Home sweet home: Creating a sense of place in globally mobile working lives

Abstract

Globalization has transformed spatial relations, increasing the demand for mobility. Literature tends to see the de-emphasising of national identity and the foregrounding of a cosmopolitan identity as central to an individual's ability to navigate this global landscape. For individuals who are constantly moving the question is how do globally mobile workers navigate the intersection of identity, meaningfulness and place? This interpretivist study explores this question through an analysis of 68 semi-structured interviews with individuals engaged in different forms of global mobility, ranging from traditional expatriate assignments through to global commuting and business travel. Our findings highlight how a complex interplay between national and cosmopolitan identities influences the search for meaningfulness in the lives of these workers. Drawing on notions of meaning and place, we argue that employers should provide opportunities to access identity narratives though networking and other IHRM practices that enable these workers to create a sense of meaningfulness in their lives. Thus, we offer a contribution to identity studies and the field of global mobility.

Keywords: social networks, home, cosmopolitan identity; belonging, mobility, globally mobile workers, expatriates

Introduction

Human geographers have long since recognised the role of place and meaning in the increasingly complex ways in which international work unfolds (Beaverstock, 2018). The demarcation of globally mobile workers (GMWs) and the different challenges they face, has

only recently been given attention in the international human resource management (IHRM) literature (Haak-Saheem and Brewster, 2017). This raises questions not only about the way in which globally mobile work is enacted, but also the spatial aspects of mobility (Morley and Robins, 1995; Nowicka, 2007; Vaara, Tienari, and Koveshnikov, 2019). A more nuanced insight into the lived experiences of GMWs is offered by exploring the intersection between place, meaningfulness and identity from the fields of human geography and IHRM.

Over the past twenty-five years the range of forms of international work has become more diverse (Kirk, 2016; Kirk, 2020), ranging from international migrants to local elites (Beaverstock, 2018). In this article, we explore the experiences of corporate-assigned and self-initiated expatriates, assignees who return to their home country after completing a short assignment which may be days or up to one year in duration, individuals who engage in frequent business travel and global commuters who cross national borders to work in a different country on a daily, weekly, or in some rare cases as discovered in this project, monthly basis (Dickmann and Baruch, 2011). Participants in this article are globally mobile across a wide geographical region, encompassing the Middle East, Europe, Africa, the Americas and Asia Pacific, more specific details are discussed in the methods section. This variation in diverse types of mobility should not be ignored as the transient nature of such differing forms of work has implications for deriving the meaningfulness of place. This is important as failure to do so can create a sense of disengagement and associated identity struggles (Cresswell, 2017).

Following Cresswell (2014), we draw on the work of Lefebvre (1991) and Agnew (1987), to define the four fundamental aspects of place as 1) location (a physical place), 2) locale (a material setting for social relations), 3) a sense of place (an emotional attachment) and 4) as per Lefebvre, place as a social or socially-produced space. We use Korotkov's (1998, p. 55) definition of meaningfulness which 'refers to the degree to which life makes

emotional sense and that the demands confronted by them are perceived as being worth of energy investment and commitment'. For Cresswell (2014, p. 12) places are spaces 'which people have made meaningful'.

In this article, we argue that it is just as important to consider the role of 'place' for frequent business travellers and global commuters as it is for expatriate workers. Work for these individuals involves travel on an ongoing basis resulting in a form of permanent transience, captured by one of the participants in this study, a global commuter, who wryly gave his location as 'flight KL 6041 Seat 10A (Geneva)'. The type of global mobility in which individuals engage impacts on the extent to which they adjust to the overseas destination (Farcas and Gonçalves, 2017), highlighting the importance of place in a globalised world (Yu, 2018). However, the role of identity of GMWs and the intersection between identity and how meaningfulness of place is established is unclear. The lacuna in the literature relating to how the spatial and temporal dimensions of place influence identity work and therefore meaningfulness for GMWs is addressed in this article.

The extant literature has identified how place affects the assimilation of migrants (Moore, 2016), however, there is a need to explore the role of place in the context of GMWs. To do so, we move away from the notion of fixed place to examine the factors that influence an individual's ability to derive meaningfulness regardless of geographical place. Our study is novel because we adopt a broader perspective on GMWs in considering the experiences of individuals engaged in different forms of international work. We draw on concepts from human geography to add a new perspective, currently lacking, in the International Human Resource Management literature. We argue that the ability to create meaningful places affects individuals and their families, regardless of the nature of their international experience, thus global mobility is a social issue that is worthy of empirical research (Easthope, 2009). The increasing reliance on and requirement for GMWs underlines the implications for both theory

and practice and the need to understand the role of destination (Ridgway and Robson, 2018) and, subsequently, how individuals create meaningfulness in different places and spaces. To frame the study and advance knowledge, we pose the following research question:

RQ 1 – How do globally mobile workers navigate the intersection of identity, meaningfulness and place?

The article is structured into six sections. Following this introduction, a discussion about the geographical notion of place brings to the fore the transient nature of place and how GMWs derive meaningfulness in such contexts. Notions of cosmopolitan and national identity are explored in recognition of the role that place plays in shaping identities. The third section focuses on the influence of social networking in navigating tensions inherent in such global careers. The methods, findings, analysis and conclusion are presented in the remaining sections. The final section proposes directions for future research.

Geographical notion of place

Work is increasingly enacted in locations that are typically not formerly considered as places of work, such as airport lounges, on planes, trains and other non-traditional spaces. Globalization has transformed 'the social and spatial relationships between actors located in different parts of the globe' (Herod, Rainnie and Mcgrath-Champ, 2007, p. 251). It has resulted in 'new senses of placed and placeless identity' (Morley and Robins, 1995, p. 121), giving rise to the so-called 'Network Society' (Castells, 2010, p. xvii). Technological advancements such as the advent of mobile devices has enabled people not only to work in different places, but also to work while travelling (Felstead, Jewson and Walters, 2005). Virtual workspaces are enabling new forms of transnational practices (Andreotti, Le Galès and Moreno Fuentes, 2013) and the evolution of big data, social media and platform capitalism continue to foster workplace mobility (Pajević and Shearmur, 2017; Beaverstock,

2018). At the same time, global crises, such as 9/11 (French, Leyshon and Thrift, 2009) and the recent Covid-19 pandemic influence the extent and form of global mobility.

The historical notion of place as static, with the emphasis on borders and singular identities, has been reconstituted with place being seen as a socially constructed phenomenon which is 'never truly finished and always open to question and transformation' (Cresswell, 2009, p. 174). Relph (1976) argued that places are becoming placeless, characterised by an absence of attachment, due to increasing mobility. This has raised questions as to how individuals who are constantly travelling derive meaning from places that they visit (Usher, 2002). Although place may be a 'locus of identity' (Herod, Rainnie and Mcgrath-Champ, 2007, p. 254), that could enhance 'people's attachment to locality' (Yu, 2018, p. 579), this article moves beyond notions of physical place to consider how social spaces are also sites that individuals can derive meaning and engage in identity work to make sense of their working lives.

Identity, mobility and place

The varying nature and complexity of the relationships that individuals develop with places (Relph, 1976) forms the basis of the arguments that GMWs suffer from a disengagement (Fechter, 2007) and a sense of placelessness (Adams and van de Vijver, 2015) creating struggles (Alberti, 2014). Those who adopt this humanistic position, view mobility as a threat as individuals derive meaningfulness and security from having a fixed sense of place and an associated identity. Indeed, as Cresswell (2009, p. 176) notes, those who perceive mobility in this way assert, 'People connect a place with a particular identity and proceed to defend it against the threatening outside with its different identities'. Based on Social Identity Theory (Tajfel, 1972) proponents of this perspective assert that individuals gain 'emotional value and significance' from being members of a group, and this extends to membership of national or cultural groupings (Bonache, Langinier and Zárraga-Oberty, 2016, p. 61; Vaara, Tienari and

Koveshnikovi, 2019). Thus, place is held to be closely associated with cosmopolitan and national identity.

Counter arguments are presented in the form of the so-called ‘new mobilities paradigm’. This is a movement that ‘looks at culture and society through the lens of mobility’ rather than assuming a fixedness of place (Cresswell, Dorow and Roseman, 2016,p. 1788). This is reflected in the work of Cranston (2017), for example, who points to how the identity of Third Culture Kids is developed through mobility, not place. Accompanying such changes are differing discourses on the changing nature of identity. Easthope (2009) differentiates between perspectives that emphasizes the need for hybrid, flexible forms of identity (Bauman, 2001); those that see identity as relational and incomplete, and a geographical discourse of identification that recognizes the role that place plays in shaping identities. Places are seen to be actively constituted by mobility and are sites of heterogeneous (Massey, 1993) or multi-layered identities (Van Bochove and Engbersen, 2015).

Rather than adopting a fixed view of identity, it is more helpful to examine how identity work (Brown, 2015) and identity narratives (Ibarra and Barbulescu, 2010) help individuals to enact their globally mobile careers and establish a sense of identity and place (Scurry, Rodriguez and Bailouni, 2013). Identity is an ‘individual’s own notion of who and what they are’ (Watson, 2008, p. 131) and identity work is defined here as a process of internal self-reflection and social interaction with others through which individuals define and redefine themselves (Jenkins, 2014). Identity narratives are 'identity-stories' that 'plausibly hang together' (Brown, 2015, p. 27) and help individuals make sense of their lives. According to Bauman (2001), this is increasingly important as individuals who are constantly moving experience a constant dis-embedding and re-embedding in new places, and this requires an ongoing revision of identity. Failure to re-embed can result in feelings of isolation and loneliness associated with the global nomad (Kannisto, 2016). Research into the lives of

those who engage in the broad spectrum of so-called employment-related geographical mobility (Cresswell, Dorow and Roseman, 2016) indicates that individuals are able to 'create meaningful places' (Easthope, 2009, p. 66) depending on certain factors, such as their ability to develop supporting networks.

The extent to which individuals are able to adapt to a new culture is related to the way in which they navigate the contextual difficulties they face in certain locations (Rodriguez and Ridgway, 2019). For example, Rodriguez and Ridgway (2019) point to the challenges self-initiated expatriates (SIEs) face where structural and institutional impositions restrict their agency and identity work. Identities are thus dynamic and positional and bonds to places can be both positive and negative. As Easthope (2009, p. 73) notes, 'People can also identify against places, establishing their own sense of self by contrasting themselves with different places and people in them'. If an individual is unable to uncover meaning in relation to a place, or perceives that meaning is being prescribed by another, it may lead to feelings of self-alienation or inauthenticity (Lips-Wiersma and Morris, 2009).

It is held that individuals draw on discourses linked to place to aid in their identity construction (Scurry, Rodriguez and Bailouni, 2013). Such discourses can be transcendent and 'influential across space', but enable the individuals concerned to associate themselves with places that have positive connotations, for example, 'creative cities' such as Silicon Valley (Gill and Larson, 2014, p. 521). Phelps (2016, p. 3), on the other hand, proposes that the key to coping in a globalised world is through '"deterritorialized" ways of thinking about identity', where individuals re-construct their sense of place in different 'transnational social fields' rather than in particular, specific locations. The degree to which this is possible for all individuals is open to question and has led to suggestions that expatriates need to develop what has been variously called a 'multi-cultural identity' (Kohonen, 2005, p. 31), a 'global identity' (De Cieri et al., 2009, p. 244), or global mindset (Andresen and Bergdolt, 2016) an

‘international identity’ (Kraimer et al., 2012, p. 400) and a ‘cosmopolitan identity’. Defined here as an individual who is able to find ‘some form of connectedness and belonging’ between the place they are in and ‘humankind’ (Adams and van de Vijver, 2015, p. 327). Such identity work has been linked to the ability of the individuals concerned to develop and maintain networks (Kirk, 2016).

Social networking

As individuals move into new places, they seek to create a new sense of belonging, but this is tempered by different degrees of attachment to a place (Easthope, 2009). It is suggested that people are more or less ‘embedded’ (Granovetter, 1985) in their national culture and this impacts on the degree to which they identify with the culture in a new place (Mao and Shen, 2015; Ridgway and Robson, 2018). From a practical perspective, proponents agree on the importance of developing strong social networks to develop a cosmopolitan identity (Mao and Shen, 2015; Skovgaard-Smith and Poulfelt, 2018).

There are different ways to facilitate a sense of belonging and, thereby, we argue, create meaningful places. These ways include the development of global networks through institutionally mediated mobility programmes (Moriarty et al., 2015), the use of social media (Glanz, 2003) and other digitally-based, on-line ways of connecting (Polson, 2015). Indeed, the growth of communication technology has enabled the development of networks ‘despite distance and the passage of time’ (Baldassar, 2016, p. 159). The significance of social networks on the ‘identity building’ of those engaged in expatriation is emphasised by Clark and Altman (2015, p. 735) who argue that expatriates tend to form ‘social enclaves in order to facilitate a sense of “home”’. This may be achieved through transnational social spaces, such as joining expatriate clubs, attending churches, meeting in cafes, engaging in web-based chat forums and organizations that transcend national boundaries (Leonard, 2010). Others argue however, that engagement with transnational social spaces varies among different GMWs,

influenced by the host destination (Van Bochove and Engbersen, 2015; Harvey and Beaverstock, 2016).

Andreotti, Le Galès and Moreno Fuentes (2013, p. 56) assert that individuals can simultaneously 'feel part of a virtual global society, yet… strongly anchor their daily lives in their local communities'. Al-Ariss (2014) stresses the importance of enabling the development of networks with local communities as a means of support. This view is echoed by McNulty et al. (2018) who claim that these more informal mechanisms are vital to encourage lesbian, gay, bi-sexual and transgender employees to accept expatriate assignments. However, accessing such local, informal networks is challenging, if not impossible in some cases, such as the so-called Yongo networks in South Korea, membership of which are determined by birth (Horak and Yang, 2016). Social hierarchies and political struggles can also prevent those without 'locale-specific embeddedness' from accessing internal networks in multinational organizations (Levy and Reiche, 2017:, p. 869). Notwithstanding these difficulties, the consensus seems to be, that regardless of the form of expatriation, it is the responsibility of the employer to facilitate the development of networks to provide support, within organizations and within the local community (Cao, Hirschi and Deller, 2014; Vaiman, Haslberger and Vance, 2015; Wang and Varma, 2018). Extant literature, however, is confined to considering the impact of different forms of expatriation on an individual's sense of belonging. Findings from this study show, however that regardless of the type of mobility engaged in, individuals and their families are impacted in terms of their identity work and the degree to which they can create meaningful places. The next section outlines the methods used in this study to explore GMWs' ability to derive meaningfulness from place.

Methods

Research design

In this article, we are interested in how GMWs navigate the intersection of identity, meaningfulness and place. Data used in this article are drawn from two previous studies by the authors (see Ridgway and Robson, 2018; Kirk, 2020), in which similar qualitative, interpretivist methods were adopted, utilising similar sampling strategies and comparative interview guides which enabled data sets to be combined for this article.

The data were reanalysed using a 'place' lens, to surface how influential the role of place is in global mobility decisions that individuals make. The first author used a combination of purposive and snowball sampling to recruit 30 SIEs to participate in the study. This method was chosen as it is particularly effective in reaching difficult to access groups. SIEs selected included different genders, nationalities, overseas duration and family situation. The second author gathered data from 38 corporate-assigned expatriates (AEs) in a large multinational case organization with a presence in over 70 countries. The case organization sponsored the study and access was secured through an ESRC grant. Although the two studies were conducted separately, the researchers remained the same on both occasions, thus they retained the important tacit knowledge of the purpose and context of the original studies (Bishop, 2016), which in both cases, was to explore the lived experience of SIEs and AEs respectively.

The findings analysed in this article are based on 68 semi-structured interviews, with GMWs, conducted either face-to-face, by telephone or using a voice-over-internet-protocol (e.g. Skype), to accommodate the participants' preference. The duration of the interviews ranged from 30 minutes to two-and-a-half hours. Both authors conducted pilot interviews as part of their respective initial studies to inform the interview protocols. Table 1 presents the authors' respective interview guides.

[Insert Table 1]

Informed consent was secured from all participants prior to conducting the interviews; the interviews were digitally recorded and then transcribed. To ensure anonymity, pseudonyms have been used. A detailed list of participants is presented in Table 2.

[Insert Table 2]

We approached the interviews with the view that people are 'knowledgeable agents' who construct 'their organisational realities' (Gioia, Corley and Hamilton, 2012, p. 17), and it is beholden on the part of the researcher to faithfully convey the perspectives of these individuals. We therefore have sought to report verbatim comments from the research participants and engage in critical reflection, questioning our assumptions from multiple standpoints (Gergen, 1999).

Recognising the importance of rigour in qualitative research, we draw on the evaluative criteria proposed by Golden-Biddle and Locke (1993), namely authenticity, plausibility and criticality. Thus, we provide the reader with evidence of authenticity in the contextual information we present relating to the backgrounds of the participants. This demonstrates that we have a depth of understanding of the phenomenon under scrutiny, namely globally mobility. We argue that the topic is plausible as it has attracted much interest from others in the field and, we offer something novel in our contribution to understanding the role that a sense of meaningfulness and place play in a globally mobile world. Criticality is achieved by questioning the implicit, taken-for-granted-assumption that there are discrete and separate types of GMWs, all of whom experience unique category-specific challenges.

Data analysis

The data from the interviews has been interrogated utilising template analysis, a form of qualitative, thematic data analysis (King and Brooks, 2017). Template analysis is defined as, 'a method of thematically organising and analysing qualitative data which has been applied in

a broad range of research areas in the social sciences' (Brooks and King, 2014, p. 4). We chose this approach as it offers a systematic, yet not overly prescriptive way of analysing data that can be approached from a number of different epistemological positions (Waring and Wainwright, 2008).

Adopting an interpretivist stance, we followed the method outlined by Brooks and King (2014) in that we commenced by individually reading all the transcripts to develop preliminary codes. As per Brooks, McCluskey, Turley and King (2015) we sought to generate codes from the data rather than develop any a priori codes to avoid approaching the data with a blinkered view (Gioia, Corley and Hamilton, 2012). Through the first stage of open coding, we independently identified a number of first order codes, writing memos to record the rationale for the codes assigned. Codes included, for example, 'willingness to change self', 'choosing to fit in' and 'feeling different from others'. To avoid definitional drift, we compared and refined the coding; this led to the creation of second order thematic categories, such as 'cosmopolitan identity' and 'identify conflict'. Constant comparisons were made between the different codes generated as the analysis progressed, as advocated by Gibbs (2018).

In this way, we developed our final template through an iterative process (King and Brooks, 2017). The final stage led to the development of two broad theoretical dimensions, meaningful place and lack of belonging/meaninglessness; out thematic codes are shown in Figure 1.

[Insert Figure 1]

Findings and discussion

Cosmopolitan identity

The relationship between mobility and the development of a cosmopolitan identity (Skovgaard-Smith and Poulfelt, 2018) that transcends notions of a fixed sense of place (Devine-Wright, 2013), is a complex one. As Moore (2016, p. 387) suggests, 'local differences in identity and globalization affect migrants' relationships with both home and host culture, and indeed the ways in which they construct their transnational identities'. Findings from this study suggest that participants are divided as to whether they believe such an identity is the result of the experience of being globally mobile or, is a preparedness to be mobile, if required. Irvine, who has experience of expatriation in Singapore and business travel widely across Europe, Asia Pacific region and the Americas was emphatic:

> If we wanna be a global company, we inherently have to have people who have a global mindset and how do you get a global mindset? You don't get it sat in London or Minnesota or whatever…you have to go places and experience culture and how business is done… I think we have to have people who are moving from place to place. (Irvine, Manager, AE and BT)

Tristan, an assigned expatriate manager in the USA engaged in frequent international business travel to Europe, echoed this sentiment stating: 'To me mobility it's a mindset, … it's not about just getting up and moving, it's the openness to the idea of it'. This echoes Nowicka and Kaweh's (2007) view that cosmopolitanism is associated with a willingness to be mobile. Receptivity to different cultures and experiences was evident in the narratives of several participants, reflecting the concept of a global mindset (Andresen and Bergdolt, 2016). However, far from viewing mobility as an identity threat (Cresswell, 2009), some of our participants seemed to embrace the prospect of global mobility. For instance, Tristan said,

'I'm truly open to being anywhere' and Moira, an Executive, stated 'You could literally send me anywhere. If you asked me to go to Bombay today it wouldn't bother me one bit'. Some individuals elaborated on what made them so open to different places and their attitudes could be seen to be indicative of a strong, 'embedded' (Granovetter, 1985, p. 486) sense of national identity, paradoxically perhaps, leading them to derive meaningfulness from the process of experiencing different places. Such individuals may be more likely to also hold cosmopolitan identities (Skovgaard-Smith and Poulfelt, 2018) as national and cosmopolitan identities are not mutually exclusive (Beck and Sznaider, 2006). In fact, our findings show that there are degrees of embededdness with respect to both national and cosmopolitan identities which may influence GMWs' ability to generate the emotional attachment (Korotkov, 1998; Cresswell, 2014) necessary to derive meaning from only one, or multiple places. Tristan, for example, linked his willingness to be internationally mobile to being South African, asserting:

> We grew up looking out. We were this third world country in the southern hemisphere, much like Australians, New Zealanders and South Africans; we go walkabout. (Tristan, Manager, AE and BT, COM)

Geographic location, population density and the perceived degree of cosmopolitanism seemed to be key influences on the development of national and cosmopolitan identities and attitudes to global mobility. Indeed, cosmopolitanism is a concept associated with a willingness to cross borders and an appreciation of and respect for different people and cultures (Nowicka and Kaweh, 2009). As Jasper, a corporately assigned expatriate based in Belgium with regular business travel and short-term assignments to the Americas and other European countries, echoing Tristan's view said laughingly:

> I think the Dutch are much more willing to move. I think it's in our genes somehow from history, the multiple language skills, that Holland is too small anyhow. (Jasper, Executive, AE, BT and STA)

Here Jasper's talk suggests that Dutch people are more open to travel than some other nationalities. This may suggest that education and socialisation, in some national contexts, engenders cosmopolitan identities (Skovgaard-Smith and Poulfelt, 2018). On the other hand, it may be a form of post-hoc rationalisation in which the actors 'select' the aspects of their nationality that support the notion of a cosmopolitan identity. Building on Cresswell's (2014) argument that meaningfulness is triggered by emotional attachment, Jasper may be alluding to a degree of emotional detachment from his home country which makes him more open to moving to different places, echoing Nowicka's (2007, p. 1) argument that 'Mobility challenges the notion of home'. Alternatively, Jasper may simply be associating mobility with all Dutch people.

Regardless of whether the expatriation was self-initiated or corporately-assigned, we encountered individuals whose identity narratives were clearly linked to their lived experiences of global mobility and reflective of Cresswell's (2009, p. 170) argument that, 'Experience is at the heart of what place is all about'. As Iona, a corporately assigned expatriate based in Switzerland who frequently travelled internationally to the Asia Pacific region for business, told us:

> The other thing I like is every time you move country even in Europe you have to rethink yourself totally, all your references, the way you communicate and influence, the way you convince people has to change. (Iona, Manager, AE and BT)

For Moira, on assignment in the USA who has also completed a short-term assignment in Europe, it makes emotional sense to invest energy in seeking to derive meaning from the different locations that she visits. The idea of meeting and interacting with new people in the new locale and establishing an emotional attachment (Cresswell, 2014) was reflected in Moira's talk; 'So it's really just getting to know the people that we work with. That's always been attractive to me'. However, individuals whose talk was imbued with such sentiments of a cosmopolitan identity (Skovgaard-Smith and Poulfelt, 2018), were in the minority, even among those who were self-initiated. There was a degree of scepticism expressed as to whether constructing such an identity was possible for everyone. Billy, was clearly unconvinced:

> I don't think it's enough to drop someone into another country and assume they will become a more global person by parking themselves some place. All of us could give you examples of people who have moved abroad, lived for several years in another country and came back as narrow minded as they were when they started. (Billy, Technical Specialist, BT and STA)

Katrina, a manager who estimated that she spent 80% of her time travelling, was also sceptical, asserting 'I also know expats on my travels here who are no more worldly and global than somebody who sat here their whole career.' Simply positioning someone in a new location and locale (Cresswell, 2014) is clearly insufficient to engender a cosmopolitan identity i.e. 'an openness to cultural difference' (Skovgaard-Smith and Poulfelt, 2018, p. 130).

For some of those interviewed, their sense of identity was linked with their families' identities and their attitudes to different locations. For example, Matthew who used to commute from Manchester to Brussels on a weekly basis and transferred to an expatriate assignment in Belgium, explained how his wife was resistant to relocating to certain places.

For his wife, meaningfulness of place was linked to being near her wider family. This shows how physical place (location) (Cresswell, 2014) has a stronger meaning for some people than others. This was a key barrier to Matthew being prepared to accept an expatriate assignment, as he said; 'The only reason I'd ever refuse an assignment would be on the basis of what my wife said'. Eric, an executive on a corporately-initiated assignment in the US, reflected on his own experience of mobility emphasising the importance of his family's attitudes to his career:

> I think the older the kids get it's tougher on kids to move because who they are and how they identify themselves and how they grow up and how they get themselves orientated, that location, that stability is very important. (Eric, Executive, AE)

For most participants, the ability to create meaningful places, for both themselves and their families, was constrained by several key factors, not least their ability to identify with a place and derive emotional attachment through their access to social support networks.

Identification

The importance of social networks in facilitating cultural adjustment has been emphasised in research in the field of expatriation (Cao, Hirschi and Deller, 2014; Plöger and Kubiak, 2018). For example, Cohen, Duberley and Ravishankar (2012, p. 108) argued that the weaker the national ties a SIE has, but the stronger the 'web of social relations' they have outside of the country of origin, the more irrelevant notions of physical place become. This shows how place is a socially constructed space (Lefebvre, 1991; Cresswell, 2014). Mao and Shen (2015) on the other hand assert that strong networks, either within their home country or outside of it, will affect the degree to which they will develop an affinity with any particular national culture(s). Our findings supported this conclusion, but also reveal that individuals engaged in

other forms of global mobility (such as frequent business travel, global commuting etc.) rely similarly on people to enable them to create a sense of meaningfulness that transcends geographic location. This illustrates how an emotional attachment to either a location or a locale (Cresswell, 2014), or any social space, needs to be facilitated through social networks, supported as needed, by communicative technologies (Baldassar, 2016). Indeed, many participants emphasised the importance of social media and information systems to help them connect. However, these networks are not only formed of either family or friends. Instead, they appear to comprise of like-minded individuals, who, as Plöger and Kubiak (2018) assert, are more likely to have shared similar mobility experiences. For example, Tristan, explained:

> I've come to learn that home is where you lay your head. It's where your social network is. When I'm back in South Africa I feel like a stranger sometimes, even though my family is still there and I've got a lot of friends there, but I'm more at home with other foreigners. (Tristan, Manager, AE, BT and COM)

Many participants stressed the importance of networking. Moira told us that even when someone is travelling on business, they need to be 'a heavy networker' to maintain connections with the rest of the senior management team. However, as Paolo on assignment in the US commuting regularly to business units in Europe, noted:

> So the networking, depends on the people. The same like networking here, I mean some people they stay isolated, there are people they quickly connect with other expats or other people. (Paolo, Executive, AE)

It is through interactions with others in this way that identities are both self-narrated and negotiated (Czarniawska, 2013). Such connections do not need to be made through face-to-face interactions, as places (and therefore meaningfulness) can be socially produced

(Lefebvre, 1991) from both physical and temporal spaces. Therefore, online communication play an important role in enabling GMWs to engage in identity work to derive meaningfulness in the sometimes liminal spaces they inhabit. Notions of identification with, or attachment to or against physical places came through as a strong theme in our findings. Usher (2002, p. 44) postulated that globalization has resulted in a state of 'homelessness' where 'a sense of place, meaning and identity become insecure or no longer exist at all', however this did not reflect the lived experiences of some of our participants. Iona, asserted:

> Now you send me six months in Minneapolis and then eight months in Singapore and then three months Vietnam, I have no issue because I don't feel anywhere with an attach. But some people have a stronger attachment to a place. (Iona, Manager, AE and BT)

This comment is reflective of 'new mobilities paradigm' defined by Cresswell, Dorow and Roseman (2016, p. 1788) as a movement that 'looks at culture and society through the lens of mobility', rather than assuming a fixedness of place. On the other hand, some had an equally strong negative identification with their country of origin, reflective of emotional detachment, such as Eric stated:

> I want to be as far away from Holland as you can and I want to guarantee you never send me back. (Eric, Executive, AE)

This phenomenon was not restricted to individuals who were relocated by their organisations, as Sylvia, an SIE in the United Arab Emirates, explained:

> My son has blonde hair, blue eyes, he is quite different from…the local Middle Eastern people. People want to take pictures of my child because he was different [which led to] feelings and that identity does definitely relate

> to place. I don't think I'd realised quite how strong identity can shift when you move location. (Sylvia, Technical Specialist, SIE)

In short, such negative feelings, such as a lack of belonging, can affect anyone engaging in global mobility, regardless of the form and can result in identity conflicts that can have a profound effect on an individual's ability to engage in positive identity work and derive meaningfulness from a place.

Identity conflict

Some participants suggested that the contrast between their host and home country's cultural values invoked in them a greater sense of national identity than perhaps they had formerly held. This difference made it more difficult for them to derive meaningfulness in their adopted country, but resulted in them developing a stronger, positive identification with their place of birth. This, in turn, created an identity conflict for some as they identified against another location (Easthope, 2009). Such positive, nostalgic identity narratives with places are similar to those associated with organizations (Brown and Humphreys, 2002; Bardon, Josserand and Villesèche, 2015) and can transform the 'emotional geographies' (Walsh, 2012) associated with place. As Hiba, an SIE in the United Arab Emirates, explained:

> I think you romanticise your home a little bit more when you're far away, and I think you have a little bit more national pride when you're far away from somewhere. I identify more clearly and especially getting to know more Arabs and realising there is a difference in my culture to yours, and I feel closer to British culture than I did when I first moved here. (Hiba, Manager, SIE)

Unlike the findings from Skovgaard-Smith and Poulfelt's (2018) study, where participants were seen to denounce their national identity, we found that in some cases the opposite held

true. Jasper, an AE executive, expressed similar sentiments after completing an assignment to America, 'I must say I discovered in the US I was much more European than I thought'. Other participants pointed, not only to their own difficulties in deriving meaningfulness in different places, but also to the identity struggles experienced by their spouses and families. Alvin, described his and his family's experience of being sent on assignment:

> I have three kids and a wife and there have been many positives, they can speak several languages, they have been to different parts of the world and they are very culturally aware, but identity suffers in the sense of belonging. (Alvin, Executive, AE)

Such feelings of loneliness and isolation were recurring themes in our findings.

Isolation

Even for those individuals who can build relationships with people easily, our participants highlighted the problem with expatriation as a recurring facet of their globally mobile careers. As Carson, corporately assigned in the US, explained:

> There's a phenomenon too if you move too many times there's a sense of dread because in my experience, and some others I know, you say goodbye… you come in a new country, you've got to get your energy up to go out and meet people and a third of them leave every year of your friends. (Carson, Manager, AE)

Carson and his family had clearly exerted a lot of energy and commitment in deriving meaningfulness (Korotkov, 1998) from the different expatriate assignments they had engaged in over time. For them it no longer made emotional sense to repeat such efforts in the future. Unlike Skovgaard-Smith and Poulfelt's (2018) research that focuses on a single expatriate

community, evidence from this study shows how the lives of those who are required to engage in numerous expatriate assignments engage in an almost continuous process of cosmopolitan identity (re)formation as they dis-embed and re-embed in different locations. Furthermore, this highlights the importance of not only being able to develop deep bonds quickly (Skovgaard-Smith and Poulfelt, 2018) but also to be able to quickly emotionally detach from a place. For frequent business travellers and global commuters there are similar challenges, without arguably, the relative stability of just one 'fixed' physical place to which they return.

For some, the temptation appears to be to seek to create a home-from-home by connecting solely with other expatriates or those engaged in the same form of global mobility through transnational social spaces (Harvey and Beaverstock, 2016). For instance, global commuters talked about connecting with others global commuters. Frequent business travellers referred to themselves as a group of 'road warriors', showing how cosmopolitan identities are 'accomplished in the context of shared social spaces and conditions' (Skovgaard-Smith and Poulfelt, 2018, p. 131), but not, as in the case of the Amsterdam expatriates in their study, in fixed physical locations. Participants described accessing 'social enclaves' (Clark and Altman, 2015, p. 735) to create a new sense of belonging by identifying themselves as 'non-nationals' (Skovgaard-Smith and Poulfelt, 2018). Others sought but failed to establish networks, especially the families of those on corporate assignments. Interestingly, participants with children were divided on the issue of when was the best time to be mobile. Some said that they would prefer to be mobile when the children were younger, and others said that it was better when they were older. Lily, a manager AE currently based in Belgium, described the experiences of some of her team, 'I mean some of them again marriages have broken up over this, the depression of the wives because they're isolated in areas of the

world'. Another example she recounted showed the longer-term impact on the children of individuals who accepted a series of expatriate assignments:

> This Spanish girl doesn't know where home is, she doesn't know where she wants to go to uni, where she wants to live, you know, long or short term, she doesn't have any kind of places she calls home. (Lily, Manager, AE)

Lily's scenario presents an alternative argument to the findings of Skovaard-Smith and Poulfelt (2018) which were based on a single expatriate community and show that a series of expatriate assignments can indeed lead to rootlessness, non-belonging and a loss of sense of place. The challenges of maintaining networks and creating a sense of belonging without face-to-face contact also directly affected participants themselves, as Jack who travels frequently across the globe, explained:

> I learned to hate hotel rooms, and I hated having to change zip codes 27 different times... today I'm living with a child that doesn't have a clue as to where home was because of the number of places and times that we've moved. For him it has been wherever you are is where home is. We have no idea where we want to retire to now, my wife and I because we've moved so many times and made so many different friends in so many different places. (Jack, Executive, BT)

The loneliness and isolation, even for some engaged in business travel and commuting was clear. Whereas Skovgaard-Smith and Poulfelt (2018) imply that there is no rootlessness for those with a cosmopolitan identity, our findings suggest that this depends on the form and demands of the international work. Thus, even expatriates, if they are required to engage in numerous relocations, experience a sense of rootlessness as described by Jack and his family. Selina, an AE executive on assignment in the UK with frequent travel across Europe, said of

her own globally mobile career, ‘So in many situations when I’m travelling, I’m socially isolated so it’s the hotel room’. Even Moira asserted:

> People have the wrong impression sometimes that it’s [travel] glamorous. I mean some men I think enjoy it because they go to the bar, you know, they meet other guys. I don’t do that when I’m travelling, I stay in my room and have room service. (Moira, Executive, AE)

Some participants, on the other hand, explained how they actively avoid opportunities to develop networks and actively seek to maintain a cultural distance between themselves and others (Hall, 1966):

> You're a big fish in a small pond, and that can be quite noose-like in terms of… variety of people… the students and teachers at school were members of the British Club, and that reminds me of colonial rule. I don't want to socialise with the students that I teach in my bikini on a beach, I just find that quite awkward. That's where everyone goes out and if you're not part of that gang you're kind of an outsider to the British way of doing things. I didn't want to be part of that, so I excluded myself from that community. (Sylvia, Technical Specialist, SIE)

In avoiding socialising with members of the ‘British Club’, Sylvia might be seen to be resisting the associated ‘emotional value and significance’ (Bonache, Langinier and Zárraga-Oberty, 2016, p. 61) of that group and maintaining ‘authentic living’ (Lips-Wiersma and Morris, 2009) by exercising choice in her socializations. This presents a contrasting perspective to Clark and Altman (2015, p. 735) who argue that expatriates form ‘social enclaves in order to facilitate a sense of “home”’. Alternatively, Sylvia may be re-constructing her sense of place and deriving meaningfulness by accessing different identity

narratives (Ibarra and Barbulescu, 2010) through networks that transcend such local discourses.

Our findings and analysis suggest the embeddedness, or otherwise, of a cosmopolitan identity influences an individual's ability to generate an emotional attachment to a physical or social place. As depicted in Figure 2, this attachment governs the degree to which they feel it makes sense to invest emotional energy in trying to derive meaning from that space or place. This, in turn, influences the form(s) of global mobility with which they are willing to engage. For instance, a strong emotional attachment to their country of origin may mean that they are not prepared to relocate, preferring instead to commute. Conversely, a weak emotional attachment to a place may lead them to seek expatriate opportunities, at least initially. The experience of being mobile, in whatever form, serves to reinforce, or not, an individual's sense of national identity. However, such identity work is also shaped by contextual factors such socio-cultural features of different countries, such as attitudes to women, receptivity to foreign workers etc.

[Figure 2]

Thus, our findings show how meaningfulness of place is derived through a complex interaction between identity, social relations and the external environment.

Limitations, suggestions for future research, and managerial implications

One of the limitations of this research is that in terms of AEs, the data is derived from a single case organization. However, as this is a large multinational with a presence in multiple, diverse locations, it provides insights into notions of identity, meaningfulness and place in diverse contexts. The cross-sectional approach adopted here does not allow for exploring the interplay of identities and place over time. A longitudinal study would allow for a more in-depth examination of these phenomena.

Considering on-going global socio-economic change, particularly in the light of the recent Covid-19 pandemic, further research is needed into how workers can be supported in developing a global mind-set enabling them to derive meaningfulness from places.

The managerial implications of our findings are as follows: Managers must support GMWs in becoming aware of how their own and their family's identities are impacted because of engaging with different cultures. Meaningfulness of place can only be achieved through a degree of assimilation with the local culture by joining a network of like-minded individuals, which managers can facilitate. Extending Baldassar's (2016) argument that access to mobility and communication technologies is imperative to facilitate care across distance, we suggest that mobility and communication technologies are also critical to facilitate networks that enable GMW to derive meaningfulness from places.

Some expatriate living arrangements, for example, gated compounds, prevent assimilation; individuals in these circumstances could be 'living anywhere' and therefore can become isolated from the local community. While the notion of 'living anywhere' may be attractive to facilitate easy global relocation, it inhibits a sense of belonging a therefore negatively affects identity and the ability to derive meaningfulness from place. Indeed, the choice of location affects an individual's relationship with the home and host culture (Moore, 2016) and thus, their ability to develop support networks. We argue that if individuals have an appreciation of how meaningfulness, and therefore a sense of belonging, can be derived from places, they will be better able to navigate globally mobile lives. Managers can address this through policies to identify ways to bring communities together and provide GMWs opportunities assimilate with local cultures, even if this is on a temporary basis. Meaningfulness can be realised through learning the local language, interacting with both those in the countries concerned and others engaged in global careers in order to establish a strong network. Employers need to take account of not only GMWs, but also other people,

for example family members, who are affected by mobility demands by an employee's global career.

Organizations have a social responsibility to develop global mobility policies that recognise the ways in which workers derive a sense of meaningfulness from place. This may be facilitated through offering workers opportunities to network through mechanisms such as intranets, which we argue is key to GMWs identifying with places and spaces. Arguably, this is more important when there is a wide cultural distance between home and host countries (Harvey and Beaverstock, 2016). While organizations may provide such mechanisms, which allow stories and experiences to be shared among GMWs, there is a need for a more proactive approach to be taken. The act of mobilising GMWs should be viewed as an ongoing process rather than an isolated task. Good practice may witness the provision of a cultural awareness training event and, where appropriate, sourcing local accommodation, however these activities are undertaken as isolated tasks, and little is done that considers 'nesting' and how individuals continue to assimilate throughout their careers.

Conclusion

In this article we respond to the question 'how do globally mobile workers navigate the intersection of identity, meaningfulness and place?'. The findings from this article contribute to the discussion about the intersection between identity, place and meaningfulness in a global context; an area that has not received recent attention in the extant literature. We extend the work of Mao and Shen (2015) and Skovgaard-Smith and Poulfelt (2018) as our findings position not only physical but also social spaces as sites of identity work and meaningfulness for GMWs. We argue that not only expatriates but all GMWs rely on strong networks to develop an affinity with any particular place. We contend that family and friends are not the only constituents of networks; GMWs may also develop a reliance on those like themselves to create a sense of meaningfulness that transcends geographic location.

Conversely, some individuals may actively avoid opportunities to develop networks in certain locales, preferring instead to derive their sense of place and meaningfulness by engaging with different identity narratives that may be accessed through alternative physical or spatial networks. For GMWs, failure to access social support through appropriate networks may result in a sense of meaninglessness and feelings of isolation and identity conflict.

The act of mobilising GMWs should be viewed as an ongoing process rather than an isolated task. Good practice may witness the provision of a cultural awareness training event and, where appropriate, sourcing local accommodation, however these activities are often undertaken as isolated tasks and little is done that takes into account 'nesting' and how individuals continue to assimilate throughout their careers. IHRM can help support GMWs by developing policies and practices that enable these individuals to derive a sense of meaning and belonging that transcends place. These practices might include opportunities to learn the local language, as well as mechanisms to enable them to establish a strong local network, such as intranets. Employers need to take account of not only GMWs, but also for example family members, who are also affected by the global mobility demands of the employee's career. This can be achieved through virtual and physical social forums where families can connect and learn from their respective experiences and share stories (Kirk, 2016).

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