



(Im)Mobility and the emotional lives of expat spouses



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A B S T R A C T

Discourses circulating among various social fields where so-called expats meet (e.g., blogs, social networks, associations), tend to portray the experience of mobility by defining how people on-the-move are expected to feel. Moving to a new place is portrayed as an “exciting” yet difficult experience, and a set of solutions based on feeling and display rules to handle the challenges of mobility are provided. Based upon ongoing qualitative research in Switzerland, the paper explores how these discourses unfold in the subjective experience of professionals’ partners, when migratory experiences are enmeshed with conditions of work stasis, social immobility and related distress. It focuses on the way two women narrate their feelings about (im)mobility while engaging and disengaging in “emotion work”. Considering the tensions and proximity between how the emotional impact of mobility is publicly portrayed and how it is described at the individual level can shed light on the mutual relationship between prevailing normative frameworks, and the more personal experience, understanding and display of emotions.

1. Introduction

Moving to a different country is an exciting adventure for many. But when the excitement fades, what is left is often loneliness and feeling out of place (InterNations.org).

Moving to another country, the above quote tells us, can be an “exciting adventure”, yet also challenging. Intercultural associations, informal gatherings and social networks proliferate, then, in order to help “ease the transition into expat life” (Internations.org), establish new connections, and lessen the sense of disorientation that moving entails. Mobile professionals, often constructed as expats, represent a relevant population of contemporary migration processes ([Smith and Favell, 2006](#)), and include, among others, employees at international organizations and multinational companies, academics, researchers, and diplomats. At times, they are followed by their families or by their partners, who can decide to quit employment and take care of family duties. Especially for the partners, commonly known as trailing spouses, blogs and associations represent important fields in which to share experiences and engage in activities. I use the term “expat” throughout this paper, to reflect the dominant construction of mobile professionals among the participants in this research and in the social fields under exploration, as well as the image of “privilege” often associated with professionals’ mobility. In doing so, the paper recognizes this as a problematic term, regarding the construction of more and less ‘deserving’ or ‘acceptable’ migration into Europe in current political

discourses.

The paper draws upon ongoing research on mobile professionals and their families temporarily living in Switzerland.¹ It illustrates the experience of (im)mobility for spouses in view of the excitement, tribulations and need of connection often associated with expat mobility. It contributes to current research on internationally-mobile professionals and their families (e.g., [Cangià, 2018](#); [Coles and Fechter, 2012](#); [Ryan and Mulholland, 2014](#); [Levitan et al., 2018](#); [Zittoun et al., 2018](#)), with a special focus on emotions. I explore how discourses on expat mobility unfold in the subjective experience of female partners, when migratory experiences are enmeshed with conditions of work stasis, social immobility and related distress. In particular, I focus on the way two women narrate their feelings about (im)mobility while (dis)engaging in emotion work. Individuals’ narratives about feelings in migration are partly reflections on personal experiences, yet also an interpretation and negotiation of socio-cultural meanings relating to mobility, and of normative constructions of feeling and display rules appropriate in certain socio-cultural settings. A focus on female spouses is particularly interesting, considering the more challenging relocation for partners compared to the employee, who generally continues to rely on the workplace as an anchorage in the new environment ([Ravasi et al., 2013](#)), highlighting the gendered dimension of professionals’ mobility and family relations ([Kofman and Parvati, 2005](#)). Despite the growing number of male spouses ([Cole, 2012](#)), gender differences still characterize family arrangements of these mobile couples, with a

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relative high proportion of accompanying female spouses (Riaño and Baghdadi, 2007; Schaer et al., 2017).

First, I present the theoretical framework, followed by an introduction of the context and methods. After, I present two women's narrations, and conclude by discussing contributions of this study.

2. Emotions and human mobility

Emerging research has recently paid special attention to the emotional dimensions of human mobility (Boccagni and Baldassar, 2015; Faier, 2011; Skrbiš, 2008; Svašek, 2010). In particular, scholars in the social sciences have reflected upon the relationship between emotions and mobility by considering receiving populations' understanding of migratory processes (Cangià, 2016; Cangià and Pagani, 2014; Pagani, 2014; Zembylas, 2012), migrants' subjective experiences and everyday lives (Adams, 2014; Baldassar, 2015; den Besten, 2010; Cangià, 2014; Christou, 2011; Kokanović and Božić-Vrbančić, 2015), as well as the multifarious ways in which migrants' emotional life is socially and culturally (re)constructed (Boccagni and Baldassar, 2015). Traditional research in anthropology has viewed emotions as socio-cultural constructs whose meanings are generated across different contexts, and shaped by different categorical dimensions, e.g., gender, ethnicity, and class (Lutz and White, 1986). Experiences of human mobility further complicates such situated emotions: the intensification of mass media and mass migration, in particular, and increases in relationships and movements across space and time, are interwoven in the emotional lives of significant numbers of people.

This paper contributes to the study of emotions in human mobility through a socio-cultural reading that takes into consideration the subjective dimension of emotions. In my previous research (Cangià, 2016), I defined "emotion" as a psychological process of evaluation of an external situation, or of the internal affective state associated with a specific event (Lindquist, 2013; Nussbaum, 2003; Solomon, 1993). While feeling is viewed as the bodily sensation, emotion is described as involving an evaluation of this sensation and what this means in context (Jasper, 2016). Here, emotions are understood as the dialectics between socio-culturally situated and subjective experiences: as processes that are "performed, practiced and displayed in a variety of situated and simultaneous interactions" (Boccagni and Baldassar, 2015, p. 74) and that are experienced through the engagement with the surrounding environment (Milton, 2002; Solomon, 2004), while simultaneously subjective processes that are "idiosyncratic, personal, and unalterably relative to the peculiar fabric of our lives" (Calhoun, 2004, p. 111). I am interested in the social and normative context in which emotions occur, and in the way people, by making sense of and managing their feelings, actively shape socio-cultural categories relating to emotional experiences. This perspective recognizes that shared socio-cultural categories on emotions can produce and reproduce knowledge about the world (Lutz and Abu-Lughod, 1990), yet at the same time considers how people actively participate in the re-constitution of these categories.

Emotions here, then, are analysed at three interrelated levels: the normative context of feeling and display rules; people's emotion work and understanding of personal experiences; and what people feel in a given situation. Exploring the tensions and proximity between how the mobility is publicly portrayed through the use of emotion categories in a given socio-cultural context, and how it is narrated and lived at the individual level, sheds light on the mutual relationship between prevailing normative frameworks and the personal experience of emotions in migration (Boccagni and Baldassar, 2015).

By considering spouses' simultaneous experiences of social and geographical (im)mobility, the paper also contributes to challenging the conceptual dichotomy between mobility and immobility (Glick Schiller and Salazar, 2013). I focus on "emotion work" as the analytical lens to understand the relationship between mobility, immobility and normative frameworks. The notion of "emotion work" is defined as "the act of trying to change in degree or quality an emotion" (Hochschild, 1979, p.

561), in particular by assessing, evoking, inhibiting, or shaping one's own feelings. The notion has been largely used in sociology and anthropology, in particular in research on occupational roles (Hochschild, 1983), on motherhood (Erickson, 1993) and on family life in migration (Maehara, 2010; Ryan, 2008).

In this paper, I use this concept to explore the interrelation between common discourses on emotions in expat mobility, and the experience of migration and work and social stasis as a spouse. For those who accompany their mobile partners, and choose to quit employment while taking care of family duties, the relationship between normative expectations regarding the most appropriate emotions and personal experience is especially complex. These people particularly face the challenges of the move, with the alteration of their working life, the lack of social networks in the destination country, and the new role as a "stay-at-home" spouse in the family (Cangià, 2018; Ravasi et al., 2013; Schlenker and Gutek, 1987). I suggest that, by making sense of social and geographical (im)mobility, spouses engage or disengage in emotion work, in particular conform to, challenge, or resist, dominant expectations regarding the quality and expression of emotions within particular social settings.

3. The study

Since 2015, I have been conducting fieldwork in Lake Geneva region, a highly international region of Switzerland, with people accompanying their partners in various professional sectors (i.e., research, diplomacy, multinational companies, civil service). Switzerland, in particular the Lake Geneva region, which includes the city of Geneva and cantons of Vaud and Valais, has recently become an attractive destination for international newcomers, due to the growing number of multinational companies, international organizations and research institutes. Cities like Geneva are especially changing their urban outlook as a result of expat mobility (Calligaro, 2016); thus Switzerland represents an interesting context in which to examine the relation between expat communities and their subjective experiences.

I have conducted in-depth narrative interviews (Rosenthal, 2004) with 12 individuals, both female (N = 5) and male (N = 7) spouses.² The interviews (lasting between one and 2 h) were held at a time and place chosen by participants (i.e., at a café, or at their house). Questions focused on people's migratory trajectory, social networks, family and working life, and future plans. Other topics were evoked, such as feelings about repeated moves, unemployment and job search. I met six respondents (3 women and 3 men) a second time after approximately one year, in order to follow their life during the period of settling-in, and to explore events that occurred in the course of their stay in Switzerland (e.g., birth of a child, internal migration, start of a new job).

The interviews represent emotional encounters between the interviewee and the interviewer, and were characterized by an "ethnographic imaginary" (Forsey, 2010) guiding both participant and researcher's intentions and positioning (Nowicka and Ryan, 2015). My presumed and shifting "insiderness" and "outsiderness" were based on "multiple positionalities", both adopted and ascribed by participants and myself, e.g., gender, parental and professional status (Ryan, 2015). These also played a role in my understanding of, and my emotional response to, the interview, people's stories and specific events in their life. At times, I caught myself struggling to ask specific questions concerning certain issues, in the attempt to protect both the interviewee and myself from resulting assumed difficult feelings (Montgomery, 2013). Other times, I took advantage of my personal experience as a woman and migrant working in a precarious context such as academia and becoming a mother in Switzerland, in order to evoke narration and

² Recently, I focus my attention specifically on the experiences of male spouses. For this reason, the sample is now composed of an increasing number of men.

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