

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

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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.

Keywords: Labour mobility; Agency; Spatiotemporalities; Migrant worker; Norway; Sweden

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 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 *immobility*).

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 participants responding, and quite often this procedure resulted in a debate among peers followed by supplementary questions from the researchers when deemed necessary. The themes explored in this way mainly revolved around migration and living in Norway, working conditions as agency workers and/or as warehouse workers, past experiences and future prospects. Interviews lasted for one to two hours, they were recorded with the informants’ permission and transcribed verbatim. All informants and workplaces have been anonymized.

The two individual interviews with agency warehouse workers were conducted to understand whether in-depth narratives would add information or a dimension that could not be attained by the focus group interviews. These interviewees (hereafter Kristoffer and Markus) were reached with the help of a colleague acting as middleman. Although individual interviews makes a difference in terms of depth and richness of detail with regard to the individual worker, the information obtained through focus group interviews, i.e. where individuals were reflecting on certain topics in a collegial setting, was deemed to be of similar rather than of radically different quality. Importantly also, the data acquired through focus group interviews was considered sufficient to answer to the overall research questions of the project.

All interviews were analysed manually using a combination of narrative and content analysis (Creswell, 2013). During this procedure, transcripts were read and critically reflected upon in a reiterative process. The analysis was conducted in a manner whereby theory was informing the understanding and interpretation of data, yet data was also informative to theory (Sayer, 2000). This method of analysis resulted in the formulation of two broad and overarching themes: (i) *Norms and expectations surrounding the Swedish worker*, and (ii) *The ‘folding in’ of spatiotemporalities into workers thinking and acting in relation to mobility*. In connection to the second theme, we were able to discern three positions (or situations) that seemed particularly relevant from both an empirical and a philosophical standpoint, meaning that they emerged as especially illustrative to the thinking and acting in relation to mobility among differently positioned and differently situated workers. After this account on methodology, we now turn to the literature in order to comprehend how agency, power and labour mobility are interconnected.

3 Agency in labour geography, labour (im)mobilities and power

Several calls have been made (Herod, 1995, 1997; Castree, 2007; Bergene et al., 2010) urging labour geographers to engage both empirically and theoretically with labour as an active agent in the production of economic geographies. As has been noted by Castree (2007) and Coe and Jordhus-Lier (2011), the concept of agency within labour geography tends to refer to various forms of collective agency, “labour struggles” and “campaigns” rather than individual agency. Nevertheless, growing attention has been directed to the agency of unorganized labour (Rogaly, 2009) as well as to the differentiation of labour agency due to factors such as gender, age, class, ethnicity and so forth (McDowell, 2008, 2011). In response to the challenge put forward by Castree (2007) on the lack of a coherent, theoretical understanding of (labour) agency and its relation to geography, Coe and Jordhus-Lier (2011) propose the re-embedding of agency in arenas such as global production networks (GPNs), the state, community politics and labour intermediaries. In a recent article, Hastings and MacKinnon (2017) pursues this track in an attempt to re-embed agency in the workplace. The present paper continues on this avenue, albeit from a different angle, i.e. by examining how nurses and warehouse workers act and think in relation to mobility and how certain spatiotemporalities come into play in the mobility agency of individual workers.

Strictly speaking, labour mobility occurs in three forms: inter-sectoral, intra-sectoral and through geographical relocation. We might add to this the mere entering into paid labour, hence becoming part of the labour market, and the exiting of the same due to longer or shorter periods of unemployment for instance. Obviously, these mobilities may combine in different ways during the course of a person’s (work) life. In addition, some of them occur in accordance with certain temporalities, for instance due to fluctuating demand patterns. That said, let us now turn to the thorny issue of mobility and power.

First of all, we do not question that workers, individually or collectively, might use their (actual and/or potential) mobility and the “freedom to quit” to resist the intensification of work and unsatisfactory working conditions in the workplace (Smith, 2006). Rather, what is under scrutiny here is any intellectual construct whereby mobility and immobility are perceived as a binary, equating mobility with agency (and power) and immobility with the lack thereof. Furthermore, binary conceptualizations tend to obfuscate the nuances and shadings of phenomena, in this case leading to the disregard of mobility as fragmented, happenstance and erratic. As we attempt to deconstruct and bring slightly new meanings to notions like ‘mobility power’ (Smith, 2006) and ‘mobility strategy’ (Alberti, 2014), we will give a brief account of recent research problematizing the interlinkages of labour mobility and power.

To begin with, the connection between mobility and power is perhaps too simplistic given that migration and mobility can be forced, free or a mixture of both, depending on the circumstances (Gill et al., 2011; Cresswell and Merriman, 2011). Similarly, ‘agency by exit’ (to use the terminology proposed by Kiil and Knutsen, 2016) can be perceived as acts of coping; acts of changing the system on its own terms to attain better conditions; or as concerted, planned and voiced efforts to change power relations and attain sustainable improvements. The outcomes will however vary with context and the sources of power the workers are able to draw on.

The power-relations involved in people’s mobility agency is further considered by Rogaly (2015), as he examines the life histories of three middle-aged men of South Asian heritage who, in their childhood, migrated to the UK. According to Rogaly, power inequalities connected to race, class and gender structure peoples’ options in relation to mobility and fixity. Adopting a critical mobilities approach, Rogaly analyzes the interrelations between mobility and fixity as they appear in the narratives of these men: Sometimes mobility (or fixity) is constrained, sometimes enabled, and sometimes co-present. Likewise, in a study on the (im)mobilities among employees at Japanese inns McMorrnan (2015) demonstrates that mobility and fixity, rather than making up for an either/or condition, co-exist and intersect in highly complex ways in workers’ lives. Indeed, some workers become stuck in the service sector or in particular establishments, while others accumulate the experiences and contacts necessary to ‘move on’ and advance their careers. However, being ‘stuck’ does not automatically and in any simple, taken-for-granted way represent a setback to the individual worker, but may in fact invoke a sense of safety and vice versa, workers who move smoothly through hotels may simultaneously nurture a wish to remain in one place. In a similar vein, Ahmad (2008: 311) shows that Pakistani workers, who have travelled thousands of miles to get to London, become “prisoners by time, locked in an endless cycle of work that confines them to a physical space of a few square metres” at work and in their dwellings.

Furthermore, AuthorZampoukos (XXXX2018) criticizes the underlying assumption in much of the literature on labour mobility and migrant workers which seem to equate mobility with agency, power and progress. This strand of literature typically stresses workers’ ability to strategize around their (geographical and/or intra- or inter-sectoral) mobility to improve their situation, for instance through upward occupational mobility *per se* or by attaining skills that will eventually enable occupational mobility, better working conditions, salaries and so forth (Hagan et al., 2011; Iskander et al., 2013; Alberti, 2014). The overall narrative thus seem to depend on a conceptualization of agency solely emphasizing and recognizing intentional, purposive and projective agency, aimed at improving the individual’s life trajectory, while underplaying elements of fragmentation, happenstance and rambling. Consequently, this portrayal implies a figure knowledgeable and in control of his/her options and, we might add, whom is therefore able to manage his/her future.

4 Agency, space and time - old questions anew

Agency is commonly understood as “intentional, purposive and meaningful actions” (Coe and Jordhus-Lier, 2011: 214), ‘intentional’ thus referring to an act which the agent knows, or believes, will have a particular outcome (Giddens, 1984). Agency is logically inseparable from power through its transformative capacity (Giddens, 1984). Hence, all people have agency, but since people are differently positioned in relation to each other (through socio-spatial hierarchies such as those found in the labour market for instance) and in relation to resources (capital, information, networks and so forth) agency and power is both relational and relative. However, there is another side to man’s being in the world, and that is the habitual aspect of praxis, of doing (Bernstein, 1971; Giddens, 1984), whether understood in terms of socialization or in terms of situated, experiential knowledge. Irrespective of the terms used, this points to agency as having an inherent temporal dimension. For instance, sociologists Emirbayer and Mische (1998: 963) set out to conceptualize human agency as:

A temporally embedded process of social engagement informed by the past (in its habitual aspect), but also oriented toward the future (as a capacity to imagine alternative possibilities) and toward the present (as a capacity to contextualize past habits and future projects within the contingencies of the moment).

Likewise, Longva (1997), in her ethnographic account of migrant workers in Kuwait, stresses the importance of considering the intermingling of past, present and future in any human practice and consciousness:

Whether we know it or not, our present is filled with echoes from our past in the form of patterns of habitualized actions, thoughts and beliefs acquired through early socialization, while the future, our own, our children’s [...] is probably what we really live for. [...] Also, the interpretation of the past as well as the perception of the present are to a large extent colored by the hopes and fears we hold about the future that lies ahead of us (Longva, 1997: 175).

Hence, the past, present and future coincide in any actor and also informs that actor’s agency. While migrants’ existence in Kuwait represented the here-and-now, the “elsewhere-life-world” (Longva, 1997: 173) represented a space of the past, but also one to which their hopes and desires for the future were located. The migrant stories told by Lee and Pratt (2011) further illustrate how concerns for their children’s present and future well-being pushes women from the global South to the global North to take on precarious and low-paid jobs in an attempt to improve their situation short-term as well as long-term. Similarly, in an article on migrant Chinese chefs in Sweden’s restaurant industry, Axelsson et al (2017) demonstrate that accepting and adapting to uncertain and precarious work-time arrangements, harsh work conditions and an intense work-pace, can be part of migrants’ long-term agential projects of

creating a better future for themselves and their dependents. Enduring the precarious present will, presumably and in due time, enable them to realize long-term goals, whether that means applying for a permanent residence permit and accessing full labour market rights, or mainly saving money to build a future for themselves in China.

Time is indubitably of essence, but what can be said about space? Following Allan Pred's (1981) writings on time-geography and everyday life, there are always certain time-geographic realities informing agency. Furthermore, the biography of a person is "ever on the move with her" as:

a person incessantly pushes ahead *in* time-space along the tip of an always advancing now line, where becoming is transformed into passing away, she is at the center of a repeated dialectical interplay between her corporeal actions and her mental activities and intentions, between what she physically does and what she is able to know and think (Pred, 1981:1, emphasis added).

In Pred's understanding, the nexus of man, agency, time and space seem to represent a dual concern where, on the one hand, the corporeal (some)body is on the move *in* evolving time-space, yet on the other hand, this person simultaneously creates his/her own progressive biography. With this in mind, and in line also with the reasoning of Doreen Massey (2005), we argue that time and space need to be thought together, not only to understand the progression of place, but also to understand the life-worlds of people, the choices they make and the actions they take. The decision to 'make a move or not' is relational in the sense that it involves the consideration of scales well beyond that of the individual (the household, the family, the labour market, the community etc.) but also because of the temporalities (the past, present and future) that (migrant) workers recursively and repeatedly must deliberate (AuthorZampoukos, XXXX2018).

Our readings have inspired us to conceptualize what might be termed a 'trialectic of spatiotemporalities' as illustrated by Fig. 1, where space-time is imagined as (i) the here-and-now (now-space), (ii) the then-and-there (past space), and (iii) as an imagined, future space (may-be-space), which may or may not come into realization (Hägerstrand, 1996; Lefebvre, 1991; Longva, 1997).

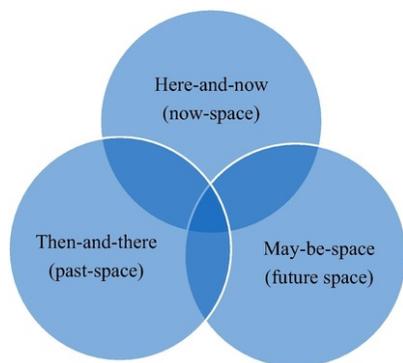


Fig. 1 The trialectics of spatiotemporalities incorporated in the mobility agency of workers.

These spatiotemporal dimensions, we argue, are fundamental to how we orient ourselves as human beings at "the tip of an always advancing now line" (Pred, 1981: 1). The here-and-now is related to the then-and-there; as human beings we connect the dots between our present existence and past experiences; imaginations about the future (space) influence how we cope with the present (space), yet the present (space) is also to some extent decisive for how we imagine the future. These dimensions are thus incorporated in the mobility agency of individual workers, for instance in the case where a warehouse worker is ready to put up with the precarious present, in the hope that this will transcend into a stable and secure future, or when a Swedish nurse decides to leave deteriorating work conditions in Sweden and opts for a better future as a temp nurse in Norway.

5 Being a 'good' Swedish temp (agency) worker

Swedish migrant workers are portrayed both by themselves and by Norwegian employers as 'good workers' (MacKenzie and Forde, 2009; Findlay et al., 2013) with a particularly strong work ethic. This stereotypical portrayal is closely connected to the status as temp workers, since workers are impelled to prove themselves as 'good workers' (Bauder, 2006). In general, the narratives of both nurses and warehouse workers illustrate the conflation of the migrant and the temp position. Adapting to the ideas and expectations on the 'good Swedish temp worker' is key to access the Norwegian labour market and to pursue one's mobility, as in the case with the nurses, but is equally important if one seeks 'a place to stay' (hence *immobility*) as in the case of some of the 'older' warehouse workers.

Among the temp warehouse workers, distinctions are being made by reference to for instance the "Swede shift" and "Norwegian shift", and the overall picture is that Swedes are more willing to work overtime, they are keeping up the work pace, they refrain from calling in sick, hence they make up for the 'better' workers. As one of the warehouse workers testify, this becomes especially evident when you are unable to live up to the expectations

around the ‘good Swedish worker’:

“Two weeks ago, I was on a double shift. I was tired, partly because I have been here for two years, working like this. In the beginning I could get two hours of sleep and work for twelve hours, no problem. But now... it’s not as easy. I do not have the energy anymore....but then there is this thing with being a temp, like if suddenly I stop working overtime, then I become a completely different person [in the eyes of management]. And then I start worrying that maybe they won’t see me as a resource anymore, because I am not doing all that overtime that I used to do, and they don’t really have to fire me, because I am only here on a two week contract, and when these weeks have passed they are not obliged to tell me why my contract is not renewed” (Focus group interview, Company D).

Importantly though, the production and reproduction of the ‘good Swedish worker’ is also connected to the warehouse workplace being a highly competitive environment. First of all, as a temp you are always expected to perform better than regulars, and in reality this means to over perform. Informants also testify as to the practice among employers (client companies) of encouraging temp workers with ‘promises’ of regular positions, which puts pressure on temps to perform at their most. Secondly, all workers are monitored with the help of technology to make sure they do not get slack at their work. Thirdly, teams are competing against each other for bonuses, and team leaders in particular are receiving a bonus when their team is performing well. Bonus systems also entail a certain level of “peer pressure” among workers (agency and regulars alike). Consequently, these three factors result in a here-and-now of discipline and self-discipline to keep the work pace at high speed. This also affects workers’ health as they sometimes strain their bodies in order to ‘keep up the good work’. However, temp workers refrain from reporting sick because again this does not comply with the idea of the ‘good’ Swedish worker, nor will it improve one’s chances of getting a permanent position:

“I think a lot about only having two week’s contract at the time, and I want to...I want to demonstrate that... I want to stay here, I want a regular position and therefore I cannot stay home from work because I’m ill. And that’s... I put my health on risk, only because I wish to have a regular position” (Focus group interview, Company D).

Thus, what this interviewee gives expression to is that the chance of having a different and better future makes it possible to put up with the present, strenuous and even precarious situation. Demonstrating one’s employability is perceived as the ticket to security and stability among warehouse workers whose intention is to stay on.

However, to some people, the here-and-now is experienced as excessively restrictive. Struggling to subsist may pose a true challenge in terms of imagining a different and better future. Early on in his career as a temp worker in Oslo, one of our interviewees, 27 year-old Kristoffer perceived working in Norway as an opportunity close to “gold-digging”, but as he experienced difficulties in getting a permanent job, his perception changed: the gold turned into sand. When asked about his future, this was his response:

Well, I should probably already have started a family. I should’ve had a flat of my own. But how can I support a family, when I’m never sure that there will be enough work...? My future is pitch dark, it seems. It’s been like that, ever since... I mean, in the beginning, when I first arrived here, then I felt like I will be OK, things will solve. But I’ve realized that I am just being exploited here. And people [managers in client companies] tell you things and make promises they do not intend to keep, just to make you show up at work the next day” (Interview, December 2014).

Turning to the nurses, the majority identified as “*guest workers*”, as verified by Anna: “[W]e are temporary guests who are allowed to work in Norway. We are thankful for this [opportunity] because employment and working conditions are better [than in Sweden]”.

The guest worker position involves awareness of one’s place, of ‘keeping a low profile’, and the importance of equality in terms of pay-levels. In some wards, the permanent staff is weary of relating to a constant flow of short-term temp workers, and Eva makes the remark that one is easier accepted as ‘a member of the team’ when temping directly: *“I think there are tendencies that people [permanent staff in the ward] are more positive if one works directly for the hospital. One of the first questions people ask is: ‘So - you work for an agency or for the temp pool?’ Then I can feel that it is more...well...it is more accepted...they think it is more okay if one works for the [hospital’s] temp pool [than a TWA] because then one has the same salary as the permanent staff. And that is the biggest question. They often get shocked that one earns so much more [as a temp nurse] than they do, they get shocked and upset”*.

Since the majority of the temp nurses tend to draw a sharp line between work (in Norway) and life (in Sweden), it is taken-for-granted among TWAs, client hospitals/wards and nurses alike that when in Norway you work hard and try to get as many shifts as possible. Thomas sometimes felt the pressure to take on more shifts: *“One could say yes or no to shifts. But of course...if you were going to be there [in Norway] for two weeks, and had planned three days off... Well, the idea [from the part of the employer] was and is that when you go there, you go there to work. It is not a holiday. I know of some people who had three-four days off, and they were not so happy with this at the agency. They never forced anyone, but of course they [the TWA] pay for accommodation, travel and everything, so they expect that you at least work full time”*.

Although nurses have leverage to attain improvements by voice and exit (Kiil and Knutsen, 2016) due to their competence and being in demand, they seem to take a subordinate position in the Norwegian workplace to “fit” with it, and to make sure that they continue to get new assignments in good workplaces. Regardless of their intention vis-à-vis mobility, both nurses and warehouse workers need to adapt to norms and expectations associated with the “good Swedish worker” in order to pursue their mobility and/or to realize their imagined, future spaces. For nurses, aligning with such expectations means that they are ensured new assignments in good workplaces. For warehouse

workers complying with the norm of the hard-working, over performing Swede is what may accord them a permanent position and ‘a place to stay’.

In the following we will take a closer look at nurses and warehouse workers agency in relation to mobility, in an attempt to further disentangle the relationship between mobility, agency and power.

6 Temping to do a good job and get well paid for it

While most of the nurses we have interviewed used TWAs as an entry point for work in the Norwegian health sector, Anna’s career in Norway started as a directly employed temp nurse. Anna, who is single and has an adult child, is a surgical nurse specialist in her early fifties. She used to be employed at a Swedish hospital, but in the early 2000s, she resigned from her permanent job in Sweden: *“The working conditions were bad, wages were bad, and the working hours were inconvenient, and there was a lot of strain and stress. There was a lot of restructuring [in the Swedish hospital sector] going on as well which affected both the working environment and the patients. And I felt that...I didn’t want to contribute to that. I felt that I wanted to get a job somewhere else where I could do what I am good at and get paid well for it”*.

All nurses interviewed for this study referred to better wages and improved working conditions as a strong motivator for turning to the Norwegian labour market. Because of concerns regarding work conditions, professionalism and patients, Anna felt compelled to leave her permanent position at a Swedish hospital and temping in Norway was perceived as the best available solution. Her narrative raises important questions around mobility, agency and power. The decision to resign from a permanent job because of deteriorating work conditions and instead engage in temping abroad can hardly be perceived as an unbridled, pure sign of power and progress. Rather it points to agency as being at once an expression of power and adaptation.

Once in Norway, Anna soon decided to shift from direct temping to TWA temping as this would give her better opportunities to bargain for higher wages, especially as specialist nurses are in short supply, but also in terms of skills development. Essentially, this means that she is now able to use TWAs and her mobility to control and arrange work and life in a favorable manner. After all these years, Anna is knowledgeable of the ‘system as a whole’ and is therefore a good bargainer. For instance, receiving an SMS or e-mail from a TWA about an interesting vacancy, she could call another TWA about the same vacancy and ask for higher wages and better employment conditions. In fact, she always checks the totality of wages and employment conditions carefully. Some TWAs may not pay their part of the pension saving and with some of them it is difficult to get overtime. Overtime is important to Anna, because of the premium paid.

Anna is now acting the ‘economic (wo)man: Her knowledge about how things work together with her market power, being a specialist nurse in a tight labour market, puts her in control of both where, when and how much she will work. Her mobility is enabled by her personal circumstances, being a specialist nurse, single with an adult child, and the much wider spatial and structural labour market context, including the current differences between Sweden and Norway regarding working conditions, pay levels, etc., as well as the possibility of using TWAs as to strategically ‘pick out the cherries’. Under the present circumstances, Anna is in command of this space, *i.e.* the nexus of TWAs and client hospitals, and by controlling this space she is controlling time as well (work-time and leisure-time, present and future). She earns well, she is able to advance her skills, her work-life balance has improved, and she is able to maintain her life in Sweden. In a way, her present (space) is divided between work in Norway and life in Sweden, thus the crossing of national borders means that the boundaries between work and spare-time is better preserved.

7 Temping to travel - travel to temping

Turning to the warehouse workers, their move to Norway is largely motivated by youth unemployment in Sweden, which by far has exceeded that of other European countries for many years ([Statistics Sweden, 2013](#)). In essence then, the decision to move to Norway is made in order to access the Norwegian labour market, which is considered easier to get a footing in and which offers higher salaries. These young, flexible, mobile and largely unorganized workers hold a liminal position ([Underthun, 2015](#)) at the threshold of the labour market. They are less educated and less experienced which altogether makes them replaceable and easy to exploit.

Apart from the general perception that it is much easier to find a job in Norway than in Sweden, one commonality among the stories told by temp warehouse workers is that they turn to the Norwegian labour market and TWAs with the short term-goal of earning money in order to travel the world. “Drifting around” for a couple of years is a common thing among young adults, and many of the warehouse workers have thus been circulating both as temp workers to and from Norway, and as tourists. This kind of “vagrant mobility” ([Cresswell, 2011](#)) among young adults may be socially accepted, but eventually these mobile subjects are expected - and expect themselves - to settle permanently. However, this may be easier said than done, as will be demonstrated.

Markus, a 25-year-old, is a typical representative of this group of migrant temp warehouse workers whom, at this stage, views temp work not primarily as a springboard to a permanent position, but merely as a means to pursue other goals in life. Temp work fits well with his current lifestyle as a ‘carefree, juvenile drifter’, vagabonding between various work-places and rental flats in Oslo, interspersed with travels throughout Asia and Europe, and shorter periods back at his parents’ home in Sweden.

Although the work is physically demanding and stressful, he can cope with it because it is only temporary in-between-travels. Moreover, the travelling allows him to reproduce himself. Markus is not particularly concerned about his future. He says he will return to Sweden to settle and start a business when he is done with the vagabonding. Yet he does express a certain worry regarding the risk of being injured at work, hence giving expression to both

hopes and fears about what the future may hold for him.

Some of the nurses included in this study also testify to be engaged in this “vagabonding before settling”. Eva, is a nurse anesthetist in her late twenties, who started to work in Norway in 2011, after graduating a general nurse. As a direct temp she can decide precisely how much and when to work. The freedom she gets from working as a temp in Norway has become important to her, since it makes it possible for her to travel the world. She wants to “drift around” between casual jobs for two or three more years in order to travel and do the things she wants to do before settling down in Sweden and starting a family. Like with the other nurses, her skills and her market power puts her in control of both her mobility and flexibility. This also entails the sensation of being in charge of both her present and her future (space). One could claim that Markus too is in control of his mobility, because of the way he perceives of both the present and his future (space). His youth, his view on temping as temporary, and the fact that no strings are yet attached, makes him perceive of his present (space) as endurable and his future (space) as open, undefined and largely hopeful.

8 Lost in transition?

The overall tendency among the temp warehouse workers included in our sample is to perceive temporary contracts as quite secure, probably due to the fact that many of them have been temping at the same company for several years. At the same time however, they are painfully aware of the restrictions that temp work means to their short-term as well as long-term existence.

“There is a limit to what you can do when you are on a temporary contract. At the back of your head, you’re always aware of the risk that you find yourself without a job [...] I cannot have a bank loan and I cannot buy an apartment because I have no regular position with a steady income [...]. (Focus group interview, Company D).

The precarious present (space) is restrictive, and being in such a situation clearly means that investments usually made to ‘build a future’ is put on hold (Ahmad, 2008). Even though many of them have been working as temps for years, their stay in Norway is commonly imagined as temporary, as illustrated by the expression “living in a suitcase” and the habit of sharing flats to save money. The focus group interviews gave expression to a jargon where workers made jokes about the time they had spent as temps in the warehouse industry, the time they had spent in Norway and how their aspirations had changed over time. Yet they also made more earnest remarks on these topics and on the migrant experience of being in-between countries. This is consistent also with Longva’s (1997) description of how guest workers live in and negotiate between two parallel life-worlds, one related to Kuwait and the other ‘elsewhere’, usually denoting migrants’ home countries.

Circular migration and short-term goals were quite often replaced by the intention to stay on at the current workplace and in Norway, at least for a couple of years. The following quote made by a 26-year-old woman illustrates this:

“I came here five years ago and my intention then was to stay for a year, only to earn some money so that I could travel. After that, I had planned to go back to Sweden and study. But it did not really turn out exactly the way I had planned. It’s easier to get a job here, easy money and stuff. But we’ve talked about giving this another year and then quit. Perhaps return to Sweden and do something with our lives” (Focus group interview, Company C, December 2014).

This statement clearly demonstrates how the spatiotemporal dimensions mentioned earlier coincide and are incorporated in workers’ acting and thinking in relation to mobility, as this temp warehouse worker is presently holding a liminal, precarious position (Underthun, 2015) in-between contracts and countries, in-between what has passed and what is yet to come, tentatively placing the future, ‘real life’ in Sweden. Although this person may once have been in control of her mobility, meaning she came to Norway to escape unemployment in Sweden and to “dig some gold” so that she could travel, her current situation seem to be rather ambiguous. Furthermore, it seems clear that objectives and aspirations may change over the course of time and that not everyone has a clear, predefined and definite understanding of what to do with their (work) lives. On the contrary, some people seem to make up their pathways as they go, which is why we need to scrutinize notions like ‘mobility power’ and ‘mobility strategy’.

9 Concluding discussion

Swedish temp nurses and warehouse workers are obviously differently positioned in the flexible, transnational labour market. As has been demonstrated, some migrant workers (nurses in particular) may act the economic (wo)man, while others may think of their existence as agency workers in Norway as a temporary solution in between travels and before they start their ‘real life’ in Sweden. Some (warehouse workers in particular) may wish to leave a peripatetic existence, but find themselves in an ambiguous position and in a situation where the options are uncertain. Irrespective of their positionalities in terms of skills and market power, both nurses and warehouse workers need to prove themselves employable, “good workers” (MacKenzie and Forde, 2009; Findlay et al., 2013) in order to pursue their objectives, dreams and aspirations.

As stated earlier, labour mobility comes in many forms. To illustrate how these mobilities may intersect (and sometimes interchange) and how they give expression to relative power, we can think of a temp nurse going back and forth between Sweden and Norway (geographical relocation) to work in the Norwegian health sector (intra-sectoral mobility) for periods of two weeks at a time. At the end of each temping period, she returns to her “normal life” in Sweden, including her permanent, part-time position in a Swedish hospital. Her mobility between the countries and various workplaces is facilitated by TWAs helping out with the necessary paper work, and paying for travels and

accommodation. Being in demand on both sides of the border positions her to pick and choose among several employers, TWAs and health sector employers alike. The nurse's market power reinforces her mobility, yet at the same time her mobility is what permits her the liberty of choice. Thus mobility and power, or more precisely empowerment *by* mobility and mobility *as* power, becomes intertwined.

Another example with relevance to our study is the young, unemployed Swedish man without post-gymnasium education who, in lack of better options, decides to go to Norway to find employment. Once in Norway, he is engaged as a temporary agency worker and takes on a vast series of physically demanding, manual jobs, the duration of which ranges from a couple of hours to a couple of weeks. He is not being cared for by TWAs in the same manner as the nurse, meaning that he is not provided with free lodgings and travels, and because of this he is forced to make a life for himself in Norway. This places him in a paradoxical space, where his mobility at one scale and in one area of life (international migration, mobility in the labour market) is combined with immobility at another scale (settled – at least temporarily – in Norway) (Ahmad, 2008; McMorran, 2015). Although being mobile both geographically and between sectors, and although his mobility enables him to balance at the threshold of the Norwegian labour market, his mobility is far from an absolute, pure sign of power and progress. Rather his mobility is enforced, and what he really wishes for is to be permanently hired by one single employer who accords him just work-time arrangements, just payments, the possibility of being on sick-leave and so forth. Hence, he is striving for fixity and security.

Mobility agency evolve as workers negotiate 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. The here-and-now (now-space) of warehouse workers is here understood as the everyday competitive and precarious situation where one has to prove oneself (re)employable almost on a day-to-day basis (thus relating to the habitual aspect of agency). This involves the acceptance of “peer pressures” to attain bonuses, submitting oneself to technologies of surveillance, over performing as to keep the work pace at high speed, refraining from calling in sick etc. Moreover, warehouse workers are forced to make a life for themselves in Norway. This often translates into ‘living in a suitcase’, *i.e.* moving between shared flats with the aim of saving money in accordance with the logic of being in Norway ‘only temporary’. Hence, they become settled in the sense that whilst in Norway, both work and leisure takes place here, and to save money, they do not travel back and forth with the same frequency as Swedish nurses. The here-and-now (now-space) of nurses corresponds to a situation where ‘knowing one’s place is important, meaning for instance that one should not make comparisons to how work is organized in Sweden, and preferably engage in direct temping since that guarantees pay-levels equal to native nurses with regular positions. However, nurses’ existence is marked by a spatial division between work in Norway and life in Sweden.

The then-and-there (past space) is conceptualized in terms of previous experiences, be that of deteriorating work conditions in a Swedish hospital, or a situation where trying ones’ luck as an agency worker in Norway was deemed the best option within reach. To continue, the imagined, future spaces of workers revolve around short-term objectives as well as long-term dreams and aspirations. For instance one of the nurses makes use of the freedom and earnings from temping to travel the world, but imagines herself settled in Sweden when the time is right to start a family. At other instances, the future does not appear as bright and/or as clear, but is rather imagined as insecure, unforeseeable and tentative. This applies to agency warehouse workers in particular.

Workers’ mobility agency is relational in the sense that it involves the simultaneous consideration of these spatiotemporal dimensions; the here-and-now, the then-and-there and the may-be-future. As our findings from the study of warehouse workers have demonstrated, a person may accept occupational uncertainty, degrading working conditions and a precarious situation overall, *in the hope* that this will transcend into a more stable and secure future (see also Axelsson et al., 2017). However, the opposite may be true as well, *i.e.* a person may remain in the precarious here-and-now, because it is so restrictive that it becomes hard to escape from it and hard also to imagine a better future (Ahmad, 2008). Importantly though, mobility across borders may also entail improvements in terms of work conditions, salaries, work-life balance etc., as demonstrated by the interview with surgical nurse specialist Anna. Compared to warehouse workers, nurses are better equipped to control both their present and to some extent their future space just by being in demand and by spatially dividing work in Norway and life in Sweden.

Our findings also point to the plasticity of workers’ mobility agency, with workers who make up their pathways as they go and/or as circumstances change. Therefore, we propose that the intentional, purposive agency as emphasized by the notion of ‘strategy’ (in ‘mobility strategy’ for instance) needs to be complemented by a conceptualization of agency that includes what we term (*erratic*) *probing*, meaning that workers objectives and motives may alter over the course of time and as circumstances change, and that not all workers have a clear and definite understanding of what to do with their (work) lives. Ultimately, this research suggests that labour mobility may be strategic and a sign of power, but not always and everywhere and not in any pure sense. Even the surgical nurse specialist’s mobility comes with a fly in the ointment as she feels compelled to leave a regular position in Sweden because of deteriorating working conditions. In final conclusion, we would urge scholars’ to further explore the experiential, spatiotemporal co-ordinates (Ahmad, 2008) of workers – migrant or not – and to continue to address the ambiguities and complexities involved in the mobility-power relationship.

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