

Transnational mobility among early-career academics: gendered aspects of negotiations and arrangements within heterosexual couples

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ABSTRACT

Today, transnational mobility is often presented as indispensable for a successful academic career. This institutionalisation of transnational mobility for young academics has important effects in (re)producing or transforming gender inequalities. Building on the results of a qualitative study conducted at three universities – Zurich (Switzerland), UCLA (U.S.A), and Cambridge (UK) – this paper examines the mobility experiences of early-career academics and their partners and seeks to understand the gendered mechanisms underlying mobility patterns. Drawing on three case studies, this paper focuses on the negotiations and arrangements of mobile couples. Each case study represents a different ideal-typical pattern of how gender is entangled with mobility. We show how gender is ‘done’ and ‘undone’ by the academics and their partners throughout these mobility trajectories, and how these couples’ negotiations and practices are closely entangled with gender representations that are structurally anchored in labour markets and discursively expressed within the wider social environment. As such, this paper questions the dichotomy between economic men and social and cultural women sometimes reproduced in studies on highly skilled migration. Furthermore, the findings challenge earlier studies that suggest a causal link between mobility and the leaky pipeline by showing that important transformations with regard to gender relations are occurring.

KEYWORDS

Transnational mobility; academic researchers; gender relations; tied migration; inequality

Introduction

Today, transnational mobility is often presented as an indispensable element in the career trajectories of young academics. In many countries, stays abroad at other universities are considered a necessary part of an academic career, the rationale being that, in order to be successful, academics must establish transnational scientific networks and broaden their academic horizons by experiencing different academic contexts (see also Bilecen and Van Mol 2017). However, the transnational mobility of young academics has important effects in terms of gender inequality within academia, and this form of mobility has a

highly gendered character. Most studies conducted in this field point to the fact that women academics are less mobile than men, and the ‘imperative of mobility’ has been identified as an important factor contributing to the maintenance of gender inequality within academia (e.g. Ackers 2004; Jöns 2011). However, to date little is known about the mechanisms through which these gender inequalities are (re)produced, contested, or transformed in the context of academic transnational mobility. This paper contributes to tackling this research gap by asking how gender is articulated through the mobility patterns of young academics and, conversely, how this specific type of mobility reinforces or transforms gender relations. We address this question by focussing on the negotiations and arrangements of mobile academics and their partners in the context of their broader social environment.

We first present our theoretical lenses, followed by a short description of the methodology. At the core of the paper are three case studies that are described and analysed with regard to the gendered negotiations and arrangements within the couples. These empirical case studies highlight the complex gendered (re)configurations enacted by early-career academics and their partners in a context of mobility. We argue that throughout the mobility trajectories, gender is ‘done’ and ‘undone’ (West and Zimmerman 1987; Deutsch 2007) by academics and their partners. As such, we identify important transformations that are taking place with regard to gender relations. Gender dynamics within mobile couples are diversifying, and they contribute to the shifting and blurring of gender boundaries, although academics and their partners are grappling with complex underlying processes related to structural issues and historically anchored gender representations. We argue that, when it comes to academic mobility, gender inequalities take on new shapes and acquire a complexity that goes beyond the ‘traditional’ representations of gender inequality we often find in the literature.

Gender and academic mobility: theoretical lenses

Despite the significant improvement in recent decades in gender equality in higher education in all European countries and beyond, women are still having difficulties in getting ahead in research careers (Le Feuvre 2015; NSF 2015; EC 2016). The literature interpreting the increasing gender gap in successive stages of an academic career, referred to as the ‘leaky pipeline’, offers two main theoretical approaches (Mason and Goulden 2002). The ‘work versus family’ hypothesis focuses on the effects of the institutionalisation of the sexual division of labour, which assigns women responsibility over childcare and men the role of breadwinner, thereby directly impacting academic careers. The ‘glass ceiling theory’ identifies patterns of overt or hidden discrimination that stands in women’s way to the top. A third explanation focuses on the ‘imperative of mobility’ for academic career progression. Indeed, several studies indicate that the necessity of geographic mobility for academic success partly explains why women often drop out en route to top positions (e.g. Ackers 2003, 2004; van Anders 2004; Ackers and Bryony 2008; Leemann 2010; Leemann and Boes 2015). Research on gender and academic mobility has shown that female academics tend to be less geographically mobile than men. For example, Jöns (2011) observes that although the gender ratio of international scholars in the United States has been diminishing in recent decades, it still amounted to 65% men versus 35% women in the 2008–2009 academic year, suggesting that women have more

difficulty in engaging in transnational mobility. Other studies depict the important impact of family ties upon the propensity for mobility. The proportion of female mobile academics starts to decline when they develop affective and family ties, while the impact of these ties is lower among men (Ackers 2003). Furthermore, married women are also less transnationally mobile than single women during the postdoc period, whereas for men no significant difference is observed (Mogu rou 2004). These gender-differentiated patterns of mobility not only concern the academics as primary migrants, but also extend to their partners and families. Compared to men, female academics are more likely to be married to other academics and to experience the so-called dual-body problem, in which the partners – both confronted with a high demand for mobility – have to coordinate their career plans (McNeil and Sher 1999; Rusconi and Solga 2007). Female academics also more frequently follow their partners to a new location as so-called tied migrants (Ledin et al. 2007) without always finding a job corresponding to their qualifications and experiencing a devaluation of their scientific knowledge (Ria o and Baghdadi 2007).

However, even though these studies point to sharp gender inequalities as regards the mobility of academics, we argue that there is a need to tackle this topic further. We still do not understand the mechanisms through which these gender inequalities are produced, reproduced, or potentially transformed by transnational mobility. To provide answers to this question, we propose to link insights from migration and gender theory with the analysis of the mobility of highly skilled people.

The transnational mobility of early-career academics is generally understood as a specific type of highly skilled migration that has to be located within broader economic processes of global restructuring, such as the development of ‘knowledge societies’, the internationalisation of education and the standardisation of education programmes in universities (Bell 1973; Sassen 1991). Although the morphology of the movements of early-career academics is different from that of settled, unqualified migrants, we argue that it is theoretically fruitful to link it with insights from migration and gender theory (for a similar argument, see also Findlay 1996; Sondhi and King 2017).

This endeavour is important in two regards for our purposes. First, research on highly skilled migration often focuses on the workplace and on career trajectories, dealing with highly skilled migrants as if they were isolated – usually male – individuals circulating alone (Kofman and Raghuram 2005). Aside from a few recent and notable exceptions (e.g. Leung 2013; Ryan and Mulholland 2014a; Shinozaki 2014), family migration, tied migration, and larger social networks have largely been ignored in this field of study, while they have been extensively theorised and studied in the gender and migration literature. Social and family networks are considered by the latter as particularly important to understanding why people leave and with whom, who is going where, who does and does not migrate, and in which ways these processes are gendered (Boyle and Halfacree 1999; Mahler and Pessar 2006; Dahinden 2010; Kofman and Raghuram 2015). We argue that these insights can help us understand the complex gendered processes underlying the mobility pattern of academics. That is why we are interested here in couples and their negotiations and arrangements, and on how these negotiations and arrangements are linked to mobility practices.

Second, studies on highly skilled migration have been criticised for often following the model of a rational and work-oriented male that reproduces the dichotomy of the

productive man and the reproductive woman. This underlying bias is not only problematic as such, but also, and more importantly, indicates that studies on highly skilled migration have not yet adequately addressed the changing role of mobile women in contemporary labour markets (Raghuram 2004). Studies tend to overwhelmingly represent women as 'trailing wives'. By doing so, research not only neglects women's role as primary migrants, but also reduces them to 'passive' followers without further investigating their life experiences as tied movers. More recently, work by Ryan and Mulholland (2014b) on highly skilled migrants in London's financial sector has provided new insights into wives' experiences of mobility by revealing their active role in developing new social ties.

Our argument dovetails with those recent bodies of research that explore the role of family in the strategies of highly skilled migrants and challenge a terminology that tends to reproduce gender stereotypes.

A gender perspective allows us to understand the conditions under which men *and* women academics potentially engage in mobility as primary migrants *or* tied movers, and to consider men's and women's practices in their diversity, attesting to the interplay of different gender representations and practices. We apply a constructivist gender perspective (Butler 1990; Lutz 2010), which maintains that gender is actively reproduced and transformed – 'done' and 'undone' (West and Zimmerman 1987; Deutsch 2007; Risman 2009) – in social practices and interactions. In other words, we focus on the interactional level and explore how academics and their partners perform gender in ways that may reproduce or challenge gender differences. By including practices that do not conform to conventional conceptions of the masculine and the feminine, we highlight the diversity and variability of gender configurations and thus gain insight into the question of the reproduction or transformation of gender inequalities.

Methodology

This paper is based on a study conducted at the University of Zurich (Switzerland), the University of California, Los Angeles (U.S.A), and the University of Cambridge (UK), consisting of qualitative interviews with early-career academics and, when in a relationship, with their partners. The universities have been selected to ensure a level of diversity in terms of local and national academic contexts. Early-career academics are defined as scholars who have obtained their PhDs within the past 10 years and who hold an academic position ranging from a postdoctoral position to a tenured professorship. In total, 52 academics and 19 partners were interviewed between December 2013 and April 2015.

The three case studies presented here involve academics who moved abroad with their (opposite-sex) partners on a fixed-term contract (or fellowship) and who had not yet secured a permanent position. They were selected because they provided interesting examples of how the decision to move together was made and what effect it had on the partners. Beyond these commonalities, the case studies illustrate three different ideal types – in Weber's sense (1992 [1904]) – of mobility patterns, and they allow us to gain a better understanding of the gendered mechanisms that facilitate or constrain transnational mobility and the impact of mobility upon the couples' gender configurations.

Each case study is composed of three tape-recorded interviews: a biographical narrative interview (Rosenthal 2007) and a narrative network interview with the academic,

complemented by a semi-structured interview with the partner. The interviews were conducted in English in the first two case studies and French in the third. In the latter case, the quotations were translated to English by the authors. We applied a reconstructive and thematic data analysis strategy (Flick 2009) focussing on the couples' transnational mobility, in particular regarding the discussions they had among themselves or with other members of their social environment, their decision-making processes, the arrangements they came up with, their personal reflections regarding their common mobility, and their observations regarding its meanings. Each case was first reconstructed and analysed on its own, resulting in a particular ideal type. The cases were then compared to allow for generalisations regarding the gendered aspects of this type of mobility.

Results: three ideal-typical patterns of mobility

This section presents the results of the case studies one by one. Each case study starts with a brief outline of the academic's trajectory. We then examine the gender aspects of their discussions, negotiations, and arrangements with their partners in greater detail, focussing on what emerged as turning points in their common experience of mobility and highlighting the specificities of their gender configurations. The length of time between their decision to become mobile and the interviews varies between the case studies.

'From dual-career mobility to a conventional gender configuration': Leo and Elisa¹

Leo grew up, studied, and obtained his PhD in Switzerland. He then did a first postdoc at a Swiss university before going to the UK for a second postdoc. His wife, Elisa, is a medical doctor. She moved with him to the UK, where she worked at a university hospital. Their first child was born during their two-year stay abroad. A few years ago, they moved back to Switzerland, where they have been living since. They now have three children. Elisa works part-time in her medical specialty and Leo holds another fixed-term postdoctoral position.

The negotiations between Leo and Elisa regarding whether to go abroad were based on the core consideration that both would pursue their professional careers. Because Leo was thinking of doing a postdoc abroad after his PhD, he and his wife discussed it and were willing to move together. But Elisa had not yet completed her medical specialisation, and she considered it too early for her to move at the time because it would require her to quit her postgraduate assistantship, which she believed would have a negative impact on her career. Unwilling to leave on his own, Leo decided to delay his mobility and pursue a first postdoc in Switzerland. Because Elisa later received confirmation that work done abroad would count towards her medical specialisation title, the couple decided to move together as soon as Leo had obtained funding and finished his first postdoc. Once he got the fellowship to join a UK university, Elisa looked for a position there and found one matching her training requirements.

Leo and Elisa represent a typical case of a dual-career couple in which the partners manage to negotiate among themselves and within their respective institutional contexts in order to be mobile together while both having the possibility to pursue their professional careers. At this point, they were thinking and acting within what we could call

a ‘gender-equal configuration’: although Leo induced the move, their mobility was organised such as not to be detrimental to Elisa’s career. Beyond their willingness to negotiate together and their ability to set up an arrangement that would take into account the professional prospects of both of them, the structural context also worked in their favour. For instance, the fact that the medical association in Switzerland recognises, under certain conditions, training work done in the UK facilitated their mobility.

Leo and Elisa had their first child during their stay abroad. After a short maternity leave, Elisa went back to work part-time. They easily found a place for their child at the day-care of the hospital where Elisa worked. Access to day-care infrastructure allowed Leo and Elisa to work and pursue their professional goals, thus illustrating the impact of structural contexts on individuals’ practices – and couples’ configurations. However, an asymmetric pattern anchored in the sexual division of labour and deep-seated representations regarding ‘natural mothering’ developed: after they had their first child, it was Elisa who reduced her work hours and combined her professional activities with her role as a parent.

After a two-year stay in the UK, Leo, Elisa, and their child moved back to Switzerland. Leo had not quite finished his research activities, and he probably could have extended his stay in the UK. But as Elisa was on unpaid leave and had to return to her job in Switzerland, Leo decided to move back as well. Finding a day-care in Switzerland turned out to be extremely difficult. Since Elisa had to work full-time and he was jobless, Leo decided to stay at home and take care of their child, postponing his job search until they had obtained a day-care spot. With Elisa as the primary earner and Leo as the primary caregiver, their family configuration after returning to Switzerland did not conform to conventional parenting roles. However, the interviews show that this configuration changed radically thereafter.

One year after returning to Switzerland, Leo started a new postdoc there. In the following years, he and Elisa had two more children. Elisa changed jobs several times, because, as she explains, she had to deal with sometimes difficult superiors in a male-dominated profession where it was hard to obtain a part-time position. Furthermore, she adds that she found herself caught in a tense situation with both Leo and with her colleagues, as her professional and family obligations conflicted with each other:

If I had to do extra hours, I asked my colleagues, ‘Could I leave today? I have to pick up the kids and if I don’t leave in ten minutes I’ll be stuck in traffic on the *Autobahn* and I’ll be late’, and then I have to call [Leo]: ‘Can you go and get them? I’m late’, and then I always got these [comments] from him and the others. [My colleagues say], ‘It’s always you who has to leave’, and [Leo] says, ‘You can’t be organised; that’s why I have to leave my stuff and go earlier’, so I was always caught in these struggles. [Partner interview]

Eventually, Elisa obtained a part-time position in her medical specialty that allows her to better combine work and family and that she herself considers as ‘actually the best option for when you have a family’ [Partner interview].

We observe here that Elisa adapted her work situation to her family constraints, reducing her working time in order to free up time for her domestic obligations. As for Leo, he also considers that his life has changed as a result of having children:

Before, let’s say, I was working between eleven and 13, 14 hours a day. And of course, you are completely free, you can organise yourself, it’s not a problem whatsoever, you can go there

over the weekend if it can speed up your experiments and stuff. And when you have a family, you better not do that anymore [laughs], because it may be that your wife doesn't agree with it. So I of course work quite a bit less, and also weekends are weekends now, so I really stay at home. [Biographical interview]

The change for Leo appears to be in that he has lost the flexibility to work long days and extra hours on weekends. However, he says that the pressure comes from his wife and he has not really adapted his work schedule in order to be more family oriented.

Leo and Elisa's current way of organising their family life is consistent with the statistical tendency in Switzerland among couples with children: the man works full-time while the woman works part-time and takes care of the children (OFS 2014; Tettamanti 2016). Their gender configuration now follows the sexual division of labour that attributes the responsibility for domestic work to women. Elisa is well aware of this fact:

I think it's also about how you, yeah, it's still this model you have in your mind of which responsibilities belong to women and which ones belong to men, I think. His [responsibility] is to go to work and help in the evening. But get the tires changed, wash the car, inside and out, it's all my business, do the insurance, do the payments, and I have to ask him, 'Could you do this? Could you do this?' And so it's also about discussing these things as your family model changes from kid to kid, or from one life stage to another. [Partner interview]

Parenting – and not mobility – seems to have been the crucial factor, the turning point, in the changes to their gender configuration, from gender-equal to 'reversed' roles, and then to conventional gender roles within the family. The changes have come step by step, or, as Elisa says, 'from kid to kid'.

This case study exemplifies the ideal-typical pattern 'from dual-career mobility to a conventional gender configuration' in which the partners manage to maintain gender-equal arrangements in a situation of mobility as long as they do not have children. However, over their life course, it is as if hegemonic gender arrangements catch up with them. Becoming parents constitutes a turning point in that regard, as structurally anchored and internalised conventional roles resurface at this point. Structural elements such as the (un)availability of childcare facilities and external contingencies related to men's and women's jobs also contribute to enabling or hampering gender-equal arrangements (for a similar argument, see Chesley 2011).

'Female primary mover – male tied mover': Amy and Jeremy

Amy grew up and studied in the United States. She met her husband Jeremy in graduate school, where they both obtained PhDs. She then wanted to pursue a career in academia, while he did not. Because she obtained a two-year postdoctoral position in Switzerland, they moved to Switzerland together. They then went back to the United States and soon after, Amy's advisor in Switzerland offered her an Oberassistentin position² in his department if she was willing to relocate to Switzerland. Amy and Jeremy eventually decided that she should accept. Jeremy quit his job in the United States and they both recently moved back to Switzerland.

The interviews indicate that Amy and Jeremy never tried to organise their mobility as a dual-career couple, but as couple in which the female partner's career is given priority to the detriment of the male partner's professional prospects. The career perceived as more

constraining in terms of geographical flexibility is prioritised in the common trajectory of the couple, regardless of gender considerations. Indeed, Jeremy recalls that it was clear to both of them early on that Amy's willingness to pursue an academic career implied being mobile, and that he would follow her:

As the relationship got serious and we started to think further ahead, it was sort of by default that we would follow wherever she went, because it's much more difficult to have a career in academia if you are fixed, if you are, you know, stuck in one place. [Partner interview]

The interviews reveal that Amy's professional aspirations were an important aspect of the couple's discussions, and that their decision to move back to Switzerland was based on several considerations. First, they both realised that they would need to relocate anyway because of the lack of academic opportunities for Amy where they lived in the United States. Second, as Amy explained, she would have struggled to find another professional career if they had decided to stay. Third, Jeremy indicated that, overall, they were both unhappy during that period in the United States. He eventually concluded that, by going back to Switzerland, the situation would be better for at least one of them, and that it was the best option for them as a couple.

However, they both anticipated that it could be challenging for Jeremy to find a job there. Amy says she was truly concerned about Jeremy's situation as a tied mover, and she mobilised the people she knew in Switzerland to talk about it and find out about job opportunities for him. Before moving, they figured that he might be able to teach in bilingual or international high schools that wanted native English speakers.

The following spring, Amy moved back to Switzerland, joined by Jeremy a couple of months later. He had asked his employers in the United States for permission to finish his work from Switzerland, but as they refused Jeremy quit his job. Since his return to Switzerland, he has come to realise that not speaking German is a bigger obstacle to finding work as a teacher than they had expected. The interview with Jeremy indicates that the uncertainty of his professional prospects weighs heavily on him, a situation that also worries Amy:

So now we are really in the middle of a bit of crisis mode because he had given the impression that working was not so important to him, but now he's realised it's actually more important than he thought and he feels useless, and, yeah. It's a bad, bad situation to be in. [Network interview]

In other words, Amy and Jeremy are confronted with a mobility constraint often experienced by tied movers, namely their employability in the country of destination. However, in their atypical gender configuration, in which the male partner follows his wife, the negotiations and 'gender troubles' take on a particular form.

The interviews also reveal that their social environment reacted in particular ways as regards their atypical – 'genderly undone' – configuration. Amy and Jeremy are aware that they represent a rather unusually gendered mobility pattern compared to friends and colleagues who engage in mobility, as observed here by Jeremy:

I don't think I know anyone else who has followed the wife ... I am trying hard to think, but ... I can't think of a single example right now, where they have followed the wife's career. [Partner interview]

Jeremy explains that, while their American friends who have completed PhDs understand the need to be mobile in order to pursue an academic career, their non-academic friends did not understand their decision to move back to Switzerland for Amy's career. One of Jeremy's best friends was particularly derogatory about their mobility decision, as Amy recounts:

I didn't have conversations with him, but I know that, based on what [Jeremy] told me, he was very, very discouraging and rather mean about the whole thing [laughs]. He said this ridiculous thing like, 'It sounds like [Amy] is just doing this for status'. [Biographical interview]

Amy also had an arduous conversation with one of her friends in the United States:

She was more like, you know, 'Your husband is here, your friends and family are here, you need to figure out something to make your life work here, rather than, you know, dragging your husband'. It was sort of like a 'you are being a bad wife' conversation [laughs], yeah, pretty sexist, really. [Biographical interview]

Even though part of this lack of understanding is probably about mobility as such – leaving the country and moving abroad – it is also marked by normative gender expectations about what men and women should do. These expectations also appear more or less implicitly in the attitudes Jeremy faced at his job when he decided to quit:

I'd never had anyone say something like, 'How could you follow your wife for her job and give up your own?' But [Amy] and I have talked about it a lot, and I think she's probably right that I wouldn't have gotten quite as much grief from [my employer] about it if I was a woman and I had said, you know, 'My husband has a great opportunity to continue this project in [Switzerland], so we are moving'. They probably would have said, 'Yeah, okay, that makes sense'. But I didn't get any of that. [Partner interview]

The attitudes and gendered representations of their social environment have in turn had an impact on how Amy and Jeremy deal with their mobility situation, even though it is difficult to tell where the pressure comes from, as Jeremy explains:

It can be really hard to tell sometimes if the pressure one feels, to go back to gender roles, is really there, or if it's all self-inflicted. Because I never viewed it like, 'Well, you know what, I made a sacrifice, I moved to Switzerland again for Amy because she loved her job, and that's okay'. Instead I always feel [...] like I've somehow failed because here I am unemployed rather than, 'Well, I was a good husband, good partner, for agreeing to come here'. And I think that that must somehow be wrapped up in being a guy [...]. I just don't know if it's all in my head or if sometimes you pick up on things from other people that they do expect me to have a job and be the one bringing in the bread and all of that [long pause]. [Partner interview]

This case study represents the ideal type of the 'female primary mover – male tied mover' mobility pattern. It exemplifies an atypical gender configuration in that it does not correspond to prevailing representations of gender relations and gender roles anchored in the broader societal context. It represents a 'gender-troubled' configuration: Amy and Jeremy are struggling with these gender representations, which they have internalised, and which are also expressed in their environment.

'Male primary mover – female tied mover': David and Miriam

David grew up and studied in France up to the master's level. He then did a PhD in Belgium, where he met his wife Miriam, who was doing a master's at the same university.

After his PhD, he did a first postdoc in France, commuting weekly between Belgium and France for a year. He then obtained a three-year postdoctoral fellowship and is currently conducting the first part of this fellowship in the United States. Miriam quit her job in Belgium and moved with him to the United States.

When they decided whether to move abroad, David and Miriam illustrated the configuration of a couple in which one of the partners is career driven, while the other considers changing professions without having clear career prospects. As such, their mobility pattern shares similarities with the one described in the second case study, but with important differences related to gender.

The interviews reveal that the idea of being mobile initially came from David. Wanting to pursue a career in academia after his PhD, he wrote a fellowship proposal for a three-year postdoc in Belgium, including a one-year stay at a university in the United States. The idea of moving abroad was thus in the air, but it did not result in much discussion, and David could not imagine any downsides to an experience abroad for Miriam, as he recalls:

Somehow, we didn't discuss it very much because I did not really offer her much of a choice, you know [...]. I don't know, it seemed to be such a positive experience, you know, to be able to leave [...], that I couldn't really see how it could be a problem. [Biographical interview]

As for Miriam, she recalls that, while she was surprised at first when David announced his intention to be mobile, she then came to agree that she would follow him if the opportunity arose. She also states that she really disliked the job she had before leaving and was considering shifting her professional orientation altogether. However, like Jeremy, she expresses some reluctance about being a tied mover:

But the fear of moving to the States, that was different, like, 'Ah, I will be losing my independence', because even if this job [in Belgium] was a shitty job, it allowed me to be completely, well completely, almost completely independent, you know? We were each paying a more or less equal part of the rent; I was paying a bit less because, well, also proportionally with my income, and yeah, and I had money to do what I wanted, and do my own stuff, yeah. [Partner interview]

Thus, before being mobile, both partners worked and performed the 'breadwinning' duties more or less equally. Their mobility as a couple resulted in one of the partners becoming financially dependent on the other. Miriam worries that their gender configuration, in which the male partner is the sole – or main – breadwinner, will cause her to lose her financial independence. As for David, he seems to be comfortable with their new configuration.

When Miriam arrived in the United States, she immediately applied for a work permit, as her visa status allowed her to do so. The process takes several months, and David explained that, in the meantime, Miriam could possibly find small jobs or take classes to stay busy, emphasising that there was no pressure on her to have an income. As for Miriam, she stated that the first months of their stay were really hard because she did not know what to do and experienced moments of depression. At some point, she befriended a woman working at a store that was looking for a part-time employee. Miriam jumped at the opportunity. This part-time job has allowed her to not only break out of her isolation, but also recover some financial independence:

And for me, it feels good, too, because I'm not always depending on [David]. I left with some savings, but, well, savings are gone fast. [...] I know that I depend on [David] financially, somehow, because he'll make ... so he's probably always made more money than I have, but well, just being able to tell myself, 'I'm contributing, actually'. And I can go out with my girlfriends without asking [David], 'Hey, can I have some money?' [Partner interview]

When it comes to having children, David and Miriam both say they want to become parents one day. But Miriam explains that she does not feel ready yet and expresses concern at becoming a mother before finding her own professional focus and being able to support her family financially. In doing so, she resists the gendered representations of work–family arrangements presented by her former colleagues, who suggested that she take advantage of not working while in the United States to have children. As she states, she does not want her stay in the United States to be a maternity experience.

This case study exemplifies a modification of the couple's gender configuration towards asymmetrical roles between the partners in the context of mobility. It exemplifies the ideal type of the 'male primary mover – female tied mover' mobility pattern. Although their joint decision to move together did not involve difficult discussions, their gender configuration in mobility is still questioned by the female partner. While David has clear ideas about a career and expects his wife to follow him, Miriam is afraid of losing her financial independence and struggles with the idea of having a child in their new gender configuration as a mobile couple. This ideal type also demonstrates that being a female tied mover does not necessarily entail having conventional gender values, but that women might develop particular strategies in trying to get out of the dependency induced in such situations.

Discussion: multiple gender configurations in a context of mobility

The three case studies depict very different ways in which the academics and their partners organise their common trajectories in a situation of mobility, each case study representing a different ideal-typical pattern of how gender is entangled with mobility. Through the analysis, we have gained insight into how these gender configurations are discussed, negotiated, and (re)arranged between the partners in the context of their broader social and institutional environments. Our case studies do not entirely confirm earlier studies: mobility does not inevitably reinforce conventional gender practices. It can lead into a variety of patterns, including atypically gendered configurations.

The first ideal type, 'from dual-career mobility to a conventional gender configuration', shows how couples may successfully manage to coordinate two careers equally while engaging in mobility. However, there are some limits to this dynamic, resulting in what we could refer to as a 'rebound of convention' over time: parenting is an especially important turning point in a couple's dynamics (Yavorsky, Kamp Dush, and Schoppe-Sullivan 2015). Having children – and here that is not directly linked to mobility – can activate historically anchored representations about the partners' roles as fathers and mothers, slowly changing the gender relations within the couple towards more conventional ideas of the masculine and feminine. At the same time, the successive changes in Leo and Elisa's gender configuration point to the connection between the individual and interactional levels, on the one hand, and the wider structural environment, on the other.

The second ideal type, 'female primary mover – male tied mover', represents an unconventional gender configuration. This case study provides insight into the conditions under

which women are able to move abroad as primary movers followed by their tied partners and the 'gender struggle' such an atypical configuration triggers. The male partner's dissatisfaction with his professional situation prior to mobility may be a decisive factor for the realisation of this pattern. This interpretation needs to be investigated further, but the professional 'footlooseness' of the male tied partner – either because he is unfulfilled by his job or because his work activities are geographically transferable – appears to be a critical factor in the implementation of this mobility pattern, as has been observed in other interviews and suggested by Ackers et al. (2000).

The third ideal type, 'male primary mover – female tied mover', is a more widespread pattern of tied mobility than the second. It has often been emphasised in the literature on highly skilled mobility and resulted in terms such as 'trailing wife' and 'sacrificed wife' (Raghuram 2004). However, we argue that without considering the tied partner's experience or the negotiations within the couple, an important research gap remains. The results here shed light on the subjective experiences of female tied movers and on the mechanisms at work in this situation. We observe that this pattern is not implemented without resistance from the female tied partner, resistance that in turn questions gender representations that reproduce the dualism between paid and unpaid work, productive and reproductive labour.

Moreover, several crosscutting elements emerge from the case studies. First, mobility can trigger a transformation in a couple's gender dynamics and cause the partners to rearrange their gender configuration more asymmetrically in a way that favours the career of the primary mover at the expense of that of the tied partner. In this regard, the structural context in which mobility unfolds contributes to shaping partners' personal and professional experiences. This context includes regulatory and social hurdles such as visa and work-permit requirements, the recognition of credentials and qualifications, and language needs, and their impact varies depending on the national or local contexts and on individual circumstances (Riaño and Baghdadi 2007). The case studies show that not speaking the language might jeopardise the partner's ability to enter the local job market, whereas mutual recognition of credentials and qualifications across countries facilitates a partner's ability to move together with a primary mover in an egalitarian configuration. These structural factors impact tied movers regardless of their gender. Second, these gender configurations are an object of discussion and negotiation among the couples and within their social environments. We have observed some 'gender trouble' as the academics or their partners expressed their discomfort, annoyance, or struggle regarding certain aspects of the gender arrangements in which they are engaged. Third, depending on who follows whom, the discourses differ. Depending on their gender, primary movers express different feelings and attitudes regarding their tied partners' experience of difficulties. Men can adopt a rather protective – paternalistic – attitude towards their female partners' following them, whereas women can express concern – and even guilt – about their male partners doing the same. These different attitudes can be interpreted as gendered expressions of feelings, which are a reflection of deep-seated conventional gender representations. Such an interpretation is confirmed by other interviews and by research on highly skilled mobility (Shinozaki 2014). Finally, it is important to note that social environments are gendered, which in turn has an impact on the actors and enables or constrains the couples' negotiations and arrangements. Indeed, couples that develop atypically gendered mobility patterns – female primary mover and male tied mover – have to

struggle against deep-seated gender representations that they have internalised and are confronted with externally. Stereotyped ideas about the masculine and the feminine – a useless man (because he is not working) and an over-ambitious woman (because she pursues her career) – are real challenges for such couples and can hamper their attempts to enact ‘genderly undone’ arrangements. In a similar vein, the social environment might reduce a female tied mover to her potential role as mother – given that she is not working – and she might have to struggle against such representations.

Conclusion: Are gender relations shifting towards less inequality?

Drawing on three case studies, this paper focuses on the gendered negotiations and arrangements of mobile couples and explores how gender is ‘done’ and ‘undone’ by the academics and their partners throughout their mobility trajectories. Applying such a ‘doing’ and ‘undoing’ gender approach (West and Zimmerman 1987; Deutsch 2007; Risman 2009) has allowed us to emphasise the importance of social interactions and provided us with a theoretical framework that makes it possible to explore the diversity of couple configurations, including atypically gendered configurations that challenge prevailing representations of the masculine and the feminine.

By depicting how gender is ‘done’ and ‘undone’ within couples and how these couples’ negotiations and arrangements are enabled and constrained by the structural context and gendered societal expectations, we have shed light on individuals’ resistance to or struggles against the gender arrangements they set up as a couple. We have also shed light on individuals’ discourses and attitudes, which vary according to their gender. Gender relations are dynamic, and this approach has enabled us to grasp the variability of gender arrangements over time. Indeed, mobility may represent a moment of transition in a couple’s trajectory. However, we have shown that (re)arranged gender configurations do point to a variety of patterns. As such, our findings suggest that the causal connection between the mobility requirement and the leaky pipeline is not as clear as other research has indicated, but rather show that important transformations with regard to gender relations are occurring and that mobility does not inevitably reinforce conventional gender practices. Nonetheless, becoming parents stands out as a key turning point in a couple’s configuration: it can cause the partners to conform more closely to ‘traditional’ conceptions of motherhood and fatherhood. Several authors (e.g. Deutsch 2007; Risman 2009) have highlighted the importance of the structural level in the process of doing and undoing gender. Change at the interactional level may be influenced by change at the structural level and, conversely, change at the interactional level has the potential to translate into structural change (Chesley 2011). Our results confirm the connection between these two levels, but the ways in which these levels are entangled needs to be investigated further.

Overall, our findings fit into larger debates on gender inequality. Some scholars have argued that progress towards gender equality has stalled (England 2010) and that, despite the many changes in how gender is enacted at the individual and interactional levels, the overall structure of social life has remained unchanged (Lorber 2000). In this regard, this paper supports the view that mobile academics and their partners engage in diversified gender practices, follow multiple gender conceptions, and sometimes challenge some gender conceptions while contesting or resisting others. As gender relations within couples change, female academics also engage in mobility as primary movers followed by

tied partners. Conversely, male academics might also increasingly face reluctance from their female partners in following them, blurring the gender boundaries between men and women. However, these dynamics require further investigation, for instance by including other ideal-typical gender configurations, such as ‘partners living apart’, ‘commuting primary mover’, and ‘commuting tied mover’. This further investigation would make it possible to deepen our understanding of the articulation between gender relations and academic mobility.

Notes

1. All names are fictitious, and some personal details and locations have been changed or withheld when considered necessary in order to ensure the research participants’ anonymity.
2. In Switzerland, an *Oberassistent-in* position is a fixed-term position as a senior teaching and research associate (see: <http://www.uniterm.uzh.ch/lists.php?char=O>, accessed 20.01.2017).

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