Geoforum 93 (2018) 40–47

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Geoforum

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/geoforum

Mobile with an agency: Negotiating the spatiotemporalities of the temp migrant worker

Kristina Zampoukos[a,*], Hege Merete Knutsen[b], Maiken Bjerga Kiil[b], Gunilla Olofsdotter[c]

[a] Mid-Sweden University, Department of Tourism Studies and Geography, Kunskapens väg 1, 831 25 Östersund, Sweden
[b] Department of Sociology and Human Geography, University of Oslo, P.O. Box 1096 Blindern, 0317 Oslo, Norway
[c] Mid-Sweden University, Department of Social Sciences, Holmgatan 10, 851 70 Sundsvall, Sweden

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
Labour mobility
Agency
Spatiotemporalities
Migrant worker
Norway
Sweden

ABSTRACT

Several calls have been made by labour geographers in support for a more thorough investigation and theorization of labour as an active agent in the production of economic geographies. The present paper responds to this challenge by examining how Swedish agency warehouse workers and temp nurses working in Norway act and think in relation to mobility and how certain spatiotemporalities come into play in the mobility agency of individual workers. Though we are particularly concerned with the ambiguities involved in the relationship between mobility, agency and power, a second objective is to contribute to the theorization of how space and time matters to mobile workers. Drawing on data from twenty interviews with Swedish temp nurses and six focus group interviews with Swedish agency warehouse workers, and by combining several strands of literature ranging from current research on mobilities and migration to the work of classical scholars in geography and sociology, we propose that a 'trialectics of spatiotemporalities' is part and parcel of workers' mobility agency. Furthermore, our findings suggest that the purposive agency as emphasized for instance by the notion of 'mobility strategy' needs to be complemented by a conceptualization of agency that includes what we term (erratic) probing. We conclude that labour mobility may be strategic and a sign of power, but not always and everywhere, and not in any pure sense.

1. Introduction

Several calls have been made by labour geographers in support for a more thorough investigation and theorization of labour as an active agent in the production of economic geographies. As noted by Castree (2007) the concept of agency within labour geography remains undertheorized, an observation that has inspired scholars such as Coe and Jordhus-Lier (2011) and Hastings and MacKinnon (2017) to propose the re-embedding of agency in arenas stretching from global production networks (GPNs) to the workplace. The present paper continues this endeavor, albeit from a different angle, *i.e.* by examining how Swedish agency warehouse workers and temp nurses working in Norway act and think in relation to mobility and how certain spatiotemporalities come into play in the mobility agency of individual workers. To expand our understanding of agency we combine several strands of literature. In particular, we consider the criticism raised by scholars such as Cresswell (2006), Adey (2010) and Hanson (2010) on the tendency to celebrate mobility (over immobility) because of the association with ideas of progress, freedom, power and change. In connection to this, we claim that the coupling between mobility and power/agency is manifest also in conceptualizations of workers 'mobility power' (Smith, 2006) and in current theorization regarding migrant and immigrant workers' ability to strategize around their mobility (Hagan et al., 2011; Iskander et al., 2013; Alberti, 2014).

Swedes working in Norway constitute a particular category of entrants, mainly due to two factors; firstly, because of the agreement from 1954 admitting free labour mobility across Nordic country borders (Pedersen et al., 2008), and secondly because of linguistic and other 'cultural' similarities between Sweden and Norway. Even though the barriers of entry between these countries have been reduced to a minimum, nurses and warehouse workers obviously differ in terms of for instance skills and market power, and these differences clearly have an impact on their agency in relation to mobility. Young Swedish warehouse workers are in many respects holding a liminal (Van Gennep, 1960; Underthun, 2015) and precarious position at the threshold of the labour market, while Swedish nurses represent a highly appreciated and much in demand workforce in both Sweden and Norway, something which puts them in better control of their mobility

* Corresponding author.
E-mail addresses: kristina.zampoukos@miun.se (K. Zampoukos), hegemk@sosgeo.uio.no (H.M. Knutsen), m.b.kiil@sosgeo.uio.no (M.B. Kiil), gunilla.olofsdotter@miun.se (G. Olofsdotter).

https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2018.05.003
Received 14 September 2017; Received in revised form 28 March 2018; Accepted 2 May 2018
Available online 09 May 2018

between the two countries and in the health sector as such. With this in mind, and by close examination of how nurses and warehouse workers act and think in relation to mobility, we set out to deconstruct the concept of 'mobility power' and 'mobility strategy'. We are particularly concerned with the ambiguities involved in the relationship between mobility and power (Lee and Pratt, 2011; McMorran, 2015; Hanson, 2010), including debates about mobility and migration as being forced, free or both (Gill et al., 2011). Our investigation is guided by the following research questions: Under what circumstances and in what respect can workers' mobility entail improvement (of the work situation, salaries, work-life balance etc.) and empowerment? How and under what circumstances is worker mobility a sign of power (and when is it rather blurred and/or a sign of the opposite)? Thus, the first question concerns if and how workers are empowered *as a consequence* of their mobility, while the second question emphasizes mobility *per se* and whether it should be perceived a sign of power (or not). In other words, we make an analytical distinction between 'empowerment *by* mobility' and 'mobility *as* power.'

Our second objective is to contribute to the theorization of how space and time matters to mobile workers. Drawing on the work by Longva (1997), Ahmad (2008) and Axelsson et al. (2017) amongst others, we argue that workers' mobility agency is imbued with negotiations of the spatiotemporalities typically involved in the existence of the migrant worker, *i.e.* the lives and places that they have (temporarily) left behind, the present situation as temps/agency workers in the host country, and the future that lies ahead. We claim that these spatiotemporalities are incorporated in workers' thinking and acting in relation to mobility, although in different ways depending on their positioning in the transnational labour market. In connection to this, we also discuss the importance for workers to adapt to the ideas and expectations on the 'good worker' (MacKenzie and Forde, 2009; Findlay et al., 2013), which is key to pursue one's mobility but which is equally important if one seeks 'a place to stay' (hence *im*mobility).

The remainder of the paper proceeds as follows: First, we introduce the methods used, followed by an account on how data was analysed. We then move on to review the literature on labour agency, paying specific attention to the literature on the spatiotemporalities at play in migrant workers lives. This is followed by a thematic presentation of our findings, starting with a passage on the need for these workers to meet with expectations associated with the 'good Swedish temp worker', and how imaginations like these become part and parcel of workers' mobility agency. We then turn to the portrayal of three different, but to some extent interrelated, approaches to labour mobility among workers with the main purpose of exploring the presence of spatiotemporalities in workers' thinking and acting in relation to labour mobility. We conclude by suggesting that the purposive agency as emphasized by the notion of 'strategy' (for instance in 'mobility strategy') needs to be complemented by a conceptualization of agency that includes what we term *(erratic) probing*, and that labour mobility may be strategic and a sign of power, but not always and everywhere, and not in any pure sense.

2. Methods and material

The empirical basis of this paper consists of two data sets: First, we have carried out 20 individual interviews with Swedish nurses working as temps in Norway and, secondly, we have conducted 6 focus group interviews with Swedish warehouse workers in four different warehouse workplaces (hereafter A, B, C and D). In addition to focus group interviews, two semi-structured individual interviews with Swedish agency warehouse workers were carried out. The differences in terms of methodology resulted from how the research project was set up, with two separate research teams operating with different methods while collecting the data.

As alluded to in the introduction, the primary reason for focusing on nurses and warehouse workers is that although both groups enjoy the possibility of crossing the border, they are differently positioned (for instance in terms of skill levels) in the labour market, and as such they make up for interesting cases to compare.

Starting with the nurses, thirteen out of twenty had experience of working as temporary agency workers (TAW) in Norway. For the majority of nurses, the temporary work agency (TWA) also served as the main point of entry to the Norwegian labour market. However, at the time of the interview, three of the twenty nurses had stopped working in Norway, two because of familial reasons and one because she discovered that she could obtain higher wages as an agency nurse in Sweden. Only five of our informants remained in agency nursing at this point, and two of them combined this with direct temping and standard employment. As for the rest of the sample, eight nurses worked as directly employed temp nurses at the time of the interview, and four had obtained a standard employment contract (three in Sweden and one in Norway).

The majority of nurses in our sample work in Norway for fixed periods of 10–12 days at the most. At the time of interview in 2014–2015, their age ranged from mid-twenties to early sixties. Sixteen out of twenty nurses were women. Contact with interviewees was established through different Internet forums, including blogs and various Facebook pages. Interviews were semi-structured and were mainly conducted via phone (15 out of the 20) because of nurses' being located in a number of places in both Norway and Sweden. They lasted from half an hour to more than two hours, and they were all recorded with the informants' permission and transcribed. Interviews revolved around nurses' working and migration *biographies*, hence covering both the current situation as well as episodes belonging to the past. In addition, interviewees were asked about how they perceived their future. All informants, workplaces and TWAs have been anonymized.

In comparison, accessing warehouse workplaces and workers proved to be a challenge. Initially, we approached the management of 12 warehouse companies with an inquiry to conduct interviews with both management and workers on topics of labour hire, a request that all of them declined. We then turned to the Confederation of Norwegian Enterprise (NHO) and the Transport and Logistics trade union (TLF) for support, before renewing our attempts to access the warehouse workplaces. At this stage we were applying what could be described as 'customized' access strategies, meaning that in companies where management was reluctant to the idea of workers being interviewed (B and C), we were assisted by union representatives who arranged for us to meet interviewees sometimes in locations outside the workplace, whilst in companies (A and D) where both management and the union approved of our research, interviews took place at the premises of the workplace. Consequently, we depended on either management or the local union representatives (or both) to arrange our sample of focus group interviewees. Although this might have incurred biases in terms of more 'loyal' workers for instance, the overall impression is that the interviewees did not try to evade sensitive issues, nor did they seem to embellish or paint a black picture of their situation as migrant workers in the warehouse workplace. We believe that this 'sincerity' was in part achieved through the focus group as a forum where participants provide checks and balances on each other (Krueger and Casey, 2000). In total, 25 people participated in the focus group interviews, the size of these groups ranging from three to six people. Out of the 25 interviewees 16 were male, and participants' aged from 20 to their early thirties. In all but one focus group, participants were Swedes (24 out of 25, the remaining being a Norwegian). Our sample includes both agency workers and former agency workers (14 out of 25) that had later on been directly employed by the client warehouse companies on regular contracts.

The focus-group interviews were conducted jointly by two researchers and had the character of 'making conversations' with participants about themes prepared beforehand (Morgan, 1993; Goss and Leinbach, 1996; Krueger and Casey, 2000). Typically, one of the researchers would raise a theme or an issue, with one or several of the