle was 'the commitment to be faithful to the understandings, interpretations, intentions and perspectives of the people studied' (Clarke, 2005: 3). Thus, I investigated the expats' own accounts of their work-life system, of what shaped it and how it was changing. To understand how highly skilled migrants living in Sweden create and manage their work-life balance and the challenges they face, their own experience and their construction of meaning around this experience are crucial. The lived shift from the work-life balance they had known before moving, the confirmed and/or failed expectations of having a transnational work-life system, the links between a strong work commitment and the renunciation of particular personal responsibilities, the importance of digitalisation in tackling the physical distance between the workplace and 'home' – these are all issues where the research efforts need the guidance of the subjects and the narratives of lived experience.

This being said, the method which is most faithful to grounded theory is the open-ended interview. It allows social actors not only to express themselves with respect to particular topics, but also to present their own hierarchies of relevance, by focusing on some particular problems and ignoring others. However, for the purpose of maintaining the unity of the empirical material, I opted to conduct semi-structured interviews, where particular themes of dialogue were proposed to the respondents. Thus, there were some common themes that were discussed during all interviews. These included the decision to move and its background (this consisted of several different stages for those who were serial migrants, as each context had its specificity), the shape of strong bonds (family, both co-present and apart, geographically dispersed friends, new bonds), the experience of transnational life and work (aspects which they enjoyed, aspects they found challenging, surprising) and intentions of settlement or circular/serial migration. Within the margins of these broad thematic coordinates, the interviews were designed to mimic free conversations, leaving space for deviations, clarifications and follow-up questions. This article draws on eight individual interviews, conducted face to face, with a duration between one and two hours. The interviews were conducted in Romanian.

All the Romanian knowledge workers who were interviewed came to Sweden either to work or to study, but those who had originally come to study had graduated and were also actively working in highly skilled positions at the time of the interview. Five of the informants were men and three were women, with ages ranging from mid-20s to mid-40s. They came from different parts of Romania and lived in the Swedish capital, with two exceptions, who were living in other large cities in Sweden. Some biographical information about the respondents is provided as a background for the interview excerpts used in this article, but the names are pseudonyms.

The interviews loosely followed a set of themes including: the context in which the subjects had started considering a move abroad for work or studies; the process through which they decided on their destination; the key points in their trajectory of serial migration (for those who had not come directly to Sweden); the challenges and the rewards they felt were part of their transnational experience; and the ways in which they envisioned their future. At every stage, the relational aspect was addressed through questions about the links with geographically distant bonds, as well as new ties.

The analysis of the data started with structural codes (Saldaña, 2009) which label portions of interviews according to themes. As a result, moments when interviewees

talked about similar things were extracted and grouped across interviews. The second phase of data analysis imvolved theoretical coding. In this case, the theoretical codes were built in relation to the concept of 'the work-life system' (e.g., dissatisfaction, coping mechanisms, shifts/changes, expectations, comparisons with locals, comparisons with one's own previous experience).

'Professional development' and the attractiveness of Sweden

To address the first research question – how Romanian skilled employees in Sweden experience the work-life system – it was important to look first into how and why they found themselves holding transnational jobs. Despite different backgrounds, genders and occupations, all of the respondents saw their move as a significant step forward for professional development and a better working environment. However, within this common framework, different points were emphasised. For instance, when asked about how she started looking for a job abroad, Julie, an architect who came to Sweden together with her husband (also a highly qualified migrant) after having also lived in another country, said that the working conditions in Romania were a key aspect in her decision to move. She explained the push she experienced as follows:

> *Well, in my case, I studied in city A and afterwards I worked in city B [both cities in Romania] for three years . . . And working there I found myself very disappointed about the way things are done in Romania, the way in which one gets a good quality project. The quality of the projects is generally very low there. You must have the good fortune to get a rich and open-minded customer if you want to practice real architecture, so then I knew I wanted to leave. (Julie, architect, early 30s)*

Here, the mix of socio-economic context within a specific place (e.g., how much the clients can afford) with the mentality (how open-minded the clients are) is regarded as impacting on quality and contributing to what Julie sees as poor outcomes. Her mention of 'real architecture' highlights the discrepancy between her own understanding of her field of work and the way in which she had witnessed it being practised in her old job.

At the same time, for others the narrative of moving focuses less on the getaway from the previous country, and more on the complementary aspect of what working in Sweden offered. Mary, who left Romania to study for a master's degree and who currently works as an industrial designer in the Scandinavian country, stated

> *Here, when I went to the University, the shock was huge! They had so many things, a very large working space where you could build anything you wanted. The materials they had, the computers, the tablets, the huge graphs . . . I think if I had these opportunities when I began my undergrad, I would have been so much better. . . . 'Have you worked in that material?', they asked. No, we used to buy cardboard, wood, and things you can easily buy. But you don't buy special plasticine which you melt, or heat up at a high temperature, there is no way you could do that. (Mary, industrial designer, mid 20s)*

For Mary, the material conditions were one of the main reasons why she preferred to work in Sweden, especially since she was active in an area which is entirely shaped by these conditions. At the same time, it is important to note her remark about the disadvantage in practical experience and preparation she believed resulted directly from doing her undergraduate degree in Romania rather than Sweden.

The views shared by Julie and Mary were also shared by other interviewees, all of whom talked about cutting edge technologies, innovative materials and/or approaches and mentioned their desire for professional development as a key element in their decision to live and work in Sweden. For some, an additional stimulus to seek work abroad was the value placed by employers on international careers. While this value may vary according to occupational fields and career levels, the shared understanding among the participants in this study was that international credentials are beneficial, if not indispensable, for career progression. Adrian and Robert both left Romania to study (the former came straight to Sweden, the latter did not) and both looked at their current work as a page in their portofolio careers:

> *I came here three years ago. I studied in city C in Romania and afterwards I wanted an MSc and I wanted some international experience . . . I started applying, looking for MSc programmes in the technical field abroad. I was looking at many, and I got accepted to two: one was University X in the Netherlands and the second was University Y in Stockholm . . . For me, it was not bad at home. I came with the idea to see how things are, to graduate from a better university, to get a shiny degree and to prove to myself I can do it. (Adrian, engineer, late 20s)*

> *I was in Denmark, I am in Sweden, I am going to Spain. That is why I am here, to get experience, professional and otherwise . . . For a while [before he was offered an international transfer] I thought Sweden will be my last country before going back to Romania. (Robert, HR manager, late 20s)*

On the one hand, the positions and thought processes of these two subjects may be regarded as illustrative of a larger scale socio-economic dynamic in which certain types of mobile work are rewarded, as are certain class backgrounds, for instance. On the other hand, in each of these cases, work-motivated migration is a means to an end, namely a means of gaining the credentials which would allow them to access higher positions in the professional hierarchy. The similarities go further, in that both men are certain they will want to return to Romania in a few years.

Within the context of discussing how they decided to move to Sweden for work, other interviewees described working styles and relations with line managers as contributing to their move. However, these were typically brought up less than the reasons quoted above. Finally, financial incentives were also mentioned, and their importance varied across professions. Many respondents pointed out the difference in income is often reflected in a difference in expenditure, so they did not feel like that affected their choices. Also, it is important to keep in mind that all the respondents were in a relatively privileged position even before leaving Romania, since they were either already working in jobs where higher education is a requirement or studying or came from families who could financially support them.

Life outside work

As much as the transnational life trajectories of skilled migrants are driven by professional considerations, their work-life experience, and especially the bonds which constitute life outside work, are strongly impacted by the transnational setting. Thus, the following sections will seek to deepen the understanding the work-life systems of the participants in the study by focusing on various types of bonds they develop and maintain.

Friendships and personal bonds in Sweden

While all the interviewees were at least relatively satisfied with the professional positions in which they found themselves, when the conversation moved to aspects unrelated to work, they discussed a variety of challenges, some of which had been resolved, but others which they were still facing. For Adrian, the engineer quoted above, who had lived in Sweden for three years, one of these challenges was finding a group of friends which would allow him to live the lifestyle he enjoys:

> *In the future, what do I do? Do I get married and spend all my time with her friends and with the three friends I've got? I am not that kind of person. I need a large pool of people who can understand me, so that we can go out together, go to festivals, do things. Here, there have been many concerts or events I have missed because I did not have someone to go with. If Tina [a Swedish woman with whom the interviewee had a romantic relationship for one and a half years] did not like the music . . . we just wouldn't go. (Adrian, engineer, mid-20s)*

For some respondents, the potential for social and recreational activities was also felt as very culturally specific. While several interviewees who had spent time in other countries felt a stronger sense of community and belonging in Sweden, another interviewee, a serial migrant who had previously worked and lived in Ireland, had a different experience. Victor, an engineer in his 30s who after moving from Ireland was working in a multinational corporation in the Swedish capital, said:

> *Anyway, in Ireland the social life was more intense and richer than in either Sweden or Romania, just because that is the lifestyle there. When people go out from work, they have a drink and then they go home. (Victor, engineer, early 30s)*

In parallel with the cultural comparisons, which were extremely common among all interviews, another important element was the reliance on work bonds for life outside work. For those who had also studied in Sweden, the bonds created at university were also mentioned. At the same time, having these personal ties (irrespective of how they had been created) was not only convenient, but also very important in creating a life-work balance and life satisfaction. Victor went on to talk about this when he describes his move from Ireland to Sweden:

> *It was quite different. Also, me being more mature, I knew what to expect. I did not need the same level of support. And the job itself is different. Before, the job was in a large team, of 20–25 people with whom you would meet every day. Here it is a small team, we often go to clients, I work from home a lot, so we do not*

> *meet face to face so often. What I can definitely say is that if I had left from Romania straight to Sweden, and I would have had the experience I am having now, it would have been so much harder than what I felt when I moved to Ireland a few years ago. (Victor, engineer, early 30s)*

Here the respondent makes very clear how much his experience of living and working abroad has been shaped by the presence of personal bonds, even if the bonds were also created through work. Furthermore, he draws attention to what several others also signalled as a form of transnational 'know-how', a preparation which comes with experience. In this sense, the concept of 'transnational habitus' gains a very concrete significance.

Traveling couples and families

For other interviewees, life outside work also included a romantic partnership with another Romanian citizen who had joined them in the transnational trajectory. Mary, the industrial designer mentioned above, reflected on her partner joining her after she had moved to Sweden:

> *He also moved here for a period . . . When I was by myself, it was just me, I knew what I had to do, I knew I had to make adjustments and for me it was easy, I just started talking to people . . . But after he moved, I had to make sure he was also well adjusted . . . Now that he is gone, I go to all sorts of events to which I would have not gone with him, because he was not interested, so then he would have been at home and getting bored. Probably the difference between him and me is that I really wanted this, and he was just here because I was, so his motivation was not as strong. The adjustment was more difficult as a couple . . . or at least it was in my case. (Mary, industrial designer, mid-20s)*

On the one hand, this statement illustrates the challenges of relocating as a couple. On the other hand, it is also important to note Mary's own experience of bonding as relatively straightforward when compared to the testimonies from Victor and Adrian above. While there is no identifiable pattern within the data as to why this variation occurs, it is worth pointing out the constant association between plans of settlement and satisfaction with life outside work. This is also the case here, since Mary, unlike both Victor and Adrian, had the intention to stay in Sweden indefinitely.

Dan, a Romanian engineer in his 30s, who recently got married, expressed the view that the desire for bonding is significantly less strong when in a couple. Moreover, he sees lack of time as an issue for life outside work, which is a concern the interviewees who were single did not share. He also discussed tie making from a couple standpoint:

> *Now that one of the couples with whom we used to go out moved, we need to find another couple . . . but also we do not have that much time anyway. Maybe one more group of friends, a couple, or whatever, two to three extra friends would be ok, but we really do not have time for anything more than that. (Dan, engineer, 30s)*

Besides Dan, the preoccupation with time limitations was also present for Cristian, a professor who had recently moved to Sweden after having lived in two other European

countries since leaving Romania over a decade earlier. He was also married, but with children. Like most interviewees, he explained that he had never chosen the countries or the cities in which he went according to existing networks of ties, which meant that he started off not knowing anyone in any of the locations where he and his family lived. He stated:

> *The ties I have formed were usually through my profession, through the university, and afterwards through my children. My boys are practising a sport and my daughter will also practise it, so that helps. We have stable bonds, but when you move from one country to another, you do lose these social ties, you can maintain them, but only with great difficulty. . . . But when I came to Sweden, firstly I came by myself, without the family, but I just did not have time. It was my first professorship and I simply took on too much work. But when they came, the fact that the family was also there, through them, I got more settled. (Cristian, professor, 40s.*

This quotation is interesting because it challenges the typical configuration of work-life systems, where family responsibilities come together with time pressures. In Cristian's case, the time constraints are constantly there (elsewhere he talks about how they still affect his life) but in the period when his family was away his life outside work shrank to leave more time for work.

Coupling Cristian's experience with the experiences of the other Romanian knowledge workers supports the idea that transnational work-life dynamics come with a very particular set of issues derived from the temporal limitations of work and personal engagements, but also from living in a space of (almost) exclusively new bonds.

Digital affordances and geographically distant bonds

Inasmuch as old bonds are concerned, these knowledge workers signalled several key points. First, there was a desire to maintain non-co-present distant bonds and an effort that went into doing so. For all my respondents, this effort was twofold, involving both periodic face-to-face encounters and constant digitally mediated contact. Secondly, there was the question of how the old bonds, but also the subject's wider network, had been transformed by migration. In this sense, whether a transnational habitus emerges or not, the practices of maintaining contact and the relational impact of geographical movement are quite varied.

For instance, for Robert, the unmarried HR manager who had lived in Sweden for several years and who was preparing for his transfer to Spain at the time of the interview, long-distance bonds were holding up well, but he did admit to feeling closer to his co-present friends:

> *Yes, yes, I have kept in touch with them. I usually try to go home as often as I can, but it actually ends up being twice a year: in the summer and in the winter. From my side, I feel everything is unchanged. We are ok, we talk, we go out. . . . But even recently I had a more important issue to discuss, and I turned to a friend from here, because with them I interact daily or weekly. But after that I would also talk to the ones from home. The ones who are here are closest to me. (Robert, HR manager, late 20s)*

The correlation between relational distance and geographical distance signalled by Robert in the quotation above diverges quite significantly, however, from the experiences of most other informants, who emphasised that they still relied mostly on old close ties, physically distant though they might be, for advice and support. The persistence of this network of support, along with caring responsibilities, emotional investment and reciprocal expectations of contact, explain the effort which was put into the maintenance of close bonds. Another example of this mix of dimensions was given by Julie, a married Romanian architect in her 30s living in Stockholm. She relied more on digital affordances to communicate with her extended family and highlighted how the structure brought to these bonds by having to communicate using technology helped to bridge relational distance more than co-presence might:

> *You have to be on Skype a lot, to talk to the parents, then to the other parents [the in-laws]), then with the siblings . . . online social life takes a while too. But I have heard this from many people who are away: the relationship with the parents is much better. You have regular contact, through Skype, weekly . . . compared to my brother who lives in city X [in Romania] and who goes home three times a year. He speaks with them once a month. I speak with them every two days and I go home as often as he does . . . (Julie, architect, 30s)*

What is also important to note here is the fact that, when asked about long-distance personal bonds, Julie was the only interviewee who framed her answer in relation to a sense of duty: 'you *have to* be on Skype'. The idea of duty, together with the mention of parents, brings to light how significant the typical themes of work-life balance (care, extended family, ageing, gendered responsibility) are for highly skilled transnational workers. Nonetheless, as pointed out in this statement, the ease of medium-length journeys within Europe and the availability of technological affordances for mediated communication help them to negotiate the actual distance. But as much as these factors narrow the space between near and far, they cannot ultimately bridge the gap from non-co-presence to co-presence. Both Robert's and Julie's narratives are shaped by the fact that their family members and distant friends are close, but not really there.

Strategies of life-work balancing and life-course approaches

As revealed by these interviewees, the portion of the work-life system that involves 'life' is made up of personal bonds to a very significant extent. From this standpoint, it was and is worthwhile to explore their networks of ties in order to gain insight into the migration experience of highly skilled workers. However, my second research question aimed to interrogate how a structural-relational perspective might be linked with a conversation about temporality, life course and the future. As mentioned above, migration is depicted in some scholarly conversations as an experience of liminality. Like the stranger in Simmel's (1950) essay, the migrant does not fully belong to the place of adoption or the place of origin. Furthermore, Kirk & Janssen (2017) talk about a double liminality, both spatial and temporal, and about migrants feeling 'betwixt and between' different cultural expectations. So, to address the question of how work-life

systems relate to the life course, it is this double liminality, and mostly the temporal aspects of it, on which I focus in this section. If the spatial in-betweenness of migration is relatively clear, the temporal in-betweenness may be more counter-intuitive.

Following Elder's (1994) approach, cited by Kõu et al. (2015), I argue that decision-making around settlement, but also individual embeddedness into relationships and an orientation towards different life stages and transitions, are important aspects to consider in life-course research. In this regard, the agency, strategic thinking and long-term goals are striking features in the discourses of my interviewees, irrespective of what their exact trajectory was or how they envisioned their future.

Anna was specialised as an economist when she moved to Sweden six years prior to the interview but had retrained in the meantime and was very enthusiastic about quitting her old job as an economist and taking up a new job offer as a programmer. She said:

> *I will not return to Romania; it has never crossed my mind . . . In the beginning it was very difficult, and I was missing home terribly, but now I do feel at home. And more than ever, because I own a home, I feel at home. But I do wish I was more social . . . it's just that I live a bit out of the city, and the fact that I have health issues . . . with my back. That limits me. But I think there is a right time for everything, and I think I will start feeling better physically and in time I will also socialise more. I am starting to reopen ties from a few years ago. I have many acquaintances and I need to invest more in developing my relationship with them. Now that the job is sorted, I will focus more on that. It is my goal. (Anna, programmer, 30s)*

Victor, viewed the stages of his life differently, wishing to return to Romania, but had put a similarly careful plan in place:

> *I want to go back firstly for personal reasons. I do not see myself in a relationship with a person of a different nationality. I know it can work, but these relationships are more complicated, I think . . . Romanians in Stockholm are too few, and I don't know them . . . Secondly, I'd like to have my own business at some point, and what I do can be done from afar – consultancy. So then it's worth it to go back home, have smaller expenses and sell my services abroad. And I want to apply, or to try to apply at home what I have seen working well in different places. (Victor, engineer, 30s)*

As Bradley and Devadason (2008) and Devadason (2017) highlight in their research on youth life trajectories in the UK, the demands of the labour market and the valorisation of international work experience result in lengthened youth transitions and in a limitation of the choices available for young people, both migrant and non-migrant. This is clearly also the case among Romanian knowledge workers in Sweden. However, in this context what is important to note is the tension within the work-life systems reflected in the quotations above (and this thread can be seen more broadly in all the interviews). The bonds which underpin the personal life of these subjects, be they idle weak ties or potential romantic partnerships, are

compartmentalised in relation to work, not only within the time frame of a day (working hours vs. free time) but also within the confines of professional and non-professional space. At the same time, the statements reveal that work-life systems are currently experienced as unbalanced. The interviewees see the possibility for future balance, and they intentionally pursue it. This pursuit involves a long-term temporisation of work and life throughout one's life course. In this regard, the carefully planned life trajectory, the decisions about settlement and the different stages through which they pass over time become strongly linked with achieving what they regard as a satisfactory work-life system.

Achieving work-life balance through life-course temporisation may be, to a certain extent, a general dynamic for young professionals, but the conditions of a transnational work-life are likely to exacerbate the reliance on such temporisation. Especially for those who regard their migration as strictly work-related and temporary, the temporal compartmentalisation is doubled by a spatial fragmentation. The receiving country becomes almost exclusively a space of work, and the period spent there becomes a working stage of life. This is seen as a route to stability, to professional success and to a spatio-temporal context which would allow these knowledge workers the privilege of a balanced work-life system at some unspecified time in the future.

Conclusion

The work-life problematic is often investigated in relation to organisational practices and competing job and family responsibilities, through the lens of traditional heterosexual nuclear families. In this article I have chosen to investigate life-work systems understood more broadly, beyond family responsibilities, in terms of the bonds which make up life outside work. Also, I have focused on early to mid-career highly skilled migrant workers (aged 25 to 40) with different family configurations. The aim was two-fold: first, to gain a deeper understanding of how transnational work-life systems are experienced by Romanian skilled migrants in Sweden; and second, to explore how challenges in work-life balance are related to and negotiated through life-course approaches.

Regarding the former aim, the first part of my qualitative data analysis focused on the professional appeal of the receiving country, and on the social and (inter)personal mechanisms behind what are ultimately cases of work-motivated migration. Since all my interviewees moved to Sweden for work (or study and then work), discussing their goals and their decision was fundamental for understanding what drove them towards transnational migration. In this sense, the advancement of technological capabilities, the level of innovation in different fields, management styles and the labour market demand for international experience were some of the key considerations discussed. Secondly, the article explored the character of personal bonds of transnational workers in three areas: bonds in the receiving country; travelling bonds (people who accompanied them in their migration); and bonds from afar. These results were also shaped by the fact that most interviewees were serial migrants, who had lived and worked in other countries before going to Sweden. Lastly, the article looked at the ways in which the challenges of balancing life and work in the case of highly skilled migrants can be interpreted in a life-course perspective.

Here, the narratives gathered in this research shed light on the changing form of life-work challenges and the temporality involved in the coping strategies of transnational workers. Many of the informants' experiences may not fit into the typical conversation of job versus family because of a conscious choice to focus on work in a certain stage of their lives. Nonetheless, work-life systems are a concern which subjects address strategically, and which becomes meaningful in a life-trajectory perspective. 'Work' is not something that takes place at the office from 9 to 5, while the family is at home or 'life' something that takes place after 5. Work is in Sweden, while life is somewhere else (e.g., in a warm country where Mary plans to go for a year or back in Romania where Robert and Adrian want to return); or, for those who plan to stay, work is something that will continue until a particular kind of job is secured, while life will be fitted in afterwards. The result is a segregation, a gradually increasing spatial distance and temporal duration between the work and life of young skilled migrants.

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