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Professionals with borders: The relationship between mobility and transnationalism in global firms

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ABSTRACT

Recent claims assert that the transnational has displaced the national in importance vis-à-vis the governance of international professional organizations. Crucial to such claims are assumptions about rising geographical mobility and the emergence of cosmopolitan professionals who are increasingly detached from national professional regimes and contexts. We interrogate claims about the importance of transnational spaces through a cross-national study of global professional service firms in 12 countries. Our study demonstrates how the imperatives of client service, the locally rooted nature of social capital and cultural barriers all contrive to limit the ability and necessity of professionals to move across borders in their work and the pursuit of successful careers. The *vitality of transnational* firms appears to depend on professionals who are, for the most part, locally groomed – *professionals with borders* - who may only experience one short period of limited geographical mobility, usually early in their careers. Where transnational mobility is in evidence, it tends to take a more virtual than physical form. These results temper arguments about the rise and, certainly, extent of, physical mobility among elite employees of global professional service firms and, in turn, about the extent to which the transnational has supplanted the national as the most important frame of reference for professional organization. Rather, they support views that see the transnational and local as co-existing and interconnected.

1. Introduction

What is the relationship between transnational firms and professional mobility? It is an increasingly prominent refrain that Professional Service Firms (PSFs) are global in nature (Boussebaa et al., 2012), with some professions now occupying transnational spaces (Faulconbridge and Muzio, 2012). The term 'transnational' connotes a qualitatively different space, one that is less fettered by national borders and "cannot be reduced to the interplay of pre-existing national groups and interests" (Morgan, 2001: 115). It is concerned with hollowing out the national or 'denationalization' (Sassen, 2003: 5; also Djelic and Quack, 2012). Suddaby et al. (2007), for example, explore this very point, examining how the Big 4 accounting firms have transcended their own profession – accounting. Their study highlights how the Big 4 have rewritten accounting rules such that PSFs and their clients may operate in ways that loosen ties to nation states and more generally overcome national constraints. Suddaby et al. (2007) evince that the "hard", regulation-based activities of the nation-state have been superseded by the soft, normative-based activities of global PSFs and other "transnational actors" (335). The corollary has been to create a transnational set of governance arrangements within which the accountancy profession now operates.

Elsewhere, Faulconbridge and Muzio (2012) outline the contours of a 'transnational sociology of the professions' that takes account of how "powerful actors involved in the institutionalisation of professional privileges more and more seek to develop professional norms, regulations and cultures outside of the confines of Westphalian state regimes" (137). Echoing the rise of supra-national organizations more generally, from NATO through to the OECD, they argue that, while the national scale clearly remains important, this has been fetishized to the detriment of other scales, particularly the transnational. GPSFs (global professional service firms) are at the vanguard of creating transnational spaces and in transcending local versions of professionalism, opting instead to develop a "cadre of truly global practitioners" that are more geographically mobile and less constrained by national factors. The intention here, according to Faulconbridge and Muzio (2012), is for firms to develop "global cosmopolitan professionals who are detached from national professional regimes" (143).

These, somewhat 'hyperglobalist' (Morgan, 2001), characterisations of transnationalism conjure up images of professional firms that

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bestride the globe like modern day colossuses, populated by footloose, multi-lingual, cosmopolitan, borderless professionals who gambol from one exciting international assignment to the next. A key ingredient in this transnational cocktail is the assumption that elite professionals are highly mobile, spending their lives between business class lounges, top hotels and the gilded corporate suites of those that they advise. This argument asserts that as power ebbs inexorably from nation states to transnational and supra-national professional regimes, professional mobility will accordingly increase in significance (Beaverstock, 2007; Faulconbridge and Muzio, 2012, 145; Suddaby et al., 2007: 352). As Jones (2013: 61) argues in a review of business mobility, "with the advent of many more increasingly transnational firms … the circulation of managers has become far greater in extent and more complex in form". Accordingly, mobility has grown enormously as a topic of interest for social scientists in recent years (Eriksson and Rogriguez-Pose, 2017; Haley, 2017; Viry and Kauffman, 2015; Walker, 2015; Hislop and Axtell, 2015), the area even being replete with a journal, *Mobilities*, now past its tenth year (Faulconbridge and Hui, 2016). Yet the 'mobility turn' in the social sciences has however only just begun to gain traction in employment-related studies (Cresswell et al., 2016).

A corollary of these arguments can be found in wider sociological treatises on globalization. For example, there have been calls for a "sociology beyond societies" (Sheller and Urry, 2006) and an epistemological shift from "methodological nationalism" to "methodological cosmopolitanism" to account for increasing transnational interdependencies (Beck, 2008). Power, according to Beck (2008), is no longer linked to the conquest of territory or space. Rather, "the power of the players in the global economy grows precisely to the extent that they become extraterritorial factors" (796). This implies that transcending the confines of the nation state becomes a key objective for global economic power players, and this typically includes some form of mobility as well as other features of globalization (see also Castells, 1996; Fechter, 2007; Malewski, 2005; and, Nowicka, 2006).

While not denying that there is a homology between economic globalization and a rise in global mobility (as well as migration), strong assertions that we now live in a fundamentally different type of society need to be tempered by emerging empirical evidence. While the more enthusiastic champions of globalism continue to conjur up images of a world in which transnationalism has become the norm for many individuals, especially those of high status, this has been challenged (Helbling and Teney, 2015). For instance, recent work has demonstrated that European managers and professionals, even when working for international organizations, tend to "remain firmly rooted in their local urban environments, where they belong to dense networks of friends and family, and where they invest in the functioning of the local social and political sphere" (Andreotti et al., 2015: 3).

This article engages directly with these issues and asks the question: are transnational firms characterized by high levels of transnational professional mobility? To that end, we report on a study into the work and careers of senior financial professionals (auditors, tax advisors and consultants) in GPSFs in 12 countries. We explore the career histories of these individuals, paying particular attention to the *extent, type and timing of mobility* that has characterized their trajectories. Our findings demonstrate that although most interviewees are very conscious that they work for international organizations – and of the status that doing so accords them - the work they performed and careers they pursued were overwhelmingly embedded in the political, cultural and social idiosyncracies of *local* offices. These idiosyncracies encourage transnational professional mobility only up to a particular point, often early in their careers, beyond which mobility becomes a risk to career advancement at the local level. This finding leads to a characterisation of the professionals that populate transnational firms as much more bound up in the nation state than they are in transnational space and provides a counterfoil and conditionality to some arguments about the rise of global mobility and the ostensibly transnational character of GPSFs. Rather, the local and transnational are combined in different ways.

The article is structured as follows. The next section introduces literature on transnational professions and shows how key arguments therein are supported by assumptions about professional mobility. The limited literature that does exist on professional mobility beyond migration is reprised before highlighting the key research questions that this study seeks to answer. The research methods employed in the study are outlined. The findings are then presented, organized along geographical, temporal and functional planes. The article then discusses the implications of the key findings and concludes with some suggestions for future research.

2. Transnational professional mobility

A number of studies from the social sciences highlight the increasing importance of global mobilities. Fechter (2007), for example, draws attention to a new generation of mobile professionals who have "an international outlook in terms of their career, place of residence, and social networks (10). Similarly, Favell (2008) suggests that these new mobile professionals cherish movement as "a permanent state of mind" (104). This is resonant with Castells (1996), who pointed to a new stratum of footloose professionals whose identity "is not linked to any specific society but to membership of the managerial circles of the informational economy across a global cultural spectrum" (447). Views such as these are also echoed in the pithy monikers coined by other social scientists such as Malewski's (2005) 'GenXpat', Nowicka's (2006) 'geographic promiscuity', Petriglieri et al's (2017) 'portable selves' and Polson's (2016) 'privileged mobilities'. Overall, there are considerable arguments from the wider social sciences pointing towards borderless movement and a much more globalized professional workforce.

In PSF literature specifically, considerable attention has been paid to the emergence of transnational firms where geographical mobility is a core element. For example, Suddaby et al. (2007) cite EU laws that 'have reduced mobility barriers between member countries, established common accreditation standards and, generally, have reduced the ability of professional regulators to govern their members' (352). Similarly, Evetts refers to global or supra-national professional associations and 'transnational markets and international divisions of labour' (1995: 772, quoted in Faulconbridge and Muzio, 2012: 142). Central to this increased mobility are professionals who can 'operate globally and (are) disconnected from national regimes whenever possible' (143). This runs counter to other findings such as those found in Barrett et al. (2005), who assert that global practice methodologies are re-interpreted at the local level.

That many arguments surrounding mobility are imputed to global firms without the benefit of extensive empirical substantiation is worthy of note: the globalist rhetoric far outstrips the empirical evidence on which the claims are made. In various studies in the late 1990s for example, Greenwood and Cooper et seq highlighted the increasingly global scope of professional services, charting the growing dominance of the PSF as a transnational actor (see, for example, Cooper and Robson, 2006; Cooper et al., 1998; Greenwood et al., 1999). While not disputing the general direction of travel of the thesis advanced by these studies, it is important to note the empirical limitations of this work. Simply put, the empirical work in these studies was not as transnational as the conceptual arguments which emerged from them. For example, in a study into how PSFs moved into the Russian market post-1989, interviews were undertaken with American, Canadian and British professionals rather than Russians (Cooper et al., 1998). This reflects the longstanding Anglo-Saxon prism through which much of the literature on PSFs specifically, and on professionals more generally, is viewed (Spence et al., 2017). There is clearly a need for more studies in this area that incorporate comparative elements into their research designs (Bryson and Rusten, 2008: 309).

Beaverstock in his detailed empirical study chronicles some of the specific functional reasons for cross-border mobility in GPSFs for a wide range of professional staff (2007: 17). In addition to relatively short-