



PRECARITY AMONG MOBILE ACADEMICS: THE PRICE OF A (SUCCESSFUL) ACADEMIC CAREER?

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Martine Schaer is a doctoral student at the Laboratory for the Study of Social Processes at the University of Neuchâtel. In her doctoral thesis, she investigates the transnational mobility of academic scholars in the early stages of their career, focusing on personal and professional aspects of their mobility patterns, social networks, and career strategies. She approaches these issues from a gender perspective and with the tools of social network analysis.

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Abstract

In the early stages of their career, academics often move abroad for fixed-term positions, urged by the normative imperative to gain international experience and the need to accept academic opportunities where they arise. This paper examines the obstacles and challenges that three academics who engaged in a series of mobility episodes confronted and how they articulated competing demands from different domains of their lives. The analysis shows that the repetitive nature of mobility associated with fixed-term appointments is a significant aspect of academic precarity, and that academics believe that the repeated effort and sacrifice involved often do not lead to academic stability.

Key words

Early-career academics

Career development

Transnational mobility

Precarity

Gender

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1. Introduction

Although it is not a new phenomenon, academic mobility has increased significantly over the past few decades (Bilecen & Van Mol, 2017), and neoliberal policies in academia have placed increasing pressure on early-career academics to remain flexible, mobile, and competitive (Münch, 2014). While academics sometimes engage in cross-border mobility (or migration) to take permanent positions, in the early stages of their career such mobility usually involves fixed-term positions or fellowships, which they accept in order to improve their curriculum vitae and remain competitive in their pursuit of stable employment.

Over the last decade, these changes and their effects on the lives of academics, in particular those in the early stages of their career, have become increasingly debated by academics themselves, who have drawn on the neologism 'precarity' and its older cognate 'precariousness' (e.g. Gill, 2010; Ivancheva, 2015; Loher & Strasser, 2019; Murgia & Poggio, 2019; Peacock, 2016; Pérez & Montoya, 2018).

This paper contributes to the research on academic mobility and to these more recent discussions on academic precarity by asking how early-career academics' experiences of precarity are produced within the context of their transnational career trajectories. To investigate this question, I examine the subjective experiences of academics who have moved across borders several times. I explore how these experiences are embedded in and shaped by biographical, social, institutional, structural, and gendered circumstances.

The paper is organized as follows. I first present the theoretical background and the concept of precarity before describing the methodology. I then describe the trajectories of three academics, which I analyze with regard to the constraints and challenges these academics faced while developing their careers across borders. I discuss how these challenges affected their everyday lives, how the academics and their partners handled and perceived complicated situations when trying to articulate competing commitments, and how their decisions and actions were affected by biographical and structural circumstances. The analysis demonstrates that the repetitive nature of mobility associated with fixed-term appointments is a significant aspect of academic precarity, and that academics believe that the repeated effort and sacrifice involved often do not lead to academic stability.

2. Theoretical background: Cross-border mobility in neoliberal academia

Transnational mobility has been increasingly presented as indispensable to a successful academic career. On the one hand, many early-career academics engage in cross-border mobility, urged by the normative imperative of mobility (Leemann & Boes, 2015; Morano-Foadi, 2005). Although it varies across countries and disciplines (Jöns, 2007), this imperative has generally tended to turn 'experience abroad' into a requirement for accessing a permanent academic position (Ackers, 2008). On the other hand, academic careers typically involve a transition period of fixed-term positions between the Ph.D. and stable employment. Many young academics engage in mobility and take academic positions abroad as they try to stay in the academic game (Ackers & Oliver, 2007).

As these observations suggest, academic mobility is an integral part of academic careers on normative grounds – as an academic, one has to gain international experience – as well as structural grounds – as an academic, one has to take job opportunities where they arise. Academics are thus pressured to be on the move, sometimes repeatedly and at high cost. Academic mobility therefore stands at the intersection of two strands of research particularly relevant to this paper.

First, the study of academic mobility draws from the broad fields of international migration and mobility studies. In this regard, I follow migration scholars who criticize the narrow

focus on the workplace and career trajectories that researchers often adopt when investigating the mobility of (male and highly qualified) workers, ignoring these workers' family relationships and wider social networks, as if they were moving and making decisions alone (Kofman & Raghuram, 2005). This paper investigates academic mobility from a perspective that addresses both professional and career aspects, on the one hand, and the non-academic domains of life with which they are interconnected, on the other. This approach is necessary for an adequate understanding of the implications of mobility on academics' life as a whole. Research has shown that academic mobility, like other forms of mobility (and migration), is highly gendered and has important effects in (re)producing or transforming gender inequalities in academia (Schaer, Dahinden, & Toader, 2017). Migration and mobility scholars have also often argued for the need to bring a gender perspective to studies on people on the move (Kofman & Raghuram, 2005; Mahler & Pessar, 2006). This paper follows a gender constructivist perspective, which maintains that, in their social practices and interactions, individuals (re)produce or transform gender representations that they themselves have internalized and that are expressed within their broader social environment – 'doing', 'redoing', or 'undoing' gender (Deutsch, 2007; Risman, 2009; West & Zimmerman, 1987).

A second, growing body of literature relevant to this paper examines how structural transformations in general, and in particular the casualization of employment in contemporary academia in the Global North and beyond, affect the professional and personal lives of academic scholars. Researchers have noted that, under the combined effect of neoliberal policies and budget restrictions, fixed-term positions have proliferated internationally while permanent positions have become relatively scarce (Bryson, 2004; Gallas, 2018; Gill, 2014; Goastellec, Benninghoff, & Pekari, 2011; Singer, 2004). While academics are in a privileged position relative to other types of workers and/or migrants, and while their working and living conditions may differ significantly among them as well, for the last 20 years their experiences have been increasingly apprehended through the lens of precarity.

It is often assumed that precarity – economic uncertainty and its impact on other social realms – is a new and increasingly widespread phenomenon. But as Neilson and Rossiter (2008) have demonstrated, precarity has in fact been the norm across time and space, and job security was an exception in Western states after the Second World War. While the presumed normality of job security (and of Fordist and Keynesian labor relations) is a socio-historical construct, Loher and Strasser (2019) have convincingly argued that it is nonetheless an integral part of precarity as a subjective experience. Normality provides a geographically and historically situated reference on which individuals – themselves positioned differently – may draw when they interpret their own life experiences. Drawing on Loher and Strasser's theoretical contribution, I consider precarity a useful concept through which to analyze the connections between academics' subjective experiences of instability and unpredictability, on the one hand, and the broader institutional and structural contexts in which they are embedded, and which may depart to a greater or lesser degree from their expectations of normality, on the other.

Whereas migration and mobility scholars have begun exploring how precarity is interconnected with migrant experiences (Cangià, 2018; Paret & Gleeson, 2016), the literature on academic precarity at best only mentions the effect of mobility in passing. Mobility and the mechanisms through which it may contribute to the production of precarious experiences among academic scholars have not yet been investigated empirically, and there is a lack of understanding of the interconnection between mobility and precarity in the academic realm.

3. Methodology

This paper draws on the results of qualitative-narrative interviews, which I conducted between December 2013 and April 2015 with early-career academics at the University

of Zurich (Switzerland) and the University of California, Los Angeles (USA). I interviewed academics who had obtained their Ph.D. a maximum of 10 years before the interviews, held an academic position (at any level, from postdoc to professor), and had moved abroad at least once after their Ph.D. I met the academics twice. I conducted a biographical narrative interview (Rosenthal, 2007) in the first meeting, and a qualitative network interview (Dahinden, 2005) in the second. If the academics were in a relationship, and if they and their partners agreed, I conducted a semi-structured interview with their partners as well. Furthermore, I interviewed a few academics who had not been transnationally mobile after their Ph.D. in order to gain insights into their biographical and career trajectories as well. In total, I interviewed 36 academics – 30 'mobile' and 6 'not mobile' – and 13 partners. All interviews were tape recorded and fully transcribed.

A biographical perspective makes it possible to apprehend people's lives diachronically. It also makes it possible to apprehend people's lives synchronically, covering the different domains of their lives, and to investigate how they articulate these different domains and handle possible competing demands (Nohl, Schittenhelm, Schmidtke, & Weiss, 2014). Following this same logic spanning across various life domains, the network interviews aimed to understand all the people involved in the interviewees' mobility, including family members, friends, academic colleagues and supervisors from their university, and peers from broader academic circles. Gender scholars have criticized the implications of studying the public and domestic spheres separately. This encompassing approach takes this critique into account. Decisions and actions are not made by isolated individuals void of context, but are instead (gendered) processes embedded in social networks and wider structural contexts. Combining biographical and network methods while at the same time embracing the different dimensions of human life is particularly suited to scrutinizing how individual trajectories are interconnected with broader (meso- and macro-) processes.

The three portrayals at the core of this paper were selected because they are emblematic examples of the growing tendency among young academics to engage in repeated episodes of mobility, especially in the early stages of their career, and because they illustrate different forms of insecurity and precarity. I first reconstructed single cases based on the biographical and network interviews with the academics, complemented, in one case, by a semi-structured interview with the partner. I next analyzed the cases separately and then compared their results with each other and in light of the other interviews (Flick, 2014). The interviews were conducted in English or French. In the following, I have translated the quotations in French into English. People's names are fictitious, and the names of institutions and localities have been withheld or modified in order to ensure the research participants' anonymity.

4. Between precarity and privilege: Three academics

The portrayals describe the trajectories of three academics who experienced several episodes of cross-border mobility. In their most recent cross-border move, one of the academics moved to take an ordinary professorship and the other two to take short-term (one-year) postdoctoral positions.

4.1 Lisa's privileged but frustrating trajectory

Lisa is from Germany, where she studied up to the master's degree. She began participating in exchange programs abroad in high school. She moved to Switzerland for her Ph.D. and met her now husband, Ralph, during an internship in Germany. At different times during and after her Ph.D., she could have accepted jobs outside academia and opted for a different career, but she did not. As she emphasized, she consciously decided to try to stay in academia:

I felt like I chose this option, in also knowing that it produces a lot of uncertainty and risk. [...] But it was my own choice, and I felt that made it much easier for me to live with this risk and uncertainty. I mean, of course I've been also very lucky as well, I haven't really had much of the downsides of the risk and all that. (Biographical interview)

Although she applied for a long list of jobs over the years, she indicated that she applied only for positions that interested her, and that she was not ready to stay in academia at any cost:

I always felt there was a limit to what I'm willing to do. I will not teach for €200 a semester. Before I do that, I'm going to quit academia. I'm not so set on academia that I'm willing to do everything for it. I felt like there's some limit of self-respect. There's plenty of interesting jobs outside academia, and if it doesn't work out, I would rather get out sooner rather than later. (Biographical interview)

After her Ph.D., she managed to coordinate her postdoctoral stay in the United States with her husband's, who was also willing to gain international experience. They worked (and lived) in different cities and met mostly on weekends. When they returned to Germany, where they found jobs in different places, they moved in together in a city halfway, both commuting to their workplaces. They had two children over the following years. Because her academic position was fixed-term, Lisa applied for the next job and obtained a professorship in Switzerland. The whole family subsequently relocated to Switzerland. Ralph, however, kept his job (and a small apartment) in Germany, where he spent half the week. Because of insufficient daycare, Lisa's mother traveled from Germany every week to take care of her grandchildren for two days. Ralph's flexible work schedule and 'very understanding' bosses, as Lisa described them, also contributed to making such family arrangements possible. When a child was sick, for instance, Ralph could decide to work from Switzerland or work on another day. However, Lisa emphasized that she felt torn between her professional commitments, which she fully enjoyed, and the constraints they imposed on her family:

I feel like I'm constantly asking myself: 'I have this wonderful job that I enjoy so much, and I mean I really, really like this job, but am I not asking too much of my family in return?' (Biographical interview)

In addition to the emotional costs, these arrangements had significant financial implications:

Financially, it's suicide, one salary in Germany, plus an apartment there, plus the commuting costs. As I'm saying, we're paying more for daycare than the money he earns. [...] As a family, I think we could do this, but the problem is that we cannot do it financially, and that's frustrating. (Biographical interview)

Lisa stated that, in the medium term, she and her husband might decide to change their current situation, including having Ralph look for a job in Switzerland. However, because he worked in government, he was unlikely to obtain the same kind of job in Switzerland, let alone regain such a position in Germany if they should one day decide to return there. Indeed, the prospect of returning to Germany seemed all the more likely to Lisa, and the political context in Switzerland added to her feeling of uncertainty. Apart from the acceptance of the popular federal initiative 'against mass immigration' in 2014 and the threat it posed to the bilateral Agreement on the Free Movement of Persons between Switzerland and the European Union¹, political discussions regarding the possible

¹ In December 2016, the Swiss Parliament preserved its bilateral agreements with the European Union and adopted a 'minimal' law, which did not impose quotas, contrary to what the initiative had called for (see e.g. https://www.swissinfo.ch/eng/eu-swiss-relations_brussels-sees-progress-in-relations-with-bern/42786022, accessed January 8, 2020).

expulsion of foreign nationals who committed serious crimes were also a source of concern for Lisa:

The whole *Ausschaffunginitiative* [expulsion initiative], how they've made it much easier to kick foreigners out now. I mean, I hope this will never happen, but do I know that my kids will never have some conflict with drugs or something? And then they might be kicked out of this country where they grew up, which they don't know anything else but they can't live here anymore. And it's all these things, it's kind of like, I don't know, I'm putting them in a position that could easily be rectified if they grew up in Germany. (Biographical interview)

Another possibility for the future would be for the whole family to live in Germany and for Lisa to commute to Switzerland for work. However, Lisa did not consider it a viable option to spend part of the week in Switzerland and leave her husband alone with their children. He would find it stressful, she said, and she would miss them. Alternatively, she might instead consider looking for a (less attractive) position in Germany:

This [current department in Switzerland] is one of the best departments I could be at. It's very clear that any position in Germany would probably not be as good as this one. So I find at this point it's very much this trade-off between 'I'm very, very happy professionally, but for my private life it's a difficult situation'. [...] It depends on how things really evolve, but I have considered taking a position that is not as good as this one here, just so we can be [together]. (Biographical interview)

For the time being, Lisa and Ralph decided to wait before making a decision. They still had three years until their oldest child started primary school, by which time, Lisa said, they should have decided where they would like to stay 'permanently'.

The various possibilities Lisa foresaw all had disadvantages and failed to integrate two fulfilling full-time jobs, a family, and cross-border mobility in a satisfactory way over the long term.

4.2 Marie's trajectory: From academy to bakery?

Marie is from France. After her master's, she conducted several brief and poorly paid research assignments in different countries before moving to Austria for her Ph.D. Luc, her now husband, was willing to join her in Austria. However, his limited German was a serious obstacle to his finding a job there, and he decided to pursue his career in France instead, and later, temporarily, in Japan. As Marie was finishing her Ph.D., a US professor offered her to join his lab for a postdoc. The United States appeared to Marie and Luc as an ideal destination because Luc would be able to integrate into the labor market right away. Luc's multinational corporation in France was willing to transfer him to its US branch. Unfortunately, shortly before Marie's departure, Luc's company unexpectedly renounced its offer to transfer him because of the costs and administrative burden associated with his visa. Because Marie's initial appointment was for only one year, they decided it was not worth it for Luc to start the lengthy process of applying for the visa he could have obtained as a dependent of Marie. He stayed in France, and he later moved to the UK, where he had accepted a new position. When I met Marie, she was finishing her postdoc, which had been extended in the meantime. She was about to join Luc in the UK and hoped that she might find another postdoc there. Although she had not heard back from the universities she had approached, she was hopeful about the possibility of reuniting with her husband while pursuing their careers.

Marie and Luc both described their past and future possible moves in positive terms despite the repeated disappointment of not having been able to move together. Marie also appeared to tolerate the instability and insecurity associated with an academic career path rather well. When I asked her whether, before starting her Ph.D., she had

been concerned about needing to move from one short-term research job to the next, she answered:

No, because it was really cool [laughs]. I traveled all around Northern Europe, Austria, South Africa, no, the benefits far outweighed [the disadvantages].
(Biographical interview)

The fact that those jobs were poorly paid did not worry Marie, nor did she seem annoyed that her current university did not reimburse her moving expenses to the United States, in spite of what her fellowship stipulated:

\$2000 from the fellowship were assigned for my moving costs. [...] I could have asked for that money when I arrived, but I didn't have an invoice amounting to \$2000. And they are very, very complicated about reimbursing expenses here. In the end, the money was spent [on lab supplies]. [...] In October I'll stop getting paid, and [my advisor] will pay for my rent instead. I mean, the money, I won't see it [...], but, on the other hand, in October I won't be spending my own savings.
(Network interview)

Marie's stay in the United States caused her to lose certain benefits in France, including unemployment benefits. She worried about anything serious happening to her, as she would soon find herself without health insurance as a result of being between jobs (and between countries). But on various occasions, and although she did mention a number of 'disillusionments' about her academic environment, Marie made clear that she was not particularly worried about her professional and financial situation:

I follow opportunities. I never had a plan such as 'within the next ten years, I have to become at least an assistant professor'. No, I don't have this ambition. My ambition is to enjoy what I do, to enjoy where I am and the people I work with. I didn't become a scientist to make money [laughs]. I would have chosen something else. (Biographical interview)

Marie had so far invested her passion and effort into her academic career. However, she believed that she might do something completely different in the future:

Maybe in 10 years we'll meet again and I'll own a bakery. I don't know. You asked me about my life story, well, my mother changed professions 15 times. My father, in contrast, always had a steady job. So, as long as one of them has a... well, she could have supported [my siblings and me] without my father's income.
(Biographical interview)

Luc stated that he had tried to develop an 'international career' once he realized that Marie's career would require her to be repeatedly mobile, because he was not willing to renounce his own professional prospects:

It's highly unlikely that [Marie] will come back to France, at least in the near future. [...] She spends a few years here, a few years there, and so on. And, well, I wasn't ready to sacrifice my career for her, just as I wouldn't ask her to sacrifice her career for me. So the goal was to become as mobile as possible in order to be able to follow her if necessary. (Partner interview)

Although both said that they enjoyed being on the move, they also stated that from then on they wished to move together, as a couple, as Marie indicated:

Let's say, from [ages] 20 to 30, it was career first and family second. And now.... Well, people tell me, 'Yeah, it's because you want to have kids'. I say, 'No, I want to be able to ask myself whether or not I want kids'. Right now, I can't raise that question. So maybe I won't have kids, but it will be my choice, it won't be imposed on me. (Biographical interview)

Marie also referred to her grandparents' experience to put her own experience into perspective:

[They] were 40 years old when they married, and they were between 40 and 45 when they had children. So sometimes, I say to myself, 'Well, there's no hurry!' [laughs] (Biographical interview)

Marie and Luc were a particularly enthusiastic tandem as regards their mobile lifestyle, even though it implied substantial compromises. Luc oriented his career in order to be able to follow Marie in her moves. Marie emphasized that she would like to be able to determine whether she wanted children or not, a situation that she does not currently consider herself to be in.

4.3 Marc and the high price of academic mobility

Marc grew up and studied in France up to the master's level. Motivated by a professor and his own aspirations for a different experience, he moved to the United States for his Ph.D. He then moved to Switzerland where, for five years, he worked as a postdoc on yearly contracts before obtaining a senior research and teaching position, a fixed-term appointment that he was about to start when I met him. His mobility experiences, he felt, had heavily affected his personal life. Following his move to the United States, his relationship with his partner in France deteriorated and they broke up. When he later moved to Switzerland, Marc's new partner in the United States looked for a position in Switzerland. She found a position in Germany, which made the distance between them shorter, but still necessitated a long-distance relationship. Adding to the geographical separation, the instability and unpredictability of his academic career led to their separation:

The typical career path [after the Ph.D.], is to do postdocs for two, three, maybe four years [...], change countries, change topics, leave. [...] It is very uncommon to stay at the same place, so there's always this sword of Damocles. [...] It's a combination of circumstances that makes things more difficult [in a relationship]. In this case, I think the uncertainty, the fact that one always had short-term contracts, didn't help. (Biographical interview)

Over time, this contractual precarity began to weigh heavily:

[My postdoc] was one of these extendable positions in which your contract is renewed on an ad hoc basis. [...] They renewed it every year, but each time for only one year. [...] When I started, I was 28, I didn't care that it was for one year, it didn't matter. It would last a year, and afterwards, if it was over, I'd still have time to find something else. I'd leave, go elsewhere, find something else. But now I'm older, and I'm tired of it. I don't see things from the same angle anymore. (Biographical interview)

Contractual precarity also affected practical, otherwise trivial, aspects of everyday life:

It even makes daily life more complicated, small things like, for instance, 'Do I sign for a two-year cell phone plan, or for only one year?', 'Do I buy a half-price train pass for two years, or for one?' And then you also have to lie because it's hard to find a flat [here], I guess like in many cities in Switzerland, and I always lied to the landlords, saying, 'No, it's okay, I have a permanent job'. [...] Otherwise, I wouldn't obtain the flat, they wouldn't give it to me. So it's small things like these that are difficult. (Biographical interview)

Marc stated that his disappointment in an academic career developed only gradually:

There was a crisis when my ex-partner, who was American, left. That was a catalyst; I was fed up with sacrificing everything. At the same time, the pay is good here, that's not the problem. But we work a lot, a lot of hours, and we don't get paid for overtime, we have fixed wages. We devote a lot of personal time to

this career and we get little in return. I don't know, it came step by step, little by little. And now I'm at the point where I don't feel like making sacrifices anymore. I just want a stable situation, because as a postdoc, even with hard work, I might not find something afterwards. It's kind of a lottery. I am aware that it can all stop. (Biographical interview)

Having shifted, as he said, from 'I absolutely want to have an academic career' to 'I want to quit', Marc explained that he had now established clear limits to how much he would sacrifice to stay in academia:

If within the next few years, let's say five years, I don't find a [stable] position in academia, it's time to move on, to think about something else. For now, I don't have a strategy, or the strategy is to try to make it work, while setting a limit. [...] A friend of mine goes from one job to the next, he's a postdoc, he's the same age as me, and for the last three years he's only been getting very short jobs, short contracts, a few months here, a few months there. [...] I say to myself, 'If this is it, it's not what I want'. If things start going in that direction, like, 'I have a job for three months, I need to find another job for a few months', just to, he has children, so just to feed his kids, no, it's over, I need to find something more stable. (Biographical interview)

Marc also felt himself stagnating, in both his personal and professional life, relative to his non-academic friends:

They got married, they're having children, they have a stable situation, they work in companies in which their careers advance. And I really have the feeling that I've remained at the same level during that time. As for self-image, postdoc.... I've been a postdoc for six years, and I'm going nowhere. (Biographical interview)

Under such circumstances, Marc found it overly difficult to reconcile continuing in academia and engaging in further mobility, on the one hand, with his desire to found a family, on the other:

Today, I'm at a point in my career, but above all in my life, when I would like to settle in, also maybe start a family, things like that. And starting a family and having to move to other countries to pursue an academic career, I don't think those things are compatible. [...] Having an academic career isn't something I want 100 percent anymore. I now have other priorities. (Biographical interview)

Marc was now living with his new partner in Switzerland, and he emphasized that he did not want mobility to jeopardize this relationship as well:

I don't want to have to leave again and screw things up [laughs], because it happens once, that's okay, it happens. But it's happened to me several times, and I think that's enough. I've learned my lesson! (Biographical interview)

Marc repeatedly experienced how difficult it could be to reconcile a mobile academic career with one's personal life. His account illustrates the heavy price that mobility can impose on personal relationships, and Marc thus concluded that, from then on, he would rather refuse another cross-border move and preserve his relationship, even if doing so required him to leave academia altogether.

5. Constraints and challenges

These three trajectories are marked by a diversity of adverse effects and challenging situations that weighed heavily not only on the academics, but also on their partners and families. Individuals make decisions and act within a specific and individualized framework of constraints related to biographical and structural circumstances. Certain options were thus available to the academics while other were not. This section explores

the constraining circumstances that contributed to the academics' (and their partners') decisions and actions.

When Lisa applied for the professorship in Switzerland, her position in Germany was a fixed-term junior professorship, and thus, as she pointed out, she 'had to' find the next job. As Lisa also stated, if her position had been tenure-track (or permanent), she would not have applied to jobs in the first place, at least not at this point in her career, and she would have stayed in Germany. Lisa's experience illustrates how the nature of academic positions (and related retention policies) within universities influences academics' propensity to engage in (further) cross-border mobility. Because early-career academics usually have to switch from one job to the next, it might only be incidental that they move across countries while following job opportunities (Ackers, 2008). Marie's and Marc's trajectories also suggest this articulation between contractual insecurity and the need to engage in transnational mobility.

Furthermore, Lisa and Ralph's experience of mobility to Switzerland was marked by biographical circumstances such as being a dual-career couple with children. Balancing childcare responsibilities with professional commitments in different countries proved to be extremely challenging, especially because of the insufficient availability of childcare. As a result, Lisa relied on her mother's help, as well as on her husband's and her own flexibility at work. Other academics pointed out that, although they worked long hours, they could often take advantage of flexible work schedules and the ability to work from home (or elsewhere). The intricacies of Lisa and Ralph's arrangements demonstrate how structural elements such as the (un)availability of childcare, external contingencies related to one's own and one's partner's professional activities, and instrumental support provided by members of one's (core) social network might contribute to shaping the – enabling or constraining – contextual framework within which individuals make and implement their decisions.

Before actually deciding to found a family, Marie and Marc anticipated that it would be difficult to have parenting responsibilities while also pursuing mobile career paths. But even without children, they experienced the challenges of reconciling biographical circumstances with academic mobility. For both, their mobile lifestyles had costly repercussions on their affective lives. Marc emphasized the disruptive consequences of cross-border mobility and its associated uncertainties on his couple relationships. Marie's relationship with Luc withstood geographical distance. However, their long-distance relationship was primarily a result of external constraints – rather than a deliberate choice – which undermined Luc's attempts to join Marie, as he was not willing to move without professional prospects.

Transnational mobility takes place within the context of a world divided into nation-states, and people's cross-border moves are facilitated or hampered by, for instance, passport and visa systems (Korpela, 2016). State policies create different mobility regimes (Glick Schiller & Salazar, 2013) that may dissuade certain people from engaging in mobility. Marie, who moved to the United States as an academic scholar, and Luc, who planned to move within a private-sector corporation, needed distinct types of visas and thus were concerned with different regimes of mobility in the United States (although they were both considered highly skilled workers and came from the same – European – country). Moreover, the sometimes lengthy and expensive visa and work-permit procedures also deter partners from accompanying academic primary movers when the latter are on short-term and relatively low-pay contracts, as was the case with Marie.

The broader structural context also includes the recognition of credentials and qualifications. Moreover, linguistic requirements and labor-market situations also affect the actors to varying degrees, depending on the national or local context and individual circumstances (Riaño & Baghdadi, 2007). Lisa's husband worked in a sector whose particularities made it structurally difficult for him to relocate to another country without

changing careers. Luc was unable to secure a job in Austria because he did not speak German well enough. As for Marc's partner in the United States, she found a position matching her professional expectations, but in a neighboring country, and still away from Marc.

Although Lisa and Ralph successfully met the challenge of coordinating their family and dual-career situation in organizational terms, their arrangement, as Lisa emphasized, was not financially sustainable in the long run, even though they both held stable and well-paying positions. Their situation entailed significant excess costs stemming from state-level income-tax regulations (and related international agreements – or the lack of thereof), differences in income levels and the cost of living between Germany and Switzerland, a second apartment, childcare, and the weekly commute for both Ralph and Lisa's mother. The need to set aside savings to cover cross-border travel expenses was also emphasized by other academics, typically when they lived apart from their partners. As for academics on the move with children, they typically stressed that costs associated with childcare, afterschool programs and even school constituted a significant proportion of their expenditures and were sometimes hard to cover.

Furthermore, the interviews revealed that the political context and policies affecting non-citizens also influenced academics on the move, as in the case of Lisa when she questioned whether she would remain in Switzerland with her family.

Many of the situations faced by the academics and their partners were gendered, as were their ways of handling them. First, as regards their gender mobility configurations, the three academics were engaged in dual-career relationships, with both partners pursuing professional careers. These gender-equal arrangements made it challenging for partners to follow primary movers. Ralph did not completely relocate, but instead commuted between Germany and Switzerland; Luc decided not to follow Marie because he could not work in either Austria or the United States; and Marc's partner moved closer to him, although not to the same place (for detailed examinations of gender arrangements in a context of highly skilled mobility, see Schaer, Dahinden, & Toader, 2017; Shinozaki, 2014).

Moreover, individuals are better able to reconcile gender-equal arrangements with mobility (and in general) when they do not have children. When Lisa considered the options to balance work and family, the one she viewed as most viable entailed adapting her work situation to her family constraints, thus moving toward a more conventional family arrangement. Gender was certainly not the only factor at play, but research has shown that having children constitutes an important turning point in couples' dynamics (Tettamanti, 2016; Yavorsky, Kamp Dush, & Schoppe-Sullivan, 2015), when structurally anchored and internalized conventional gender roles resurface.

Apart from biographical circumstances, structural elements such as access to childcare and contingencies relating to work organization also facilitate or constrain gender-equal arrangements (see also Chesley, 2011). Family policies, and in particular access to childcare, are gendered and reflect gendered representations anchored in the broader societal environment. In Switzerland, for instance, family policies reflect conventionally gendered views of the sexual division of labor, which assigns domestic responsibilities to women and the role of breadwinner to men. Couples with children in Switzerland tend to predominantly comprise men working full time and women working part time (or not at all) and taking care of the children (OFS, 2014)². Lisa complained about the gendered policies and representations she encountered in her daily life in Switzerland, including limited and expensive childcare, an income-tax system that she depicted as unfriendly to dual-earner couples, and negative representations within her wider social environment

² Regarding the contextual situations of academic careers in Switzerland and six other European countries, see Le Feuvre (2015), available at http://garciaproject.eu/?page_id=52 (accessed January 8, 2020).

of career women having children. Marie also challenged gendered social expectations, in her case the idea that as a woman in her thirties she obviously wanted children.

Finally, the 'living apart configuration' implemented by Marie and Luc echoes the arrangements of other interviewees and also reflects gender representations. Indeed, and as has been suggested by other authors as well (Ackers et al., 2000), it seems that the professional 'footlooseness' of the male tied partner – whether because he is unfulfilled in his job or because his work activities are geographically transferable – is a critical factor enabling men (in heterosexual couples) to follow their female partners. Among my interviewees, the only male partner who had followed his academic wife without having a job at the destination had to confront stereotyped ideas about men – useless when not working – and women – over-ambitious when they pursued careers (Schaer, Dahinden, & Toader, 2017).

6. From attractive ambivalences to the aspiration of stability

As the portrayals reveal, academics often embrace mobility with a certain enthusiasm, at least initially. Many interview partners emphasized the attractiveness of academic mobility and depicted their stays abroad as rewarding experiences, even when they had negative consequences for other aspects of their lives. This 'ambivalent attractiveness of mobility' has been discussed by Presskorn-Thygesen (2015), who observed that research on work-related mobility tends to either celebrate mobility as a form of freedom among the 'kinetic elite', or to blame it for masking renewed forms of exploitation and inequality. He argued that it is necessary to critically assess the historicized social and economic conditions of mobility while not losing sight of the fact that the ideal of mobility also often appeals to the individuals who engage in it. Mobility is not the only site of ambivalence faced by academics, however. As Bozzon, Murgia, and Poggio suggest (2019), academics find themselves entangled in other ambiguous dynamics as they try to make their way between flexibility and managerial demands, personal dedication and subordination, and enduring hardship in the present and hoping for stability in the future.

The changing nature of these ambivalences over time constitutes an important result of the analysis of the stories of academics on the move and illuminates how precarity is produced in the logic of their career. Repeated job-to-job mobility and the challenging situations it contributed to ultimately led the academics portrayed here to either consider renouncing (in full or part) their academic career or delay other projects (like founding a family). No single episode in their mobile trajectories per se seems to have discouraged the academics. Rather, it was the serial (and lasting) character of challenging temporary episodes that wearied them and rendered their experiences of everyday life frustrating and unsustainable in the longer run (for a similar argument, see Ackers & Oliver, 2007). Marc's narrative reflected a strong sense of precarity, and he was considering leaving academia. He decided to carry on for the time being, but within the time and geographical limits he had set for himself. In contrast, Marie seemed less concerned about her unstable situation, perhaps because she was about to move to join her husband and hoped that more favorable arrangements lay ahead. Lisa had obtained a permanent and fulfilling professorship and occupied a stable and privileged position in academia. However, her experience still shows that, even for those who succeed career-wise, it remains difficult to combine competing aspirations.

As mentioned above, people cope with academic insecurity in the hope of future rewards. Like other interview partners, Marc expected that hard work would pay off (and lead to secure employment). This expectation reflects the imaginary of a Fordist normality (and labor relations organized around a two-way exchange between workers and employers). In Marc's case, his sense of precarity was not so much about his income. Rather, it related to the increasing imbalance between the high price he had paid to remain in academia and the little he had received in return (in terms of stability). Relative to his non-academic friends who settled down, started families, and advanced in their careers,

Marc felt himself stagnating and unable to plan ahead. As with mobility, it is over time that the various challenges of an academic career tilt the balance toward precarity. In contrast to Marc, when Marie stated that in a few years she might well quit academia and open a bakery, she mobilized her mother's experience, who changed jobs multiple times, to substantiate her claim. In so doing, she challenged the representation of a stable career as normal.

The increasing unattainability of stable academic employment has been produced by structural circumstances, in particular the structure of contemporary academic employment, internationally characterized by a distortion between fixed-term and stable positions. Beyond academia, the larger structural context, including non-academic labor sectors and the possibility of transferring their skills to these sectors, also affects the academics' experiences. Academics in disciplines that offer interesting jobs in the private and governmental sectors typically benefit from a more reassuring environment that makes it easier to cope with academic instabilities. As Lisa indicated, she had several opportunities to transfer to other sectors that offered her safe and interesting alternatives outside academia. In this regard, she was in an advantageous position to attempt an academic career and set minimum limits of self-respect below which she would quit academia. In contrast, Marc's colleague, working in another discipline and being a third-country national in Switzerland, probably had few options but to stay in the academic sector even on very precarious contracts so as not to run the risk of having to leave the country altogether.

7. Conclusion: The downsides of repeated mobility

This paper has examined how the experiences of academics who engage in repeated episodes of cross-border mobility reflect a sense of precarity. The analysis has shown that the repetitive nature of the challenges and difficulties encountered along their mobile trajectories plays an important role in this regard. The interviewees' narratives all express some sense of insecurity, frustration, or uncertainty about the future. Precarity ensues when the repeated pressure to be mobile at the end of fixed-term contracts comes at a price perceived as disproportionate to the (lack of) returns. Indeed, academics may come to view the multiple arrangements and compromises they make in pursuit of their career in the expectation of stable employment as sacrifices made in vain. The analysis suggests that precarity is not primarily a result of economic instability – although this result does not imply that in other circumstances academics in unstable employment do not confront severe economic hardship – but of the increasing misalignment between the effort invested and the scarcity of stable prospects. However, as Lisa's experience illuminates, successfully securing a permanent position does not mean that all sources of frustration vanish.

Repeated mobility thus clearly has heavy downsides, as the portrayals here indicate. While migration and mobility studies have often demonstrated that access to mobility is an important asset in many contexts (e.g. Moret, 2016), it is no less important to avoid being blinded by a romanticized view of mobility. In her study on migrants with precarious legal status in Europe, for example, Wyss (2019) demonstrates that mobility enables them to secure basic needs but also makes it impossible for them to develop any plan for the (near) future and comes at a high emotional cost. Although the present paper focuses on a different, and privileged, group of people on the move – early-career academics – it extends the applicability of Wyss' results and similarly demonstrates the need to investigate the ways in which mobility may negatively affect individuals. Indeed, for early-career academics, as for migrants with precarious legal status, staying put might be an important asset for those who can afford it, because of the stability that it entails.

The downsides of repeated job-to-job mobility do not only affect academics. As academics consider leaving academia (or moving to a less fulfilling position elsewhere) in order to access more stability and reconcile different domains of their lives, academic

institutions are affected as well and might lose important resources in the process. In a system in which recruitment is supposedly based on performance and merit, it is legitimate to question the imperative of mobility – and the temporary nature of contracts with which it is often associated – which seems to lead academic institutions to instead select individuals according to biographical and structural circumstances.

Combining precarious contracts and repeated cross-border mobility seems ‘uneven’, if not discriminatory, as regards the individuals who engage in the competition to pursue a career in academia and who, depending on biographical and structural circumstances, may or may not be able to comply with such demands. It is also unsatisfactory, if not detrimental, to academic institutions, insofar as it might cause them to fail to attract or retain valuable academics on the basis of criteria unrelated to scientific quality and merit. Additionally, academic institutions, rather than preferring academics who have all engaged in several stays abroad, could favor the overall diversity of the profiles of academics within an institution or department, including when it comes to the transnational or local nature of their career trajectories. Such diversity would not only allow academics to follow different career patterns – from localized to highly transnationalized ones, or, in other words, from patterns of immobility to patterns of unlimited cross-border mobility – but would also benefit the academic community overall, by not failing to retain important resources by effectively forcing young academics to be continuously mobile and neglecting the value of local social and knowledge networks, which also contribute to academic excellence.

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