Moving, settling and becoming: A conversation about mobility between two early career researchers



DOI reference: 10.1080/13673882.2018.00001003

By
Rhiannon Pugh, Department of Social and Economic Geography, Uppsala University, Sweden and Elisa Thomas, Center for Innovation Research, Business School, University of Stavanger, Norway.

Rhiannon Pugh and Elisa Thomas reflect on their experiences of mobility as early career researchers and discuss the pros and cons of developing their research careers in new countries.

:Introduction:

The expectation of mobility is now a well-established "fact" of academic life, and for most early career researchers (ECRs), the idea of having a permanent contract in our "home" institution is an unrealistic prospect. Often, funding (especially that open to post-doctoral researchers) has a mobility dimension and the relative scarcity of employment prospects means that travel to different cities, regions, countries, and continents is now a required part of an academic career. There is evidence that mobility leads to better science, and is better for national systems and individual researchers' careers, with one study reporting 40% more publications for mobile than non-mobile individuals (Sugimoto et al., 2017). We may have personal as well as professional reasons for moving, but it is certain that early career academics are expected to be internationally mobile. This process might repeat itself several times over, and we might never "settle" in the way our friends and families back home are accustomed to. For some of us this might be okay, or even desirable, for others it would be less so.

Leaving aside the broader debates around the increasing globalisation and neoliberalisation of education (for a rich discussion see, for example: Boden & Epstein, 2006; Berg et al., 2016), in this piece we will discuss some of the practical issues we have encountered as early career researchers in regional studies, who have moved long distances for our work, and some strategies we have developed to create strong professional and personal networks and support structures. More generally we aim to give voice to the experiences of early career researchers in the field and offer solidarity, perhaps opening up a dialogue in our community around mobility that goes beyond the simplistic "mobility is good" characterisation we often hear.

This piece came about as a result of a discussion between us about our experiences of mobility and the particular challenges and opportunities we see. We decided to broaden this discussion and reach out to the broader ECR community to share experiences and ideas about how to cope with the every-day challenges of being an ECR in the current climate. Reflecting its origins (an ad-hoc conversation) this essay is written as a sort of dialogue between two ECRs with different experiences and views on mobility. We thank the editors of this special issue on early career researchers for giving us a voice and a platform, and

allowing us to speak of our experiences. Given our increasing awareness of mental health issues amongst academics, we would also like to give thanks to the bravery of colleagues who have spoken out about their experiences (cf. Shaw and Ward, 2014; Berg et al. 2016); we consider opportunities like this to extend solidarity, share experiences and coping strategies to be invaluable.

Part I: Who am I and why am I here?

Rhiannon: My office overlooks a snowy car park (it's December when I'm writing this), and in my more melancholic moments I stare out, over that white frozen patch of ground and wonder "what the heck I'm doing here", in the cold periphery of Europe, where I hardly know anybody, miles away from home. Well, what I'm doing here is work. I have no other reason to be in Sweden other than that I got a job here, when my last employment as a researcher in the UK was running out, and the prospect of a fully funded fellowship with three years to pursue my own research was too good to pass by. It's probably quite a typical story for ECRs, the struggle for employment, an attractive job offer somewhere far away. What were your mobility motivations?

Elisa: it is interesting how you mentioned the window of your office. I think what we see shapes our experience and this can be for good or bad. I love looking out the window of my office, where I see snowy pine trees and kids from a nearby kindergarten exploring around with their teachers. It is a beautiful and peaceful view. As academics, we could read and write anywhere. But as ECRs abroad, our offices become a huge part of our lives. It wouldn't make sense moving to Norway and working from my apartment, right? So my office, as silly as it may sound, is an important part of my experience in Norway. That is not only for the view, of course… it also means that "I have a job here" and "I belong in this community". The opportunity to work as a post-doctoral researcher was the first reason why I decided to move. After completing my PhD, I was working as a teacher in Brazil, and having a post-doc there would mean quitting my job and living on a scholarship for one or two years, with no guarantee of a job afterwards. At the same time, there was no time to do research while working as a teacher at the university, so the possibility of developing my academic career was low. The second reason was to work in a better country regarding academic life, meaning a country with more funding for research, more access to the international community, more contacts with top researchers. The whole environment here is more fruitful for research in my field of study.

Rhiannon: Elisa, what do you think about the pros and cons of mobility? I feel that it is often presented in a very positive light in academia, framed in terms of new experiences, sharing of knowledge, the best people being employed in the best places but the reality is often far from this. I know a lot of PhDs and post-docs who had quite difficult times being far away from home, lacking support structures, and ultimately their mental health suffers. University support structures aren't always equipped to deal with such issues, and the competitive and long-hours culture of academia can fan the flames of this. It seems to be more and more of an expectation that we can and should move around for our work, but what if we can't or we don't want to? We risk missing out on opportunities and our careers can suffer.

Elisa: Well Rhiannon, I don't think the university should be the only body responsible for the mental health of staff and students. Of course I agree that the institution should provide all possible means so people can have a healthy work environment. But a lot about mental health is out of the reach of one's work place. People who want to move abroad, work in a different environment with new colleagues and a new culture have to be aware that it is not easy. We have to feel responsible for our own mental state, and do whatever is possible to influence it in a positive way: do physical exercise, eat properly, clean and organize the house, go to social activities, meditate or go to church for those who like it. Several of these aspects have been proven to help us to have a better mental state, and they are solely our own responsibility.

Rhiannon: Mobility carries with it romantic notions of the globe-trotting academic, the chance to see the world, to live in different places, to meet new people, to broaden our professional and personal horizons. On a good day I feel very lucky to be able to choose where I live and work and I find the experience of being in Sweden very enriching, but often I just want to go home and have a job in my home institution and be able to see my family. These feelings have become stronger since having a child away from home, and I feel very disconnected and alone, struggling to manage on a daily basis without family and friends around to support me. Whilst I love my work, sometimes I feel that the sacrifices I have made in terms of family are too high, although technologies such as skype and instant messaging makes the connections home easier to maintain than previously. This isn't something it feels very acceptable to talk about within academia though, and sometimes it feels like we are expected to be "machines"

without emotions, difficulties, or other priorities in our lives. From our conversations I sense that you see mobility in a more positive light though, Elisa?

Elisa: I don't have husband and kids, so I guess it is easier for me to move. I can imagine it is more difficult when you don't have your family around to help you raise your kids. In my case, I feel the support and love from my family and friends even at a distance. I know that they will always be there for me, as I am for them. Keeping constant communication with them and sharing small things make me feel close to them. I don't limit communications only for important achievements or desperate moments. Also, I make an effort to build a community in my new country. It is important for me to have good friends in any place where I live. I know this will make my life abroad much nicer and easier. Besides, friends will help in moments of need. We really need to build these relationships when we move to a new place.

Rhiannon: Yes that's a good point, can you share some strategies for making friends and finding a community when you move to a new place? Personally, I have found social media very useful for this, and have found groups of foreign parents in my city, who are sharing events that are happening and meet ups for coffee and company. Through these meet-ups I have made friends with others in a similar situation and this is the nice thing about living in a university city.

Elisa: I agree, social media helps. There are so many groups joining people with similar interests. But I think that the most important effort is leaving the house and going to meet people. If you like to play volleyball and there is a group of people who play volleyball in your university or in your city, join them in real life. If you like knitting and there is a group who knits, if you like skiing and there is a group of people who organize trips to ski, go meet the group. There are other ways to meet people outside social media: events by organizations such as InterNations; in Norway we have events for expats organized by the Chamber of Commerce; in Stavanger I'm part of a multicultural group called SAPS; there are several opportunities to work as a volunteer; attending language courses is also a way to meet people. I have a colleague (PhD student) who goes to dance classes and she is making friends there. Once you get to know people, invite the ones you like for a dinner at your house. You don't cook? How about a pizza? They will probably invite you back next time. The message here is: we need to be proactive and sociable.

Part II: Doing research in different countries

Rhiannon: Mobility throws up a number of issues in terms of our personal lives, but also in terms of our research and professional lives. There are a lot of practical things to think about when working and researching in a new context, and we are navigating these on a daily basis. Moving country also provides a number of opportunities to broaden our research horizons, collect data in different locations, and be part of different academic networks with new ideas.

As ECRs we may have become accustomed to our close networks of fellow PhD students, supervisors to call upon when we need support, and a deep knowledge and understanding of our local, regional and national systems that we often take for granted. When we move to a new country for work we are faced with a new higher education system with different rules and norms, communities of academics we may be unfamiliar with or know their names on paper only, and perhaps a new working language to learn and adopt. Creating new networks and finding your way into existing ones from the outside can be quite difficult, but in these days of Skype, email, Facebook, LinkedIn etc. it becomes much easier to work with other researchers all over the world and maintain our academic networks wherever we are.

These last two years I have been dedicating quite a lot of time and effort into learning a new language, Swedish of course, which I believe is very close to Norwegian, which you have also been learning Elisa. Perhaps one day we will have a new way of communicating other than English. It is hard though, don't you think? To learn a new language now we are older and so busy with our research, my brain certainly is not absorbing it particularly well, I hope one day I will be able to conduct meetings and teach in Swedish but it feels a long way off. This is an aspect of mobility that we should consider as ECRs, especially if we are moving between multiple countries in a short space of time, as then it becomes simply impossible and unrealistic that we could learn the language quickly enough. We are lucky in the Nordic countries people have very high English language capabilities so getting by on a daily basis is quite easy, but I can imagine moving to some countries and being in a very difficult position. Still, I wonder how it will affect the research I plan to conduct, which will involve interviewing economic policy makers in the Nordic countries. Will I get a decent quality of data if I can't conduct the interviews in Swedish? Should I budget for a translator or research assistant? These practical research issues didn't cross my

mind when I was conducting research in my home country.

Elisa: I believe this aspect needs to be considered when moving abroad especially in terms of the research we want to conduct in the new country. As you suggested, one solution would be budgeting a translator or research assistant, but that may not be easy as an ECR with limited budget. Involving colleagues from the country could help us since they would understand the subject of study and, would therefore be able to conduct interviews or translate a survey using proper terms in the country's language. The biggest problem can be teaching. Most undergraduate courses are still in the country's native language. This could lower job opportunities since most likely we will combine research with teaching going forwards in our academic careers.

Rhiannon: Absolutely. Teaching is a big issue, as we are very limited in the hours we can get. This is a shame if we enjoy teaching and, critically, can block our career paths. It is something I didn't think about when I moved to Sweden but I encourage other ECRs to think about it. You can experience a career blockage when you come to the end of the post-doc or temporary research period and want to look for a permanent employment as a teacher-researcher if you are not able to teach in the language of the university. At the same time, reaching this level of fluency is quite unrealistic over a two or three year post-doc period unless you are particularly talented linguistically!

Part II: Strategies and Tips

Rhiannon: In this final part I thought it would make sense to summarise some of the strategies and tips we have developed since becoming post-docs abroad, to manage both the personal and professional dimensions of mobility. For myself, I have become a much more active social media and online communications user since living in Sweden. I am still working with old colleagues from the UK, people I have met at conferences, and even a co-author in China who I have never met in "real life". In the past this dimension of mobility would have been much more problematic, but through online communication platforms it is surprisingly easy to keep old networks up and running and continue working on collaborative research projects no matter where the participants are based. Certainly there are some adjustments to be made when living in a new country and plenty of time and patience is needed to learn a new language, a new way of doing things, and become embedded in a new environment. Also, a positive mental outlook certainly

helps!

Elisa: I believe patience and being open for differences (of methods, of literature etc) is key to handle all the changes regarding work brought by the mobility. As you mentioned, Rhiannon, technology makes it easy to keep our networks from previous jobs. So we should make an effort to develop new networks with researchers who have similar interests and who work on the same research areas as us. By being at a new university and new country, we have the chance to get to know a lot of new possible partners for future collaboration. For myself, I try to get involved in as many activities in my department as I can. Whenever I have the chance, I watch presentations from my colleagues, I participate in simulated PhD defences, I present my working papers in internal seminars, I take courses offered by the university among other opportunities to engage myself in the new community. What else would you say that could help ECRs in the mobility challenge?

Rhiannon: There are some opportunities provided to ECRs that we can take advantage of to increase our mobility and find support and networks from academics in our field with similar research interests wherever we are. For instance, the journal Regional Studies, Regional Science has a special mentored route and fee waiver for ECRs to help them get a foot onto the publication ladder and links up with a senior colleague to guide them through the process, wherever in the world they are based. The Regional Studies Association has also a number of grants which can greatly support early career researchers. For example there is the RSA Travel Grant aimed at supporting conference participation and the RSA Early Career Grant Scheme that can be used to expand academic research on regional studies and related fields.

Through associations such as the RSA, building up our own networks of solidarity and mutual support with other ECRs, drawing on the advice and kindness of sympathetic senior academics, and being kind to ourselves and looking after our mental health, we can hope to enjoy the opportunities offered to us as ECRs, and enact our motilities in a way that enriches our lives beyond just our careers, whilst supporting those who for various reasons are immobile or have limited mobility to also develop their career trajectories.

References

Berg, L., Huijbens, E. and Larsen, H. G. (2016) Producing Anxiety in the Neoliberal University. Canadian Geographer / Le Géographe Canadien. vol. 60 No. 2, pp. 168-180.

Sugimoto, C. R., Robinson-Garcia, N., Murray, D. S., Yegros-Yegros, A., Costas, R. and Larivière, V. (2017) Scientists have most impact when they're free to move, Nature, vol. 550, pp. 29-31.

Boden, R. and Epstein, D. (2006) Managing the Research Imagination? Globalisation and Research in Higher Education. Globalisation, Societies and Education. vol. 4 No. 2, pp. 223-236.

Shaw, C. and Ward, L. (2014) Dark thoughts: why mental illness is on the rise in academia.