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The importance of friends: social life challenges for foreign physicians in Southern Sweden

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ABSTRACT
The article connects the fields of work/non-work research with the research on social integration of migrants. It is based on in-depth interviews with foreign physicians in the south of Sweden which explored their work/non-work experiences and their subjective perceptions of managing work, family, social and private domains of life. Based on individual reflections of social life as experienced in the workplace, in the locations of everyday life and transnationally, the analysis does not pursue the existence and composition of social networks but focuses on non-instrumental aspects of social life and explores their significance for high-skilled migrants’ own sense of integration. The findings suggest that migrants who are privileged in terms of education and employment still face extensive challenges in the social domain of life, especially with regard to close friendships. The findings furthermore suggest that social integration is a process that is influenced by place, time and individual life trajectories and therefore cannot be truthfully accounted for by looking at the numbers and ethnic composition of a migrant’s social relations. It is the quality of relations – notably friendships – that matters most.

RÉSUMÉ
Cet article associe les champs de la recherche sur le travail/non-travail avec la recherche sur l’intégration sociale des migrants. Il est basé sur des entretiens approfondis avec des médecins étrangers basés dans le sud de la Suède, explorant leurs expériences professionnelles/non-professionnelles ainsi que leurs perceptions subjectives de la gestion de la vie professionnelle, familiale, sociale et privée. Fondée sur des réflexions individuelles sur la vie sociale vécue sur le lieu de travail, dans les lieux de la vie quotidienne et au niveau transnational, cette analyse ne cherche pas à étudier l’existence et la composition des réseaux sociaux, mais se concentre sur les aspects non-instrumentaux de la vie sociale et explore leur signification pour le sentiment d’intégration des migrants hautement qualifiés. Les résultats suggèrent que, malgré les privilèges en termes d’éducation et d’emploi, les migrants doivent encore faire face à des défis

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Highly skilled migrants: beyond employment

In the context of globalisation of labour markets and the emergence of knowledge-based economies, highly skilled migrants not only represent a workforce supplement, but they contribute significantly to employers’ expertise in the competitive global market (e.g. Schittenhelm & Schmidtke, 2010). Defined as migrants who possess a university degree and/or have extensive working experience in a certain field (Iredale, 2001, p. 8), highly skilled migrants’ human capital is sought after in both the private and public sectors. To respond to the high demand for professionals in sectors like health care (OECD, 2015), the recruitment of foreign experts is praised both on national and transnational (EU) levels, and it is supported by the discourse of mobility-as-opportunity also on the individual level in terms of financial gains and career development.

As employment is generally seen as an essential feature of successful integration of migrants in the host society, also the studies on highly skilled migrants predominantly focus on matters related to employment and workplace (e.g. Benson-Rea & Rawlinson, 2003; Liversage, 2009; Madziva, McGrath, & Thondhlana, 2016; Nohl, Schittenhelm, Schmidtke, & Weiβ, 2006; Schittenhelm & Schmidtke, 2010; Somerville & Walsworth, 2010). However, even if successful employment integration is indisputably important for high-skilled migrants’ integration in the place of residence, a growing body of academic literature shows that this rests not only on professional but also on non-work-related factors. As noted by Favell, Feldblum, and Smith (2007, p. 21), high-skilled mobility based on ‘universally’ useful skills and talent does not ‘remove the challenge of incorporation’. Being engaged with ‘day-to-day banalities of grounded experiences’ (Ryan & Mulholland, 2014a, p. 592), migrants encounter challenges related to foreign language, socio-cultural norms and personal contacts (Butcher, 2009; Ho, 2011; Nagel, 2005; Povrzanović Frykman & Öhlander, 2018). Consequently, there is a need for a more complex understanding of factors that contribute to attracting, integrating and retaining high-skilled migrants in the face of increased competition for this labour.

Individuals’ work/non-work experiences have been of academic interest in different areas, such as business, corporate social responsibility and stress management studies, most often in connection with issues of an individual’s work and/or life satisfaction, stress and related health problems (e.g. Muhonen, 2012). The interest in work/non-work experiences of migrants has therefore been reserved mostly for the high-skilled ones, yet rarely approached by migration scholars, but rather by those interested in human-resource management and career development (Ackers, 2004; Oliver, 2012; Richardson, 2009; Richardson & Zikic, 2007; Robertson, 2010).
The social aspects of highly skilled migrants’ lives have rarely featured as the main focus of attention (e.g. Oishi, 2012) and it was only as of late that the topic of highly skilled migrants’ social networks, their purpose for migrant integration and the resources they provide received more academic attention (e.g. Phan, Banerjee, Deacon, & Tarak, 2015; Plöger & Becker, 2015; Raghuram, Henry, & Bornat, 2010; Ryan, 2011; Ryan & Mulholland, 2014b). Main area of interest has thus been, how social contacts might be useful to migrants, as the concept of social networks is tightly connected to research on social capital and other forms of capital that interpersonal and community networks create (Depalo, Faini, & Venturini, 2006; Van Tubergen, 2006, p. 32). Less attention has been given however to the non-instrumental aspects of highly skilled migrants’ social life, such as socialising for the sake of ‘real, close friendship’ as differentiated from ‘opportunist’ networks that are not necessarily sources of friendships (Ryan, 2011, p. 722; see also Morosanu, 2013).

This article pursues such non-instrumental aspects of social life and argues for their importance with respect to social integration of high-skilled migrants. The article is based on the results of a pilot study among foreign physicians in Southern Sweden that explored their personal experiences in work, family, social and private domains of life. It focuses on their experiences within the social domain by capturing their social life as consisting of friends, colleagues and acquaintances (Languilaire, 2009, p. 428) and their subjective feeling of integration that is created through a variety of social connections both locally and transnationally.

In Sweden, the available data shows that in 2014, about 27% of all practicing physicians were educated abroad, most of them being recruited from other EU/EEA countries (Socialstyrelsen, 2016, p. 14, 2017, p. 18). Whereas several studies dealing with foreign physicians in Sweden have been conducted, they deal mainly – as often their international counterparts do (see e.g. Bornat, Henry, & Raghuram, 2009; Harris, 2011; Shuval, 2000) – with specific aspects of these professionals’ employment integration like the licensing process of non-EU physicians (Wolanik Boström & Öhlander, 2012), the role of migrant doctors within the medical working environment (Salmonsson, 2014; Salmonsson & Mella, 2013) and the intercultural aspects of their working experiences (Andersson, 2010; Berbyuk Lindström, 2008; Berbyuk, Allwood, & Edebäck, 2005). This article contributes to the existing research on foreign physicians (or ‘doctors’) in Sweden by employing work/non-work approach in order to reveal and understand the challenges they experience in the social domain. At the same time, it contributes to the knowledge on work/non-work issues by emphasising their transnational dimensions (Povrzanović Frykman, Bunescu, & Mozetič, 2016). The transnational perspective (Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2004) has been less prominent in the field of work-life research (Duxbury & Higgins, 2002; Kinman & Jones, 2008; Kinman & Wray, 2013; Languilaire, 2009; Muhonen, 2012) as it often focuses on work–family relations in the place of everyday life.

**Theoretical framework: networks and friendships in work and non-work domains of life**

Inspired by Languilaire (2009), we differentiate between the work domain and family, social and private domains as non-work domains of life. Work domain refers to tasks carried out in the context of an employment relationship, while family domain relates to individuals’ family relations and private domain to the activities they do on their own
Social domain refers to social life as consisting of friends, colleagues and acquaintances (Languilaire, 2009, p. 428), where friends have a prominent role of “enabling” belongingness and social support (Languilaire & Carey, 2017, p. 102). Work/non-work experiences are grasped as subjective perceptions of the interrelations between these domains – as a ‘continued negotiation of a set of practices which is likely to fluctuate on a daily, weekly or on a more long-term basis due to employees’ changing circumstances’ (Wattis, Standing, & Yerkes, 2013, p. 6). These circumstances may refer e.g. to the life course, to moving to another country, or to changed family circumstances. We therefore see work/non-work experiences as an ongoing process of ‘managing’ (Languilaire, 2009) which does not depend only on macro structural and institutional factors but also on inherently subjective micro forces of adaptation (see e.g.Ackers, 2004; Kinman & Jones, 2008; Zikic, Bonache, & Cerdin, 2010).

This approach recognises the diversity of work/non-work experiences as they evolve in particular individual, organisational and societal contexts (Kossek, 2015; Languilaire, 2009; Zikic et al., 2010) and in a transnational framework that is crucial to understanding migrants’ experiences (Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2004). It also allows for exploring how the migrants themselves experience the changes in the social domain of their lives over time (Schans, 2009).

The lens of work and non-work domains of life allows us to account for the perceived quality of social relations, instead of employing the integration lens directed towards the composition of individuals’ social domain (as in the distinction of ethnic and other social ties and networks). Also a quantified description of one’s social life in terms of ‘having’ a certain number of friends and acquaintances does not seem adequate for capturing people’s lived realities. We reach beyond the pre-conceptions measurable through indicators of what it takes to be ’socially integrated’ and who is actually important for individuals to socialise with in order to feel socially integrated.

Even if the term ‘friend’ can cover a wider range of close informal relationships and there is no common agreement on any kind of qualitative scale, our findings are in line with research that shows that friendship is perceived as centrally important aspect of people’s lives (Cronin, 2014). As elaborated by Cronin (2014), significance of friendship appears to lie not solely in its status as a chosen relationship, or even as a support mechanism. Pursuing how emotions are produced intersubjectively between friends, Cronin claims that friendships provide intersubjective spaces in which emotions are created and shaped.

We therefore find useful Ray Pahl’s (2000) conceptualisation of friendship as the pillar of social life that is an end in its own right. According to him, friendships are ‘basic garments that surround one’s social self’ (p. 73) and constitute ‘the highest and best quality in our personal relationships’ (p. 43). He claims that they are of crucial importance for individual’s self-esteem and well-being (p. 135), and are thus a part of ‘good life’ (p. 73).

Though still underexplored (see e.g. Mand, 2006; Phillips & Potter, 2009), research on migrants’ friendships suggests that they are an extremely important component for individuals in satisfying deep personal and emotional needs (Hendrickson, Rosen, & Aune, 2011). In the context of mobility and migration, friendship is ‘a means through which people across the world maintain intimate social relations both proximate and at a distance’ (Bunnell, Yea, Peake, Skelton, & Smith, 2012, p. 490). However, the creation of new friendships and the cultivation of old ones seem to be highly problematic (Marcu, 2012; Morosanu, 2013; Phillips & Potter, 2009). While suggesting a rather fragmented
and disconcerting picture of migrants’ social life (Morosanu, 2013), research has also shown that making new friends plays ‘a crucial role in mitigating the worst aspects of migration’ and that friendships ‘can be understood within the emotional labour of mobility’ (Ryan, 2015, p. 1671; see also Hendrickson et al., 2011).

**Method and material**

In the second half of 2015, 16 semi-structured interviews were conducted with international physicians in Skåne, a ‘knowledge economy’ region in the south of Sweden that aims to attract international professionals, including those that are in high demand in health care and medical research and industry. This region is marked by the presence of international institutions of higher education and Skåne University Hospital with approximately 8000 employees. There is a pronounced emphasis on high-tech clinics, and the corresponding need for physicians is high.

Our research participants included 10 male and 6 female physicians; most of them were labour migrants, but some were marriage migrants and refugees. Three were retired after a long career in Skåne. Twelve came from a European country (Czechoslovakia, Germany, Bosnia, Bulgaria, Denmark, Greece, Poland and Slovakia), and four were originally from Iraq. They were between 29 and 72 years old and had lived in Sweden for between 4 and 47 years. Thirteen participants were married, one was divorced and two were single. Except for one, all married interviewees had children, as did the one who was divorced.

Our sample is rather diverse in terms of how and when did the interviewees come to Sweden, where do they originally come from, how old they are or what is their family status, as well as at which stage of their career they are. Though these characteristics indeed influence individuals’ perceptions and experiences of work/non-work, and create considerable differences between them, the broad nature of the sample is of no disadvantage for a study which made the first explorative steps in direction of work/non-work experiences of highly skilled migrants, rather than discussing the differences among them. ‘Explorative’ in this context means that we were interested in personal narratives, with the intention of exploring the meanings our research participants attribute to their work/non-work experiences.

Each interview lasted for an average of one hour. Fourteen were conducted in English, and two were conducted in Swedish and translated into English. The transcripts provide for about 240 pages of original material: thick subjective narratives of the work/non-work experiences of these highly qualified migrants. The depictions of individual experiences and perceptions cannot be generalised, however, they provide an insight into the complexity of the integration issues pertinent to those migrants who assumingly face the fewest barriers to integration (Favell et al., 2007; Povrzanović Frykman & Öhlander, 2018).

The interview guide prompted the participants to talk about their lives in Sweden, as well as their connections to their home countries and other countries in which they previously lived. They brought up topics that they found important to mention with regard to their professional trajectory, family life, other social connections and leisure time and holidays. It is important to note that we did not specifically ask about satisfaction with social life – the lack of satisfaction was highlighted by the participants themselves.

The interview material makes it clear that our participants are truly devoted to their profession and that this (and the fact that many commute) demands careful time-
management and adjustments by family members. Most participants perceive themselves as at least partly socially integrated in their local contexts in Sweden. They have acquaintances among international migrants or among people coming from the same national or ethnic background, and some socialise also with Swedish people. Most of those who have just a couple of friends in Sweden do not mind that the number is low; it is the quality of relations that matters. However, the interviewed doctors claim that they encounter(ed) challenges in creating their social life and tend to feel insufficiently socially included in their living surroundings in Skåne. These challenges are described as tightly connected to the quality of their social contacts in the place they migrated to but also to the time that passed since migrating. Not fully satisfactory socialising in their places of work and life in general, and with ethnic Swedes in particular, is perceived as a problem by most research participants, regardless of their country of origin and reason for migration. Only the retired ones, who have been in Sweden the longest, were fully satisfied with their social contacts and ways of socialising.

In order to analyse the material, the thematic narrative analysis was implemented. It is a qualitative method widely recognised as insightful when exploring the meanings of experiences. Moreover, it is seen as particularly useful for ‘revealing insights into the meaning and emotionality of migrant friendship formations and the efforts required to sustain these relationships over time’ (Ryan, 2015, p. 1666).

The transcripts were coded either manually or with the assistance of Dedoose, an online tool used to analyse qualitative material. The coding was done both within and across all transcripts, to identify specificities of individual narratives as well as the themes shared by all participants. Three main themes have been identified concerning experiences within the social domain; they pertain to the quality of social contacts, their changes over time, and the challenges of creation a social life in Sweden. These themes organise the discussion of material in the sections below.

Quality of social contacts: a constant comparison

Our material confirms the observation made by other researchers (e.g. Cronin, 2014; Magnusson & Osanami Törngren, 2014) that the workplace is often an important venue for meeting new people and creating social contacts. However, several interviewees said that no closer ties evolve out of their work connections. When speaking of the perceived quality of social relations, our research participants presented friendships as an essential element of their social life. They differentiate between friendly contacts with colleagues (see e.g. Cronin, 2014) and the quality of a personal relationship that qualifies as friendship in the sense of ‘real, close friendship’ mentioned above. They use the notion of friends for people who are emotionally close or with whom they have more regular leisure activities. That is in line with Morosanu’s (2013) description of friendships as characterised by long-term engagement, frequent interaction, shared experiences and affection.

A female doctor in her 40s, who has lived in Sweden for almost 15 years, pointed out the following:

I am not an unsocial person, but I found it, I find it difficult to really integrate. Socially. In Sweden. Even though we [her husband and she] have friends, you know, we meet, we have friends, and also Swedish friends, but to get that closeness that you have with friends from your studies, especially, or from school, like these old, true friends, whom you can,
you can feel you can, you know, you can do whatever, and they will always be your friends. They will not judge you. You know? They will just be there. These types of people are hard to find.

Later on in the interview she observed that despite having nice colleagues, she has struggled to establish a more friendship-like bond with them. She offered several explanations for the lack of close contacts with her colleagues, one being the physical distance of her home and the other one being the fact that making friends in a new location may be challenging because of the lack of time. As observed by Ryan (2015, p. 1672), migrants’ new friendships ‘may not have sufficient time to become deeply embedded and enduring’. Our interviewee went out with some colleagues, had a beer or a glass of wine, but they hardly found time for a more sustained socialising:

(I)t was really nice, and we said, ‘you should come for dinner’, and we chat, or we come for dinner. We tried two or three times to find a time, and then things just ran out in sand again.

She stressed the generally present issue of time poverty (Warren, 2003), noted also in terms of the lack of time for socialising in the workplace:

I have actually one colleague I used to spend more time with. She studied in [the interviewee’s country of origin], but is Swedish, but she lives in [the interviewee’s place of work], and we haven’t seen each other privately. (...) Sometimes we hardly see each other in the clinic and find time to talk. And that would be really nice, to have that feeling. There’s that private connection also, not just work connection, to feel personal connection.

The differentiation between friendly, albeit fleeting, contact with colleagues and the quality of a personal relationship that qualifies as friendship is central also to several other interviewees’ narratives. A male doctor in his 30s pointed to a dimension of time different from the aforementioned time poverty, namely, to the matter of one’s age, the moment in the life cycle: he has difficulty in creating tight relations as an adult, especially since he already has his close friends. In his case, keeping in touch with close friends is not difficult since they live in a country neighbouring Sweden, in which this interviewee has spent his youth. His socialising with friends is a part of his regular transnational practices. That is the case also with a young male doctor who has lived in Sweden for almost 5 years. For him the transnational perspective on friendship is equalled with transnational practice, namely, regular ‘travels home’ in another, more far away EU country:

I travel back home a lot when I have free weeks or weekends, so that’s why I try to fly or travel back home just to meet my friends, do the ordinary things which I can’t do here because I don’t have the Swedish friends.

Our material makes it quite obvious that a migrant-specific ‘constant comparison’ is at work in the course of narrative production in interview situations. Reflections on the satisfaction with social life refer not only to life in Sweden but also to life in other countries, most often to the countries of origin where the interviewees were coming of age. The general insight that ‘the quality of the friendly act is often perceived only in retrospect, when the context can be seen in perspective’ (Pahl, 2000, p. 24) appears as particularly poignant for migrants, as friends back home are often referred to as the closest and tightest. Indeed, they represent an important pillar of life, providing unconditional emotional support, sense of security and continuity. As observed by Pahl, people who
are changing their life circumstances ‘may come to rely on their friends to provide support and confirmation of their enduring identities’ (Pahl, 2000, p. 69). The feeling of dissatisfaction, however, occurs when one understands that true friends are needed close by, that one cannot rely on support and advice of friends who only pay short visits and with whom one can only talk over the phone; who are no longer a part of one’s everyday life.

Changes over time

Louise Ryan (2015, p. 1672) observed that ‘the composition and structure of networks may ebb and flow over time as people drift in and out of one’s life’ and that this is ‘particularly acute for migrants’. For example, the female doctor quoted above, who for a long time relied strongly on friends who live in her country of origin, decided at one point that she had to create a social network in Sweden. She started a women’s circle in the small town she moved to some years earlier:

A few years ago I found myself in a situation when I felt like I needed to really find a network here to survive emotionally with all the things going on in my life. And I have to have it here. I cannot rely on friends coming and talking on the phone. I really need to be more active and create these really deep personal relationships with people whom I can trust. I should have done this much earlier. (...) I started a women’s circle, actually, where I live. (...) And I also felt like it was good because I felt it didn’t matter whether I have an accent or not. It’s like a really big acceptance in that group. (...) Since I started that I felt better.

At the same time, this doctor observed that even if close friends from her home country stay emotionally close, they are not a part of her everyday life in her present-day local contexts, making the connection looser and looser.

Similarly, a 40-year-old male doctor who has lived in Sweden for almost 15 years describes his hometown-based friendships in terms of ‘true’ friendships and of changes over time that occur due to migration:

It’s difficult, … I wouldn’t say you lose them [friends], but it’s … In the beginning you have a lot of contact, and then … it’s not that much anymore. Maybe in the beginning it’s once every two months and then once every half year. Suddenly it’s just once a year, and suddenly, you didn’t hear from each other for two years. I have a lot of friends like that, but, strangely, if you call them again after three years, ‘hello I’m in [his town of origin]’, then you meet them and then it’s like it was before.

Not everyone’s friends from the home country remain what Pahl (2000, p. 72) calls ‘fossil friends’, i.e. people who were particularly important at one stage of life and are presently not a part of an individual’s active personal community, but may be ‘reactivated’ and the friendship would carry on ‘just where it left off’. Another doctor in his 40s, from another EU country, explained the gradual dissolution of his and his wife’s friendships in the home country during a decade of their life in Sweden:

All of the contacts we have in [the country of origin] more or less disappeared. In a way. Because, when we moved here, of course, we called and talked, and we were visiting [the country of origin]. We met and so on. But with time, one could see that actually it was us who did everything to keep the contact. It was us who called. It was us who contacted them when we were in [country of origin] and so on. And we stopped doing that. It was quiet.
Indeed, keeping social contacts in the home country is not without friction; it requires the effort of travelling back home, managing time, and/or receiving visits. The consciousness of the effort involved is enhanced by the insight into the migrant’s responsibility for keeping in touch.\(^5\)

When reflecting on their social domain from a transnational perspective, the interviewees showed awareness of the migration-related changes in their social lives.\(^6\) Their close social relations appear as very different in different countries, but with time they tend to be more embedded in places in which one spends most time. This is in line with Pahl’s (2000, p. 14) observation that friendships exist largely through an involvement in certain activities.

Investigating the social domain of migrant lives within a transnational framework contributes to a more complex understanding of the importance of new social connections in Sweden. Our interviewees’ accounts remind us that people never simply ‘have’ social relations, but, rather, that they are an outcome of efforts, situational circumstances, opportunities, personal priorities, obstacles and constraints (Ryan, 2011; see also Ryan, 2018). For migrants, social relations are always an interplay of presence and distance – in the social context left behind as much as in the new one. Friendship demands presence, as it is first and foremost a set of intersubjective practices such as meeting, talking, and offering support, that in their turn constitute a safe space in which to enact emotions (Cronin, 2014).

Creating a social life in Sweden

Most of our interviewees consistently talked about having (had) difficulties in creating a social life in Sweden. Similar to the French high-skilled migrants in London presented in an article by Ryan and Mulholland (2014b), our participants also discussed difficulties, efforts and solutions associated with establishing a social life. A female doctor from an EU country (in her late 30s, married, with 4 children) told:

(I)t was quite hard in the beginning, and at the same time, my husband didn’t find the job, and … Even socially, it was difficult. I think it is difficult to get to know Swedish people. Once you know them, then it’s happy life, really, but the first step is quite difficult. So, we were actually thinking of maybe moving in a little, in a smaller town with a less … Not as big [a] hospital. But then all in a sudden everything just went fine. But it took about a year to settle down, to get to know people, to come into the hospital life.

To the question of whether there was something special that suddenly made ‘everything go fine’, she moved from talking about the workplace to talking about the neighbourhood:

It takes long time to get to know people, to get a feeling whom is it worth to work a little bit on to open the doors. Because we are living in a village. There’s a lot of families who have their families and friends. They are not obliged to open up and get to know new people. So, that was difficult. But then it was a bit luck and a bit over the kindergarten, other parents that we then, yeah, got to know new people, very good friends still.

Neighbourhood contacts were taken up by many interviewees.\(^7\) Several of them observed that their Swedish neighbours ‘have their own lives’ and therefore do not feel the need for making new social connections. While the female doctor quoted above is nowadays satisfied with her neighbourhood connections, most other participants would like to have
tighter contacts with their neighbours. As a doctor with Middle Eastern background explained, despite having lived in Sweden for two decades, he has no contact with his neighbours except with one family from India:

*(W)*ith all other families it is just ‘hi, hi’. Nothing more. Not one of them has visited us, and we have never been invited to visit anybody, so it’s a little bit different culture. But I see sometime, our neighbours, Swedish people, they visit each other, so they have some more or less contact with each other, so … 8

He also presented the contact with his colleagues as friendly, yet distant. He has been invited to a colleague’s home only once in 15 years, and the reason was actually a work-related discussion. He says:

Now, I have been working here in this clinic for 15 years, and I have very good contact with everybody here, colleagues, each other. Nobody has been home, I haven’t invited anybody to my home, because, and I haven’t been anywhere. Nobody invites me to visit them at home like, just to bring some coffee with them or … We meet each other only in the job. We are colleagues. We are … It is going well during this work time, but after the work, I don’t know anything about too many of our colleagues. We have very limited information about each other.

The fact that this interviewee is a doctor himself does not make it any easier to forge private relations with other medical doctors; he does not have ‘automatic access to a given constituency of social relationships’ (Ryan & Mulholland, 2014b, p. 260). This is apparent also in the case of our youngest participant (from an EU country, single, in Sweden for almost 5 years) who has no significant local social relations and travels regularly to his home country in order to have fulfilling social activities:

It’s great to work here. The colleagues are very nice, helpful. When you ask, they answer, so it’s no problem with the communication. (...) I came here to try if I can find a job and to begin work. So, now I am working, but it’s so still that I don’t have some kind of good Swedish friends which can I meet every Friday night to drink öl [Swedish word for beer] and so on, so that’s why I am travelling quite often.

Yet, when reflecting on reasons for it being so difficult to anchor himself socially in Sweden, he admits his lack of proactivity in creating social relations: ‘I am not so active to build some kind of social connection here in Sweden, so also it depends on me’.

Also other researchers who did qualitative studies with highly skilled migrants observed that ‘it takes time and effort to develop meaningful, close, trusting relationships’ (Ryan & Mulholland, 2014b, p. 263; the same point is made in Pahl, 2000, pp. 86 and 170). Many of the interviewees reflected extensively on their own efforts invested into creating a satisfying social life in Sweden. In doing so, they referred both to the local contexts of everyday life and to workplace-related socialising. They offered multiple confirmations that the experiences related to the life domains – that we differentiate as *analytical* categories – are actually intermingling in lived experience. When explaining their difficulties with creating a social life in Sweden, the reasons they mentioned included, first and foremost, the fact that people (Swedes as well as their own co-ethnics living in Sweden for a long time) already have established social lives which keep them busy and fulfilled, so they do not feel the need for establishing new connections. The fact that family life requires time was presented as equally important, and different social needs for single versus married people with children were observed. Moreover, by mentioning the general lack
of time, and the time needed for commuting, our research participants stressed the entan-
glement of work, family, private and social domains.

Conclusions

The article explores highly skilled migrants’ experiences of social life in the workplace, in
the location of everyday life and transnationally. It connects the field of work/non-work
research with the research on social integration of migrants, beyond the interest in
social networks and with the focus on friendships. The lens of work/non-work domains
allows for reaching beyond the focus on employment and the sociality connected to work-
place, and facilitates understanding of the totality of lived experience and the changes
experienced over time.

Our findings suggest that migrants who are privileged in terms of education and
employment still face extensive challenges in non-work domains, especially in the social
domain of life and with regard to friendships. The three main themes identified by the nar-
ратive analysis point to a number of challenges, such as the lack of time due to work obli-
gations, the lack of common activities with the closest old friends in the home country,
and the lack of opportunities for making new contacts that could develop into friendships –
those pillars of social life (Pahl, 2000) that are not instrumental, but an end in their own
right.

The focus on the social domain contributes to the understanding of social integration of
migrants as a process that is multiply contextualised, highly individualised and seldom
linear. It suggests that social integration cannot be truthfully accounted for by looking
at it as a still life painting featuring the numbers and ethnic composition of a migrant’s
social relations. Instead, it emerges as a dynamic reality that is influenced by place,
time, transnational practices, and individual life trajectories.

The transnational dimension of our study (Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2004) offers a more
nuanced picture of managing distance and time and thereby contributes both to the lit-
erature on migrant integration and to the literature on work/non-work that usually does
not dwell on micro-level social contacts across borders. Last but not least, challenging
assumptions about the absence of friction, the article contributes to the literature
demanding that high-skilled migratory ‘flows’ – that are an important characteristic of
the present-day globalisation of labour markets – are given a more ‘human face’ (Favell
et al., 2007).

Even if the term ‘friend’ can cover a wider range of close informal relationships, our
findings are in line with research that shows that friendship is perceived as centrally
important aspect of people’s lives (Cronin, 2014). Further studies employing the work/
non-work approach that includes a transnational dimension would contribute to a
better understanding of ‘geographies of mobility and transnationalism in which friend-
ship appears to be important for understanding a world of increased human spatial
movement and social relations at a distance’ (Bunnell et al., 2012, p. 503), but also to
a much-needed elaboration of the social implications of high-skilled migration. The
work/non-work approach has the potential to provide for an empirically grounded
understanding of what is actually at stake when it comes to highly skilled integration
and general well-being. The salience of gender and age, ethnicity and the country of
origin, profession and the length of stay in the place of immigration needs to be
further explored in research on highly skilled migrants’ friendships – made and main-
tained both locally and at a distance.

Notes

1. It is important to bear in mind that the distinction between different life domains is purely
analytical (Languilaire, 2009, p. 28). In individuals’ lives, these domains can hardly be con-
ceived as separate entities, but rather appear as intertwined with one another.

2. Though most of the interviewees possessed good command of Swedish language (doctors
trained outside of the EU, for instance, have to document high Swedish language proficiency
before being able to obtain Swedish medical license), most of the interviews were conducted
in English as this was also the stronger foreign language of the interviewers.

3. Discussion of friendships with co-nationals is beyond the scope of this article. Let us just note that
our participants neither expressed negative attitudes towards co-nationals such as those noted by
Morosanu (2013), nor confirmed the pattern of preference for co-national friendships described
by Hendrickson et al. (2011). Ethnicity or national origin is clearly less important to our participants
than long-term engagement, frequent interaction, shared experiences and affectivity, so we align
with Morosanu’s (2013) claim that the role of ethnicity in migrants’ friendships should not be
readily assumed. Tsujimoto (2016) describes how migrants’ transnationalism exhibits cosmopo-
litanism through the reconfiguration of their compatriot friendship into globally spanning, multi-
local ties. Kennedy’s (2004) study of skilled migrants suggests that transnationalism is constructed
through affectivity and shared experiences of friendship grounded in similar professions and life-
styles rather than in co-national or home connections (see also Marcu, 2012).

4. Ryan (2018, p. 12) notes the deep emotional attachment of migrants to long-distance friend-
ships rooted in childhood that are based on shared links from the past rather than the present.
While some of her highly skilled research participants were confident that they were worth
maintaining, others were less sure. See also Morosanu (2013), on the migrants’ experience
on losing touch with their previous social circle in the country of origin.

5. This is an issue we are aware of on the basis of personal experience as migrants, but we are not
aware of it being thoroughly discussed in the literature on migration. It may be seen as
suggesting the prevalence of the deeply ingrained understanding of migration as aberration
and sedentarism as normality among people who did not migrate themselves (Lindley, 2014,
p. 1). The negative effect of migration on the maintenance of meaningful home-based social
relations has been described e.g. by Marcu (2012) and Morosanu (2013).

6. It has to be noted that only interviewees from the European countries referred to their trans-
national friendship connections. It should be explored further why non-EU doctors abstained
from talking about these, though one possible explanation could be the distance to the home
country.

7. Neighbourhood contacts are discussed widely in the literature of migrant integration but they
are commonly addressed on group level (e.g. Ferruccio & Ponzo, 2016).

8. Ethno-racial aspects of relations in the social domain should be explored further among the
highly skilled migrants, as has been done with the focus on work domain (see Berbyuk
et al., 2005; Berbyuk Lindström, 2008; Wolanik Boström & Öhlander, 2012).

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