

Why Do Transnationally Mobile People Volunteer? Insights From a Swiss Case Study

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Published online: 9 March 2013

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Abstract Based on 44 qualitative interviews with transnationally mobile people engaged in 28 different associations in Switzerland, this article tries to understand the motives behind the choice to volunteer, i.e. to actively and regularly engage in associations. These interviews reveal the great importance of associations in fostering inclusion in both the new living place and the place of origin. They further reveal that mobile people, no matter where they come from or why they are on the move, turn to associations for similar motives. In order of importance, they turn to associations to secure material advantages, to find ways of defining their identity in a manner that is both coherent and compatible with the host society and to socialize with people who are thought of as trustworthy.

Résumé Sur la base de 44 entretiens qualitatifs avec des individus caractérisés par leur mobilité transnationale et engagés auprès de 28 associations différentes en Suisse, cet article tente de comprendre ce qui motive le choix du bénévolat, c.-à-d. le choix de s'engager activement et régulièrement dans des associations. Ces entretiens révèlent le rôle important que joue les associations pour aider à l'inclusion à la fois dans le nouveau lieu de résidence et dans le lieu d'origine. Ils révèlent aussi que les individus mobiles, quels que soient leur lieu d'origine ou les raisons de leur mobilité se tournent vers les associations guidés par des motivations similaires. Par ordre d'importance, ils se tournent vers les associations pour obtenir des avantages matériels, pour trouver des moyens de définir leur identité d'une façon qui soit à la

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fois cohérente et compatible avec la société qui les accueille, et pour nouer des liens sociaux avec des gens jugés dignes de confiance.

Zusammenfassung Beruhend auf 44 qualitativen Interviews von transnational mobilen Personen, die in 28 verschiedenen Vereinigungen in der Schweiz engagiert sind, versucht man in diesem Beitrag, die Beweggründe für eine Entscheidung zu ehrenamtlicher Arbeit, d. h. das aktive und regelmäßige Engagement in Vereinigungen, zu verstehen. Die Befragungen zeigen, welche große Bedeutung Vereinigungen für die Förderung der Eingliederung sowohl am neuen Wohnort als auch am Herkunftsort haben. Sie lassen des Weiteren erkennen, dass sich mobile Personen, unabhängig von ihrem Herkunftsort oder den Gründen für ihre Mobilität, Vereinigungen aus ähnlichen Beweggründen zuwenden. Der Wichtigkeit nach sortiert haben sie folgende Motivationen: Sie wenden sich Vereinigungen zu, um sich materielle Vorteile zu sichern, um ihre Identität so definieren zu können, dass sie anschlussfähig und kompatibel zum neuen Lebensort ist, und um Kontakte mit Personen zu knüpfen, die sie als vertrauenswürdig einschätzen.

Resumen Basado en 44 entrevistas cualitativas con personas móviles a nivel transnacional implicadas en 28 asociaciones diferentes en Suiza, el presente artículo trata de comprender los motivos subyacentes a la elección de ser voluntario, es decir, de implicarse de manera activa y con regularidad en asociaciones. Estas entrevistas revelan la gran importancia de las asociaciones para fomentar la inclusión tanto en el nuevo lugar donde se vive como en el lugar de origen. Revelan asimismo que las personas móviles, independientemente de dónde proceden o por qué están en movimiento, recurren a asociaciones por motivos similares. En orden de importancia, recurren a las asociaciones para asegurarse ventajas materiales, para encontrar formas de definir su identidad de manera que sea coherente y compatible con la sociedad anfitriona y para socializarse con personas que son consideradas como de confianza.

Keywords Transnationalism · Mobility · Volunteering · Associations · Migration · Diaspora

Introduction

All over the world, people are on the move. These people are called migrants, asylum seekers, refugees, foreigners, undocumented people or expats. There are many reasons to migrate, but underlying them all is the aspiration to improve one's life chances, to move not only territorially but also socially. In view of this commonality, we refer here to all of these categories of people as *transnationally mobile people*. This term opens new analytical perspectives, as territorial mobility occurs primarily for economic, political or social improvement, though we should not forget that mobility may imply social decline as well as advancement. So, especially in today's society, mobility means to move forward also in a figurative sense, in order to improve life chances and life conditions. In this text, we focus on

one aspect of this kind of mobility, namely transnationally mobile people's volunteering in associations.

Little has been written so far about transnationally mobile people's volunteering in associations, and there are more political projections seeing these associations as either hurdles to integration or partners than there is scientific research about them. We would like to fill this gap by focusing mainly on one specific issue, i.e. transnationally mobile people's motives for engaging in associations.¹ By *engagement* we mean unpaid, continuous participation in a formally constituted association.²

Globally and purely quantitatively speaking, these people's engagement is comparable to that of the local population, but mobile people with a foreign passport are, on average, represented 10 per cent less in voluntary activities (as, e.g. shown by Swiss and German studies: see Stadelmann-Steffen et al. 2010, or Gensicke et al. 2006). The reason for this lower rate of volunteerism appears to have more to do with time than with a weaker engagement to volunteering; indeed, when mobility leads to sedentarisation, the dynamics of engagement between the transnationally mobile and the rest of the population are quite similar. As Halm and Sauer have shown (Halm et al. 2007), for example, the population of Turkish origin in Germany is no longer distinguished from the population of German descent in terms of the percentage of voluntary engagement. Yet what doubtlessly distinguishes transnationally mobile people from the rest of the population is their *choices* of engagement: the former are almost exclusively involved in associations of mobile people—where the main incentive does not seem to reside in the so-called cultural background, but rather in the migration process itself, which in most cases first enhances and intensifies national or ethnic identities (Moya 2005). Voluntary engagement in mobile people's associations usually has a very specific motivational basis. This article analyses this motivational basis.

Method

Our work is based on interviews in the urban context with people regularly engaged in associations in Zurich, Lausanne and Geneva and reflecting four different histories of mobility: traditional migration in the aftermath of the Second World War and largely related to Switzerland's post-war industrialisation; the more recent mobility in the context of the service society and the flexibilised economy, within which we count, on the one hand, the regular mobility of transnational elites—the so-called expats—and, on the other, the irregular mobility of illegal migrants and asylum seekers, including mobile people who are often not highly qualified and

¹ This article is based on a study financed by the Schweizerische Gemeinnützige Gesellschaft (SGG). Complete study results are published in Cattacin and Domenig (2012). Thanks to Mary Leontisini, Costanzo Ranci and Hans-Rudolf Wicker for their helpful comments on an earlier version of this article. Many thanks also to Daniel Moure, who improved not only the article's legibility, but also its stringency, and to the anonymous reviewers for their helpful general and detailed comments.

² For the purposes of this article, *associations* refer only to membership associations that are formally recognised (they have statutes and their organisation follows legal rules), and we only consider associations that refer in their statutes to the origin of their members.

usually work and live under precarious conditions; and finally, the migration of those who came to Switzerland as political refugees or asylum seekers and have gathered in the so-called diasporas.

We chose to interview volunteers who regularly participated in or were presidents of selected associations. Twenty-eight associations have thus been included, and 44 interviews were carried out. The interviews were semi-structured and lasted between 35 min and 2 h. We further interviewed some experts working with associations of mobile people; those results have been integrated into the interpretation as well. All interviews were recorded, and 43 were completely transcribed.

The collected data were then submitted to a content analysis.³ The empirical material was further analysed for its logic of argumentation, in particular for the way motifs of engagement were hierarchized. Finally, we compared the data with structured, pre-existing knowledge (Soeffner 1989; Wagner and Oevermann 2001). The interpretation of the data permitted us to form three hierarchically related groups of motives—instrumental, subjective and social—that helped us understand transnationally mobile people's logic of volunteering.

Instrumental Motives

The results of the interviews show that transnationally mobile people's main motivation for volunteering is instrumental. Volunteering is related to a desire to facilitate one's professional career, compensate for professional stagnation or mitigate political exclusion. In order to realise these objectives, mobile people establish useful ties in their associations, take over semi-professional tasks and engage in political activities. Associations also play an important role in gathering information and imparting knowledge.

Useful Ties

Associations play a key role in stabilising and developing individuals' social capital by allowing them to form useful relationships, which can become key for their professional and social success (Granovetter 1983). Therefore, through increasing exchanges between people, important contacts—whose commitment and depth are determined by the dedicated people themselves—are produced, though the importance of these supporting activities varies according to the specific groups involved. In contemporary regular (highly skilled migrants) and irregular (illegal migrants and asylum seekers) mobility, these supporting activities are in the foreground, whereas during the earlier traditional migration the association was less important to migrants' search for inclusion in the labour and housing markets. In contemporary mobility, membership and engagement in an association are seen as useful as long as existing material problems have not yet been overcome. This perception contrasts with that of the former migration, where assistance created a

³ To support the analysis, we used a computer-based coding scheme (ResearchWare 2010).

longer term obligation to the association. Cesare⁴ describes this development as follows:

I remember well a dozen young students who arrived in 2010 in Geneva, and who, thanks to the website of the association, contacted me and my colleagues, and even before they had left Sardinia. Once they had arrived in Geneva, and after the housing problem had been solved, these young people never returned to the association. (Cesare, Sardinian association, Geneva)

The associations of contemporary mobility differ in that the motives for the engagement, namely finding a job or solving other material problems, are either deliberately targeted and formulated explicitly or widely tabooed, so to speak, as an accidental by-product. People who define themselves primarily as socially centred or as members of specific social communities (or families) are obviously motivated more by social or voluntary considerations, though they are also pursuing a more implicit strategy regarding their personal instrumental motives, as Fabiana describes:

And then I give some people Spanish courses. And you do this in collaboration with an association, at the beginning voluntarily, but the idea is that we also integrate ourselves professionally. (Fabiana, Latin American association, Lausanne)

Those who see themselves more as individually centred tend to be motivated by instrumental reasons, as Emma, the president of an American association, demonstrates. She is quite explicit about the importance of instrumental motives and aspirations:

So, if you want to have any business network you have to enter into an American club. (Emma, American association, Zurich)

A collectivist attitude thus seems to lead to overtly altruistic motives for voluntary work, whereas an individualistic orientation puts career-related decisions explicitly in the foreground (cf. Finkelstein 2009; Musick and Wilson 2008, p. 373). But, whether it is explicitly admitted or not, formal involvement in an association usually leads to an increase in informal mutual support and useful relationships.

Information and Learning

Associations, beyond their role of providing a network for material aid, also aim to spread information. Thus, associations act as not only inclusion facilitators for mobile people and get ahead of most local, but also national integration programmes, even without any intention of doing so. Sadia confirmed this view succinctly:

⁴ All names have been changed.

With regard to the initial integration problems, the association is really the first place where one usually finds answers. (Sadia, Cameroonian association, Geneva)

In all our interviews, this crucial role of associations as providers of information is highlighted very clearly, although expats are more interested in the time they save by obtaining information from associations than in the acquisition of the information itself. Furthermore, many expats automatically benefit from notable support provided by their employers upon entry to Switzerland (Dahinden et al. 2003, p. 77), whereas all other mobile people are dependent on associations to obtain such information and support.

In the associations founded during the period of post-war industrialisation, the former need for information regarding the workplace has given way in recent years to questions about impending retirement or other pension-related issues, reflecting not only the demographic changes in the traditional migrant populations from Italy, Spain and Turkey (Fibbi et al. 2002), but also changes to these people's original plans to return to their country of origin. Only about one-third of these retired migrants return; another third commute between their countries of origin and destination, and a final third do not return at all (Fibbi et al. 1999). Valeria describes this development, and its influence on the association's work today, very precisely:

At the moment, it is quite difficult; we have a lot of older people who no longer really want to go back. They always thought: 'We will live in Switzerland until we have built our house in Italy, and then we'll go back'. They did not anticipate that they would have children, and even grandchildren, and suddenly they are at retirement age and realise that they no longer want to go back. And here begins the problem, because they hope that we will deal with everything that will happen to them, such as old-age insurance and so on. (Valeria, Italian association, Zurich)

The newer associations that have emerged in the era of flexibilism have specialised mainly in issues relating to employment and housing, the legal system, the tax system, the school system, training and healthcare. In particular, associations that are faced with asylum seekers develop quite specific skills on the topic. These newer associations do not necessarily provide complete information on these topics, but they often refer the mobile people to specialised agencies. The continuous activity of communicating information also leads the associations to obtain increasingly precise knowledge—and consequently to expand their role as key actors inside specialised networks.

However, the fundamental role of the associations for the inclusion of mobile people becomes visible in the services they deliver, including courses in the local language or language of origin, and courses to improve migrants' job opportunities by, for example, teaching them how to prepare a CV. Our interviewees describe, proudly and with surprise, that their associations are recognised for their ability to provide good help and are consulted by many urban authorities and institutions, even regarding services that are normally offered by other official institutions.

So associations have inadvertently moulted into collective actors that contribute to urban-integration policy. As information platforms about opportunities and basic understandings, and often also as places where the new language is learned and the language of origin is perpetuated, these associations become the backbone of successful inclusion. As accurate and efficient providers of information, these places build a bridge between state agencies and mobile people, as Carmen describes:

So when people come to us, we actually build bridges to the institutions. So, for example, regarding unemployment, the people come to us, or if they end up in the unemployment office, they are sent to us. Or, when people go to the social services, and they want to learn more about social rights, then they are told to get in touch with the association. So we build a bridge between these two. (Carmen, Colombian association, Geneva)

The enhancement of their own knowledge, often linked with the provision of information, makes associations not only places of learning, but also places for mobile people to change careers.

A Different Career

That engagement in associations can lead individuals to other careers was already known from associations that were established during the post-war industrialisation (Fibbi 1983), especially from those that served Italian migrants. Associations provide a key opportunity to build a different, part-time career. That migration wave led to the local population's upward social mobility and to the proletarianization of labour migrants (Hoffmann-Nowotny 1970), who often failed to have their professional credentials recognised. As a result, the association career—especially as president of an association—dissolves this status inconsistency (Bolzman and Fibbi 1991) and serves as a functional replacement for a failed career, as Mattia aptly put it:

The fact that someone calls me up to do something—despite the fact that I actually have to work in order to get a salary—makes me an obviously important person, and I like that: it tickles my vanity. I do not think that I'm vain, but still.... (Mattia, Italian association, Lausanne)

If your 'vanity is tickled', you feel important. Thus the association world of traditional migration becomes a place of recognition, while material security comes from the individual's main job.

In contemporary mobility, mobile people from Latin America, Asia or Sub-Saharan Africa are often highly skilled, but their education is typically not recognised. This situation increases their de-skilling relative to that of the earlier migration wave during the period of industrialisation (Piguet 2005). As a result, similar recognition mechanisms are found in this group, although associations mainly provide contemporary mobile people with opportunities to use their pre-vocational skills and thus give them back their dignity through engagement in an association.

In contemporary mobility associations, one can find highly qualified, transnationally mobile *women* who have failed to integrate professionally, despite the fact that they have learned the local language, and even after having made up their professional qualifications. For such well-qualified women, working in an association gives them an opportunity to use their professional skills, and thereby not only increases their chances of achieving successful professional integration, but also counters the denied professional recognition through militant political activity.

Mobile women of the newer, regular mobility follow their husbands more frequently than vice versa, and they also typically give up their careers, as confirmed by a Danish study carried out on expats (Oxford Research and Copenhagen Post 2010). These women typically find themselves transformed, through the mobility of their husbands, from highly skilled individuals into spouses.

Interestingly, in this case we can often see a kind of reinterpretation of engagement with associations as *work experience*, which in our view sheds a new light on the role of associations for mobile people as a *place of work* where existing professional skills are used and developed further, as Julia explains vividly:

When I was on the board for nine years, I would not say, those were my social friends; no, they were just people that I worked with. I had friends outside and that's why I tried to limit. So it was almost like a working experience. In some way, I was at work on the board, but they were not my friends socially, occasionally, but not really, no. I do not know why. (Julia, American association, Lausanne).

There seem to be two main reasons for this re-interpretation of volunteering as work experience. First, these women desire to avoid damaging their careers, and especially their CVs, by being removed from the labour market during their temporary stay in Switzerland, and by volunteering they try to maintain their long-term prospects in the US labour market. According to a study by Anne Copeland, women who followed their partners abroad usually struggled in their new life as expats (Copeland 2004, p. 82). Although the impending stay abroad may initially be thought of as a long-overdue time out, this positive attitude often does not last very long.

But these women's associational engagement can also be motivated simply by the desire to do something to make new meaning out of their new status as spouses by using their newfound free time to do meaningful work. Interestingly, the American women we interviewed do not question their belief that professional skills are useful for the association. According to Wilson and Musick, this outlook is associated with good self-confidence, showing that these women's motive is not recognition, but just being employed (Wilson and Musick 1997, p. 710).

The results of our analysis about other career opportunities within the associational world reveal that associations generally not only create possibilities for alternative careers for mobile people, but also *intermediate* career points for well-qualified mobile women, who often help their associations modernise.

Citizenship Here

Associations are not only places for *other* careers, but also places for alternative recognition, whether as a political person or as a (quasi)citizen of a place, because only through the association will one be noticed as a political person or citizen and hence receive political recognition—what Barbara Schmitter Heisler has referred to as *secondary political rights* (Schmitter Heisler 1980). Furthermore, only associations can legitimately contact other collective actors to, for example, find out about meeting rooms or apply for financial support for certain activities (Baglioni 2005). Conversely, politicians and administrative officials also contact associations in order to learn more about them, to compete for votes (if there is a local election) or to include them in integration programmes (Reinprecht 2011; Huth 2007).

Associations generally consider it important to fight for people's rights and thus increase their chances for better living conditions. Yet what associations facilitate is not access to rights in a conventional sense, but rather a differentiated access to participation rights in an urban reality—or, simply, to *urban citizenship* (Isin 2000). Thus, associations are places that establish rights in two ways—first, by fighting for a better legal position for those on whose behalf they advocate; and second by helping unveil previously unknown rights, as Mattia illustrates:

It is very important to give others a voice. Sometimes one may have a right but not know how to exercise it. I believe that this is the ABC of a socially committed volunteer. (Mattia, Italian association, Lausanne)

Especially among asylum seekers and undocumented migrants associations play an important role in establishing at least a minimal degree of respect. But associations do more than provide rights; they also provide association members with opportunities to act in other contexts as relevant stakeholders. Thus, the association is seen as a useful way for governmental and political actors to motivate association members to become engaged beyond the association. The president of an Afghan association describes these pro-active, enabling governmental actions as follows:

Our chance was that we started with small activities that made us so well known, without having applied for anything from others, not even from the Canton of Geneva. They then contacted us and said that they appreciated our projects and even offered financial support. (Amira, Afghan association, Geneva)

Hence, associations produce *citizenship*, thereby making political recognition possible, a fact that most of our interviewees were well aware of; only associations grant the legitimacy necessary to establish contacts with government agencies.

Citizenship There

Mobile people and their descendants are by definition citizens of different worlds that undermine territorialised or exclusive affiliations (Soysal 1997). Roberto,

therefore, criticises the term ‘migrant’ for inadequately representing his own affiliation to the world:

I would define myself as a citizen of the world. Something is missing in the term ‘migrant’. I have acquired the status of a world citizen, and that is much more than just being a migrant. (Roberto, Italian association, Lausanne)

There is no doubt that a world community is emerging with multiple and flexible affiliations, cosmopolitan attitudes, extended identities and transnational networks, especially as a result of contemporary mobility. Gerard Delanty explicitly refers to mobility as a cause of the enlarged cosmopolitan transformation of Europe (Delanty 2006, p. 41). The concept of *transnationalism*, through which new dynamics in the context of transnational mobility are explained, has in recent years fuelled a major branch of research. Thomas Faist (2000) and Rainer Bauböck (2002) figure, among many others, as pioneers of transnational analysis. Their work demonstrates that mobile people’s well-organised networks are crucial for the development of transnational relations. Whereas mere individuals can afford to establish transnational social or economic relationships by, for example, investing in their country of origin or opening a business or maintaining friendships there, the struggle for political influence or for more rights in the country of origin needs support from an association.

So we were not surprised to discover, through our interviews, evidence that associations also play a transnational role. Adriano for example, describes the need for an association in the country of destination, in order to be able to act politically in the country of origin:

We are also aiming at the defence of human rights by writing a lot about it and denouncing the situation in Angola. It is clear that alone one cannot do anything; we can only act through an organised framework—I would say in the context of an association that has statutes, which are recognised by the Swiss and Geneva authorities. Otherwise it would be impossible. (Adriano, Angolan association, Geneva)

In our interviews, we can distinguish three forms of transnational volunteering. The first is that of dissidence—the volunteering of political dissidents who gather in diaspora associations, support each other and try to influence the destiny of their country of origin. The second is that of cooperation, in contrast to the above-described dissidence, which usually manifests itself as a request for assistance by the country of origin. The third is that of the organising political events, such as the celebration of national holidays or campaign events, as illustrated here by Rama:

I would say that, during my years as a board member, we have organised some unique events, as the 60-year celebration of Indian Independence and also the first anniversary of the International Day of Non-Violence, the birthday of Mahatma Gandhi. We have invited almost all the ambassadors of various permanent missions in Geneva and the entire top management of the different international associations. (Rama, Indian association, Geneva)

Such transnational engagement not only cements the political and legal affiliation to the country of origin, but also introduces a transnational dimension into these associations, which enables flexible and territorially independent political participation.

Subjective Motives

The motives for volunteering are primarily instrumental, which corresponds with mobile people's need to focus mainly on themselves. It is undisputed that transnational mobility leads to additional collateral social risks, which may be more or less dramatic: Abdelmalek Sayad speaks of *uprooting* and—closely related to this phenomenon—mental-health problems (Sayad and Bourdieu 1999); Zygmunt Bauman emphasises migrants' need to reduce their identities to definable elements in order to be able to recognise themselves at all (Bauman 2000, p. 82). Associations, therefore, have the essential role of helping stabilising mobile people's identity. Accordingly, mobility-induced identity challenges (D'Andrea 2006) might be mitigated by these places of identity stabilisation.

Breakthroughs in Life

Concerning the relationship between space and modernity, Martuccelli identifies a dialectical moment in the tension between mobility and territorial embedding (Martuccelli 2007, p. 26): *urban life challenges* acquire a new relationship to space and life, particularly in regards to shaping a relationship between two distant places—the global, as a place for integration and segregation, and the local, as a place for affective investments. Pablo confirmed that his association plays such a dialectical role:

The lens through which our association looks is the constant dialectic between the global and the particular. In any case, we experiment with it. (Pablo, Latin American association, Geneva)

The individual must, therefore, learn to deal with the tension between spatial mobility and its control, on the one hand, and territorial embedding or inclusion on ground, on the other. Mobility experiences are thus always experiences of *life trials*, fractures and *bifurcations* (Soulet 2009), and they always have a long-lasting impact on our lives. Even from the privileged perspective of Julia, who accompanied her husband abroad, transnational mobility means a permanent 'reinvention' of oneself:

As a woman who is not working in a foreign country, each time you move to a foreign country you have to reinvent yourself. (Julia, American association, Lausanne)

Provided that the decision to move has not been made under duress, people generally handle the challenge of reinventing themselves quite well. In this context, associations are not only described as places of strategic importance upon

immediate arrival, but also later on as places that help individuals fend off the effects of mobility-induced identity insecurities.

In particular, migrants during the period of industrialisation were exposed to a high degree of uncertainty regarding their identity, as migration usually entailed the transition from a village to an urban life. In addition, the linguistic challenges often combined with transnational mobility could not always be superseded, especially for poorly educated migrants who became integrated into linguistically segregated and non-communicative workplaces in industry and construction. Finally, those who participated in this migratory wave faced enormous pressure to adapt or assimilate to the post-war way of life—as did the whole population during this period—which manifested itself, for example, in inflexible working hours and conditions, predetermined leisure activities and family and apartment size (Niederberger 2004).

In contrast to the post-war migration wave, in the contemporary mobility wave there is no longer as much pressure to adapt, as such a demand is no longer considered legitimate in a pluralistic society. Individualisation and individuation today present mobile people with a society in which differentiation is worthwhile, but adaptation is not. Hence, identity-based insecurities are no longer based on assimilationist pressure.

Many people on the move today have experienced war and other violations of their identity, which may be the first cause of any fragility before they became transnationally mobile. But during the migration process—sometimes lasting months or even years and involving passage through many countries—mobile people are often exposed to traumatic events. Ehsan speaks very openly about the war experiences that were formative for his Afghan compatriots, and also about the psychological problems associated with those experiences:

We all need to cool down. We have suffered a variety of psychological shocks, because thirty years of war leaves deep scars, especially for women and children. There is a very great need to address the psychological problems of this population in order to improve their situation. (Ehsan, Afghan association, Lausanne)

The reason that the target country apparently takes too little care of this particular problem may be that the ‘newly traumatised’ typically do not have a lobby (Wicker 2005, p. 163).

The new environment causes a second uncertainty regarding identity, as illustrated by the case of Sadia, a woman who initially withdrew completely before overcoming her loneliness with the help of the association:

If there had been no association when I arrived here, I think I would have felt lonely, because in the beginning I spoke to nobody. The first friends I had then were Cameroonians that I had met through the association. And over time I’ve also opened myself to other nationalities, but I am convinced that if I would not have had the association, I would not be the person that I am today. (Sadia, Cameroonian association, Geneva)

The Swedish association of expats helps resolve the initial uncertainty regarding the new environment by making crucial information available. But even here the

goal, as Wilma, the manager of the association, tells us, is to stabilise the identities of people who are constantly on the move:

In life, it is crucial to have some stability, which I can understand. One cannot imagine what it means to be an expat. It is hell for women. For men it is different, because they have a job that is mostly the same everywhere, whether in Singapore, in Bern or in Stockholm, and everywhere they speak English. But for the women... you must identify schools and all the other things you need for your children, then friends, food and so on. To have a stable life in an association like [association's name] is very important. So you have, if you constantly have to change your place of residence in the world, something that is always the same. (Wilma, Swedish association, Geneva)

This quotation shows how aware some mobile people, especially spouses accompanying their husbands abroad, are of associations as places for personal engagement that help them avoid losing their identity in their self-interpretation. The last sentence in the quotation also shows that expats' associations have organised themselves according to a transnational logic, meaning that they exist in a similar manner anywhere in the world where expats live. Thus they become islands of stability that are distributed around the world and are similar to Disneyland because of their placelessness: every place can be any place (Sorkin 1992, p. 217).

A third and final uncertainty regarding identity has to do with *communicative and linguistic challenges*. These challenges are usually not about the language of origin, but about a common language, regardless of the place of origin, reflecting the fact that the emphasis here is not on the language itself, but rather on mutual understanding. As such, the same language—and not really the country of origin—is often the main connecting link within associations.

To conclude, fractures in mobile people's lives may cause them, especially immediately after their arrival in their country of destination, to turn to an association because engagement in an association may help mitigate the identity tension between the global and the local life worlds. The association, therefore, stands for both the global in the local and the local embedding. Thus, the association helps the mobile, global person gain a local foothold in a new place. Engagement in the association is, therefore, a tool in order to acquire a new, transnational identity and overcome the drama of migration, as Alejandro states:

What exactly the drama of migrants is can be described well: migrants who are recognised neither in their country of origin nor in Switzerland, despite their enormous contribution to the community's well-being, both here and in their country of origin. (Alejandro, Bolivian association, Geneva)

Identity and Reflexivity

The association strengthens individuals' personality by providing them with a system of reference that is either recognised as familiar or onto which familiarity is projected. The constancy of such a reference system offers confidence, as Emmanuel describes:

When I arrived, this was for me a place where you could already meet a lot of people, because when you consider how quickly the weeks go by, yes, you can never really see each other. Thus, even the mere fact that you say to each other, ‘OK, let’s meet again on such or such day’, does lead to the fact that you will end up again with several people at the same place, and you know that the others will be there too, and you are not alone. (Emmanuel, Cameroonian association, Geneva)

This confidence first allows recently mobile people to deal with the new, unpredictable environment, because only this confidence, based on a stabilised identity, can create the conditions for reflexivity and the ability to change [see also (Bolzman et al. 1988)]. In this context, our interviewees mention again and again that the courses in their language of origin, which are offered by the associations, may improve their sense of self-esteem. The clarification of identity that mobile people acquire through association work not only helps reduce their ambivalence, but also increases their tolerance of ambivalence (Häussermann 1995).

At this point, we must particularly emphasise that associations do not essentialise identities of origin. On the contrary, they provide identity references that on the one hand are compatible with mobile people’s place of origin and on the other hand allow mobile people to locate themselves within the local population and the new environment (Jagusch 2011, p. 20). If the resulting ambivalence is unbearable, it will not be denied, but simply collectively revised by the association. Kiana tells us in relation to the Afghan New Year how this process occurs concretely:

It is actually not common for young women to go dancing in front of everyone, as this is usually only possible as part of the family. And there we showed everyone that we wanted to change something in the Afghan culture by giving not only the men the opportunity to have fun—as always on such occasions, whereas the girls slip into a corner—but also us, and so we all danced and had a very good time. My mother was very proud. She was proud of the whole association, about what we represent internally, but also externally, for the Swiss. Because they always say that the young women have to follow all the rules and restrictions, but we have proven that this is not always the case, and that we are just as free as the young men, who grew up with us. (Kiana, Afghan association, Geneva)

As we have seen, associations may stabilise mobile people’s identity, which in turn increases their reflexivity and thus their ability to cope with their social, economic and political environment.

To Be Yourself

Our interviews highlighted as particularly valuable both the opportunity to *be oneself* in associations and the well-being related to that opportunity. A continuous presence in the association and participating in its regular activities furthermore establish an experienced normality and a space for the stamping and legitimacy of identity. If a mobile person is criticised from outside the association, this criticism

will be relativised or invalidated within the association. Thus the association becomes a haven for mobile people who are often exposed to multiple stresses. For some, the association even becomes a kind of *extended family*. The boundary between family and peer group becomes blurred, mainly because of the mobility-related loss of the primary family network. The emergence of this second family enables mobile people to enter into longer term engagements, which—as in a family—cannot be questioned. Hamid even considers himself to be a real person mainly through his involvement in the association, and Roberto feels a great emptiness when he is not involved:

Yes, I do work as a volunteer, because if I just sit in my apartment, without working, I feel meaningless. (Hamid, Somali association, Zurich)

If I'm not involved, something is missing. Besides, there were also phases in which I was less committed, and I then felt that it did me no good, that I had to be volunteering, to fill up a void that somehow made me feel depressed. (Roberto, Italian association, Lausanne)

Again and again, the interviewees talk about the association as a place of peace, friendship and normality. But peace and normality are not isolated phenomena; instead, they always exist in connection with efforts in other areas of life, as Valeria reveals by addressing the paradox that a greater investment in her professional career would mean becoming even more engaged in the association:

But one thing is certain: I do not want to stop. I want to go further concerning my professional career, but then I will probably—as a result—have to engage even more intensely in our association, which is actually almost impossible. (Valeria, Italian association, Zurich)

This statement is consistent with the results of the Volunteer Monitor in Switzerland, which found that people who assume professional responsibilities are rather overrepresented in volunteering (Stadelmann-Steffen et al. 2010, pp. 56–59). But our interviewees also point to some relevant context, especially for mobile people, namely that routinised work for the association stands for the calm in the storm of life and consolidates exactly those resources—such as serenity, strength and determination—that are demanded outside the association.

Social Motives

So far, we have analysed the instrumental and subjective motives for mobile people's engagement in associations, but not the social ones, although one might be inclined to believe that social motives for volunteering are of paramount importance for transnationally mobile people. In the interviews, however, social motives are only referred to as a positive side effect. From this fact, we may conclude that sociability is either assumed as an incentive for participating in the activities of the association without having to be mentioned specifically, or that it does not have the same relevance for our interviewees as instrumental or subjective motives do.

Annalisa argues in this latter direction, with a certain disillusion that for many people the association is interesting only until they have fully settled in Switzerland:

The fact that fewer and fewer people come by [the association] can be explained by the fact that many of them have completely adapted to the Swiss way of life. (Annalisa, Sardinian association, Geneva)

Successful labour inclusion and stabilised identities are obviously reasons to allow associations to dissolve, which would of course be problematic for the latter's social reproduction. Such dissolution, however, could also be a sign of success, i.e. the more that mobile people are able to emancipate themselves from the association, the more that the association will have worked successfully. Of course, this situation does not mean that those who have been involved with an association for a long time have not developed personally, because there are, as we have seen, a variety of instrumental and subjective factors in favour of a longer term commitment. In addition, our results suggest that social motives often become more important with time, or perhaps that volunteers are more aware of these correlations at a later stage of volunteering.

Communication and Social Inclusion

A society is coordinated through communication, which may be limited if mobile people's competence in the local language is inadequate or not present. In general, this situation does not make it impossible to survive in a new place, but participating in society requires more than basic communication skills: it requires the ability to communicate in a complex way. Those who do not speak the local language will have great difficulty in dealing with health issues and bureaucracy, as well as in working with colleagues and developing friendships. A limited ability to communicate not only hinders the quality of interpersonal contact, but also damages an individual's self-confidence.

Associations, therefore, are obviously places where differentiated communication can take place, information can be obtained, the self can be discovered and social inclusion can be fostered. Roberto describes the activating force of a common language (Habermas 1981, p. 396) as follows:

In my opinion, I meet up with Italians, especially because I can speak my language with them, but also because I find certain elements in them or an identity that I never meet otherwise. I need that, yes, I need to speak Italian, so that I can make things and activities. (Roberto, Italian association, Lausanne)

Language is the central criterion of inclusion and exclusion for most associations. Admission resulting from competence in the common language, on the one hand, and the unimportance of competence in other languages, on the other, connect.

Intersubjectivity and the Production of a Common Identity

Mobile people's associations are mainly formed around a common language as a unifying element, but they are also often formed around a *somewhat* defined *ethnic*

group, as is revealed in the names of the so-called *cultural* associations. *Ethnicity* and *culture* are usually understood to refer to common traditions or a common history, which correspond more to institutionally stabilised places like museums or an orally transmitted folklore. We have spoken with people who have constituted themselves into a fan club of a Portuguese soccer team or a Galician folklore dance group, and in their statutes these associations state that their mission is to promote their *culture*. But when one looks a little bit closer, one realises that this objective plays only a minor role in the associations' activities. This discovery raises the question of why reference to *culture* is always pushed so strongly to the fore.

Linked to concepts such as *ethnicity*, *culture* or *nation*, self-attributions may serve as 'irrational communitarization' (Wicker 1998, p. 44) to strengthen a group, through an internally coordinated definition of what one is, what one wants to be and what one conveys oneself to be in discourse beyond the association (see also Appadurai 1996, p. 189). Ethnicising and culturalist discourses are shaped in such a way that they are compatible with one's own life or the group's professional context. Therefore, self-attributions have something to do with the ability or capability—as defined by Amartya Sen—for everyone to ultimately decide for themselves how and who they want to be (Sen 2006).

In our interviews, we have found different culturalising or ethnicising constructions, all of which have the objective of strengthening the relevant association. Philippe, for example, justifies his association's recourse to 'Africa' in order to produce a common view on what the common history is supposed to stand for, on the grounds that such a view helps members work together for a common future:

But in terms of Africa, we must have access to the fundamentals, to history. Because, if you know your history, then from there comes the pride. We can only know where to go if we know where we come from. (Philippe, African association, Geneva)

Carmen describes how flexibly her association responds to the new need to communicate *culture* to partners and children by organising Colombian cultural events:

The needs are of a different kind today. Now they ask more questions like how do I help my child with school, because now they know the rest. They no longer ask, how can I find work or how can I find an apartment. Now they want to share their culture with their children. And those who are married to Swiss nationals, with a Portuguese or Spanish background, will now also share their culture with their husband, their partner. Since there are now such different needs, we do more festivals that put Colombian culture at the heart. (Carmen, Colombian association, Geneva)

In associations that are open to mobile people of different origins, the choice from all the available *cultures* of the one that will finally be transmitted in the association's daily activities seems to be almost random. For instance, the Galician association, as Armando says, spreads Galician *culture*, but also Spanish and Italian *culture*. *Culture* has thus become a potpourri of folklore, food, music, literature and painting:

The association was created as a cultural and sports association, on the basis of language courses and courses on Galician culture, based on the popular culture, cuisine, music, literature, painting. Afterwards, we became open to the contributions of Spanish and Italian artists with whom we also had relationships. (Armando, Galician association, Geneva)

It is also necessary to *invent culture* in order to bring it closer to the local population. Carmen is explicit on this point and emphasises the link between the production of cultural definitions and the opportunity to gain recognition.

Well, I think the role of the association in Switzerland is to show that there is a Colombian association, and that we are able to unite ourselves, to live together, to adapt and contribute something. This is very important. I think that they perceive us now as people who have adapted well, who have something to give, something to offer culturally, and who can contribute something from which one can also learn, and with whom it is interesting to share. So, this is enormous. Because when you are a foreigner, you do not always get recognition for certain things that really have a value for you. So if you reveal your differences, you respect the other, who keeps their own differences, too. That is a great value, I think. (Carmen, Colombian association, Geneva)

There seems to be a need to produce stereotypical cultural images of mobile people as an antidote to discrimination and racism. Having and defending something like a *culture* thus becomes a way to tell others that they do not possess a monopoly on *culture*, which turns *culture* into a topic of sameness, and no longer of difference (Pache 1990; Jagusch 2011, p. 128). The lack of recognition is, therefore, the reason why associations invent *culture* and invest in the marketing of a specific cultural image.

Transnational Relations

Mobile people's associations are also places for maintaining a relationship with their place of origin, as is captured by the concept of *long-distance nationalism* (Anderson 1992, p. 13; Wimmer and Schiller 2002, p. 23). Mobile people often do not care for a certain *culture* or *ethnicity*, but simply for their place of origin.

Associations help mobile people maintain a relationship with their place of origin. This relationship can take different forms—for example, a financial commitment that is often tied to a project or an emergency situation. Ties to the place of origin are also stabilised by travel agencies and other demand-oriented businesses and activities, which all aim to satisfy deterritorialised mobile people's craving for an increasingly imaginary homeland. But beside this, detachment from associations or origin-based communities, provoked by a material improvement of one's own life situation, may also contribute to feelings of guilt, which are based on a *reciprocity relationship*, as we can deduce from Carmen's words:

We say, well, we will support projects in Colombia, because in this way we can say, ok, we went away, we are doing better now, but you're still in deep

shit, but now we are in a position to help you. Now that we are doing better, we can also give you support. (Carmen, Colombian association, Geneva)

The described moral asymmetry can only be escaped when the place of origin is considered to be responsible for the earlier mobility, or when the moral debt is cancelled through material returns (McKay 2007). That is probably the cause for the binding power, which is the basis for the significant transfer of funds from the transnationally mobile, which by far exceeds official development aid in terms of both the amount and effect (Wanner 2008; GCIM 2005).

But the search for a real base of *identity references* also promotes transnational relations. Through her association's involvement in transnational projects, Amira wins back a piece of her identity:

I have a cousin who recently returned to Afghanistan in order to live there. My own family lives, in contrast, not in Afghanistan, but all over the world, except in Afghanistan. I left Afghanistan eighteen years ago with my whole family, and we live here now. The goal was, therefore, to have relations with other Afghans, and especially on the spot to do something for Afghanistan. That was one of my biggest motivations for developing a project in Afghanistan and supporting it. (Amira, Afghan association, Geneva)

As such, associations offer members the opportunity to establish relationships that create a feeling of belonging not to one community, but to several, in the sense that they allow members to consciously and proactively extend their identities.

Thus, transnationalism not only results from the simplified technical ways of communication, but can also promote them. In fact transnationalism arises in a mobile world, including all the prevailing pre-existing or recently constructed dynamics therein, primarily through reciprocal or identity-based patterns of sociability.

Conclusion

We have analysed the volunteering of mobile people from the perspective of transnational mobility rather than that of migration research. Mobility separates place and identity; it simultaneously liberates identities and pluralises societies. We have argued in particular that mobile people's motives for volunteering are symptoms of this more general transformation of our societies.

In our analysis, we have distinguished three basic groups of motives. The first group, which we have called *instrumental*, explains engagement as *interest*. The objectives of engagement are existential, targeting material opportunities and access to rights. Associations thus serve as places where these objectives can be pursued, especially by controlling the flow and exchange of information about, for example, job openings, good doctors, good car garages or simply about how to fill out tax forms. Associations stabilise or even produce social capital, increase knowledge, offer language courses, organise meetings on health or school-related issues and publicly denounce discrimination and racism. Associations are also places that

make possible an alternative career or, in particular for expats, create a stop-gap in an interrupted career. Membership and volunteering are, therefore, always associated with specific personal benefits, and associations are thus often visited at the beginning of the mobility process. Since associations promote inclusion as well as relationships between mobile people and locals, local and regional authorities approach them as serious partners.

A second group of motives for volunteering, which we have called *subjective*, relates to the effect of committing to one's own identity. The engagement is intended to improve mobile people's self-esteem, to enable them to experience *dignity* through a respectful relationship and to allow them to learn that it is possible to be oneself. Associations, therefore, stabilise identities and serve as safe heavens, and to some extent even as places that promote an identity's self-assurance. Sometimes associations are also refuges permitting members to reflect on the suffering caused by the dominant society's non-recognition of their identity. Associations value mobile people's identities and often reverse stigmas. The experiences of foreignness and alienation are not only made understandable, but are also normalised through exchange within the group and, in the process, are de-individualised (Goffmann 1963). Members realise that their ill-being is not simply self-inflicted, but can also be assigned by others, and that—through the association—it is possible to learn about, and be proud of, their origin and language. Through associations, not only the individual, but the collective as a whole is also strengthened. As islands of retreat, associations become important to the well-being of individuals experiencing transnational mobility (Duchêne-Lacroix 2006). By learning to be oneself, one can establish trust, an important resource for living in society, because trust promotes confidence. Associations may thereby become central pillars in the mobility process, because they reinforce members' personality and self-confidence outside the association, which allows members not only to deal with but also to benefit creatively from their difference, and to accept the ambivalences associated with that difference.

Third, and less importantly, mobile people engage in associations for *social* reasons. The celebration of commonalities in associations creates friendships and common orientations that arise from internal-clarification processes about the peculiarity of the group in question and how this specificity can meaningfully be linked to the society in which the mobile people live. This process mediated by associations makes possible the use of group-legitimated self-descriptions that are both generalising and individualising (Matas and Pfefferkorn 2000). It is this definition of a legitimate peculiarity that allows the group to constitute a community that can engage with other collective actors as well as institutions and ask for social recognition—and thereby to construct a collective existence outside the association as well. In doing so, and in producing social capital, associations also help improve the quality of life in the place where they act.

In summary, the motives of transnationally mobile people to become involved in associations are very similar, and depend more on the moment of engagement than on the individuals' origins. Mobile people typically have few ties when they arrive in a new place. The motive for searching for an association is, therefore, primarily to secure better living conditions. After some time in the country of destination and

after dealing with basic material problems, identity-based questions frequently surface. Issues of personal dignity are solved at the same time that a new identity is stabilised in both the here and now and the place of origin. Through this process, the search for sociability often begins, whether in the association or in the new place of living. Only then does the question of transmitting one's own specificity to one's children, who usually know their origins only from holidays, arise and assume increasing significance. Here too, the association, as we have shown, plays a crucial role. Transnationally mobile people's motives for volunteering, therefore, seem to change in the course of time from being instrumental, to subjective, to social.

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