Shabih Zaidi

Globally Mobile Intellectual Capital:

Narratives of Corporate Executives & Families on the Move

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Abstract

The concentration of pharmaceutical research and production in Basel is unique and the influx of highly skilled professionals and their families has changed the local landscape over the past few decades. This thesis is based on ethnographic research carried out in Basel between 2016 and 2019. The experiences of families moving to work in Basel on an International Assignment is explored through the lens of Corporate Mobility from the company's perspective. I also wanted to understand how the move was experienced by the family accompanying the Corporate Executive. Interviews with both the employee and the spouse allowed me to explore their various motivating factors and also acknowledge the unique aspects of life in Basel.

Using Grounded Theory to analyse my semi-structured interviews, I argue that emotions play a strong role in both the professional and personal spheres. I started with Human Resources (HR) literature, explored studies of the migration of the 'highly skilled' and used my Coaching & Training development knowledge to inform this dissertation with a multiple perspectives approach. I chose not to focus on ethnicity, gender or nationality during my fieldwork, but tried to gain as much as possible through personal discussions, participant observation and full immersion in the field whilst collating numerous biographical accounts.

Globally Mobile Intellectual Capital is critical to companies and starts with the individual's self-realisation when entering the corporate world. Leveraging this concept and negotiating the career-plus-personal trajectory of the individual and their family are key to understanding the benefits and also some of the challenges that mobility offers.

I use Sensorialscapes to highlight the flow of emotions as embodied and practised by mobile individuals connecting to a space via the senses.

Profiles

Chris & Anne, American, mid-50s, came to Basel on a 3-year contract and left behind their two college-aged sons in the US. They decided to bring no furniture with them and moved into a flat on the Rhine. This is their first move abroad.

Patrick & Mary, Irish, late 40s, here on their second stint in Basel with three teenage children, all at the International School. They moved from Ireland to Basel 10 years ago, then moved to the UK and are back in Basel again.

Carlos, Spanish, mid-30s, single. Moved to Basel 6 months before I interviewed him. This is his first move abroad.

Stefanie & Thomas, German, late 40s, 2 teenage children at the Swiss International School. In Basel for 2 years after other international assignments away from their base in Germany, including France and Singapore.

Rajesh & Jaya, Indian, mid-40s, 1 son. Moved to Basel from Thailand 10 months before I spoke to them and just accepted another international assignment to Turkey. This is their 7th year abroad.

Lucy & Axel, British-American, mid-40s, two children in primary school. Lucy was brought up 'on the move' and this is the family's second time in Switzerland. Her American husband had not moved prior to their first stint 6 years ago.

Helle, German, single, early 50s. Located in Basel now after living in the US for a decade. Went to the US on an assignment and then moved to Basel initially for a short period but then decided to stay.

Robert & Shauna, American, late 40s, two teenagers at the International school. Five years into their first assignment abroad. Moving back to another city in the US.

Carmen & Chloe, American, mid 40s, first assignment abroad. Two middle school children at the International school. They are moving back to the US after this assignment.

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Chapter 1 : Introduction

'We've come here as expats on assignment and want to explore Europe as much as possible. My husband has a lot of stress at work, so we try to take as many short breaks nearby to enjoy the experience of living here.'

Ann, Spouse

Switzerland, like other OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) countries, depends on a considerable number of 'foreign' workers. Since this thesis is focused on the 'highly skilled' workforce employed by pharmaceutical companies in Basel, I include below a table that highlights the importance of the Chemical and Pharmaceutical Industries to the Swiss economy.

Figure 1. Top ten Swiss chemical and pharmaceutical companies in 2012.

Company	Revenue	Employees
Novartis	$59.5 billion	130,000
Roche	$51.0 billion	82,000
Syngenta	$15.1 billion	27,000
Clariant	$8.7 billion	21,000
Sika	$5.4 billion	15,000
Givaudan	$4.7 billion	9,000
Omya	$4.7 billion	6,000
Lonza	$4.4 billion	11,000
Galencia	$3.7 billion	7,000
Firmenich	$2.9 billion	6,000

HandelsZeitung, 'Switzerland's Top-Ten Chemical Companies, 2012', www.handelszeitung.ch (June 27, 2013).

Many of these companies are headquartered in Basel and this fact alone indicates the diverse nature of the city and the attraction of Switzerland as a favourable working destination for mobile individuals and families. The country spends a considerable amount of time and resources on branding itself, promoting its low taxes, good salaries, impeccable environment and high standard of living.

The migration of a highly qualified workforce to Switzerland is a topic that has been studied through different lenses at many local institutions including the University of Basel.[1] These projects focus on learning more about the lived experience of the migrant population availing itself of numerous strategies to live and work in Switzerland. Again, since my focus is limited to a specific group, Company Executives and their families, I am only trying to present the larger framework within which my fieldsite is situated. I am not dealing with the 'highly skilled' per se but with a category within the highly skilled, that of Corporate Management Leaders. The general political as well as local and national economic ramifications of migratory processes are not covered in this study. The Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF) supports research projects through funding initiatives that promote research excellence in accordance with its mission statement 'Knowledge is the Key to the Future: Research Creates Knowledge' (www.snf.ch). The Swiss government fully supports the impetus for a knowledge-based economy at all levels . This plays a role in the number of highly qualified foreigners living in Basel, which by some accounts amounts to approximately 30% of the resident population.

---

1 At the Institute of Cultural Anthropology and European Ethnology at the University of Basel, a number of research projects funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF) were underway when I joined and discussions with colleagues helped me to define my own focus. 'The Mobility of the Highly Skilled Towards Switzerland' by Prof. Walter Leimgruber, Dr Metka Hercog and Dr Laure Sandoz; 'Narratives of Identity, Multi-sited Biographies and Transnational Life-modes of Highly Qualified Migrants: Two Case Studies' by Prof. Jacques Picard, Helene Oberle and Haddy Sarr; 'Movements of Entrepreneurs of Born Global Startups' by Dr Katrin Sontag; and 'Swiss Living Abroad' by Dr Aldina Camenisch & Seraina Mueller have all informed my research through collegial discussions.

Basel is located on the Rhine river, which divides the city into two parts: Basel City and Basel Land. This division has political implications since the two parts compose two separate states (Cantons) of the 26 that make up the Swiss Federation. The Swiss Cantons, like the states in the US, have their own unique identity, history, traditions and even public holidays. Cantons send representatives to the Swiss Parliament and, importantly for foreign workers, are in charge of issuing relevant work permits. The borders with France and Germany are approximately 15 minutes from the centre of Basel, the third largest city in Switzerland after Zürich and Geneva. The official language is German although a dialect (Basel Deutsch) is spoken locally.

As noted in the above table, there are a cluster of chemical and pharmaceutical companies in Basel and these make it punch above its weight economically in the region. Transport connectivity is excellent, with trams, buses and trains running smoothly, along with plenty of flights servicing the EuroAirport. I will outline more details regarding the topography of Basel in a later chapter to further underline its uniqueness.

i. Research Question / Collection of Biographies

How is mobility experienced by Corporate Executives and their families? This question is the starting point for my biographical thesis that Globally Mobile Intellectual Capital constitutes a form of currency that creates new opportunities for those involved: executives and their families, and of course the companies that facilitate their move. The participants in my study are often viewed as a privileged elite living within their own social 'bubble'.

Locating my fieldwork in Basel, I have focused on the Pharmaceutical Industry because Novartis and Roche, along with several other important supporting industry players, have their headquarters here. This rich offering of multinational companies has created a vibrant self-described 'expatriate' population that is transient in nature. I use the word 'expatriate' generically to refer to my field informants, Corporate Executives who have moved here with their families for a limited number of years. There are many

other members of the local population who also refer to themselves as 'expatriates', since they are not living in their country of origin, but they are not part of this study. I will go deeper into the labelling of categories in the course of this dissertation.

What does it take to settle into a new job at the Basel headquarters and how do the families adjust to their new environment? What factors contribute to a successful relocation? Are there certain mechanisms that can be used to construct 'home' and what does that mean to these families? How is belonging negotiated on a daily basis to create a familiar rhythm?

I have used Grounded Theory to probe my data in the larger framework of migration studies vis-à-vis, to start with, the concepts of Globalization and Mobility. What I quickly discovered in my interviews was the emotionally charged nature of the experience. That led me to explore the importance of the senses as a means of locating, creating and grounding oneself in a particular space. My colleague Marta Rudnicka (PhD Candidate in Social Anthropology) and I explored this concept at length with our students in a course that we developed and taught at the University of Basel called Anthropological Perspectives on Sensorial Mobility.

Using Affect Theory as a framework to examine and articulate subjective and intersubjective states (Svašek 2014), we explored the literature on the senses, migration studies and globalization to delve into key aspects of human behaviour. I use the concept of *Sensorialscapes* to designate the idea of connecting to a place through the senses in order to create a familiar rhythm that would provide a level of comfort and a feeling of being settled. Those individuals who were successful at negotiating *Sensorialscapes* for themselves, thus establishing a comfortable connection to Basel, reported high levels of satisfaction with their lives.

The research design included multiple interviews with Corporate Executives and their spouses to probe the many aspects of the process of their relocation to Basel. I have anonymised the accounts; however, several familiar tropes can be recognized as typical experiences of newcomers to Basel. The collection of biographies below highlights the many conversations I have had

about the migration experiences of this group. These narratives allow a deeper exploration of what it means to move.

ii. The Field and Biographical sample

Being in Basel, it is hard to ignore the impact of the Pharmaceutical Industry on the local economy, population and architecture. My office at the University of Basel is at Rheinsprung 9/11 and I can see the Roche Tower to my right and the Novartis campus to my left. The question that a non-Swiss person living in Basel is most commonly asked first is 'do you work at Novartis or Roche?' There are very few people who do not have some sort of link to either company or a related industry. I was intrigued by the experience of individuals who moved here for work and brought their families to this unique part of the world. Companies spend a lot of money, time and resources on Talent Management, supporting executives and their families to ensure that relocations are smooth. I was curious to learn the narratives of these individual and the meaning they gave to this experience. How did it affect them on an individual, family and career level? Could the findings of this study be used to better inform companies and individuals of the ramifications this kind of lifestyle choice has? Why were some moves more successful than others and what could be done for a more positive outcome?

These were some of the questions I wanted to explore when I started and, in a sense, they mirrored my own experience of moving with my family to different locations. I knew what corporate mobility meant for us and wanted to explore if there were ways of better understanding the processes involved in order to facilitate positive outcomes for individuals, families and companies. As a Coach it quickly became apparent to me that this area required more attention, vital as it is for companies' Organisation Development, for Leadership qualities in Executives and, critically, for the Mindset of individuals and their families. In effect, these all intersect at the individual level where I use Emotions as an analytical tool to delve deeper into what the key indicators for success are.

iii. Methodology: interviews, participant observation

The question of who is considered a globally mobile executive is highly problematic and subject to many different factors. With that in mind, the biographical data collected for this study was in the form of semi-structured one-on-one interviews with an executive and their spouse, on a mobile career trajectory determined by their company or driven by themselves. The sample is reflective of the multinational makeup of the companies and is not categorised according to gender, nationality, age or ethnicity unless a strong trend emerges from the data.

In addition, I sought to explore mobility through self-descriptive words such as 'mobile', 'expat', 'lucky'' and 'lifestyle', used by some of my informants in casual conversations which fortunately led to interviews. This group of migrants are highly skilled and sought-after individuals, occupying a 'bubble' on the fringes of society and building up cultural capital (Bourdieu 1986) as they move from country to country. Their transnational lives often transcend borders, ethnicities, genders and the resultant effect is that of a certain 'malleability' which allows them to mingle with other globally mobile individuals. There is a lot of literature that explores the experience of such families and my research intention was to explore the meaning of the lived experience in Basel particularly.

Whilst the duration of their stay is a factor, as many fixed short-term contract employees may not invest as much into their new surroundings, the overall majority of employees, along with their families, go through a varying number of issues when trying to settle into their new home. They need to 'integrate' not only into the mainstream Swiss community, but also into Basel's large international community, all the while trying to maintain a sense of family identity.

The detailed biographies collected necessitated an individual-level analysis of the narratives and meanings produced as a result of mobility. I started by using Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss 1967) with the additional developments of Corbin (1998) and Charmaz (1998). Analysis of the data to determine the social

networks maintained and created and what these established for the informant helped in understanding the adjustment process. Biographies are powerful narratives that link memories, places, spaces, objects and people through storytelling and, I would venture, the concept of *Sensorialscapes*. By marking out and connecting key life events as a 'journey', by using language that is often evocative, the Narrator conveys emotions that are central to the process of communicating hopes, dreams, motivations, etc., moments that are (de)constructed with a touch of self-reflection and nostalgia. Using biographies as a way to approach and understand an informant's perspective on their own life trajectories 'means new interpretations of the past and new meanings, sometimes even reinterpretations in the light of current or recent events or evaluations can be woven into older layers of the experience … People and their life stories appear in dynamic relationships whose interaction involves different and interdependent vectors: people, groups, times, spaces, things, symbols, ideas, dreams, properties, institutions, actions and movements' (Picard 2016; my translation)

Collecting these biographies as data for my research was an exercise in active listening and open questioning. This allowed 'the understanding of a perspective of both subjective and individual experiences, as well as of structural or institutional areas considered to be methodologically equivalent by actors. The concepts of biography and the lived environment can help draw out insights from interviews and participant observation about a complex narrative that condenses the situation' (Picard 2016; my translation).

The semi-structured interviews were conducted individually with a view to establishing an open and confidential conversation about the decision to move to Basel and how they dealt with the whole relocation process, starting from logistical matters to the settling-in phase and to their current situation. As a member of the international community it was easy to establish a rapport with my informants and I was mindful of not leading the conversation, but just listening and waiting for thoughts to develop and explanations to be expanded upon.

iv. Observing Oneself: Positionality

As an ethnographer, the concept of positionality truly hit home for me on multiple levels whilst writing and reflecting upon this topic. It is no longer the simple binary of 'Insider/Outsider', originally developed in the field of anthropology when the early anthropologists travelled to distant lands in search of 'untouched cultures', which could be studied through the lens of 'the Other'. Nowadays we can look at our computer screens and explore 'new tribes' and 'new spaces' at any moment. The description or understanding of culture as 'shared webs of meaning' (Geertz 1973) has become synonymous with talking about the collective human experience of a system. How can we describe and understand the meaning of a lived experience through the everyday connections human beings make with their environment? What are the limitations and possibilities of this kind of ethnographic study, and is there ever a moment when we, as researchers, can truly capture through analysis what is fully meant by 'thick description'?(Geertz 1973).

When I started this dissertation, I was trying to grasp what mobility meant to the families that experienced several global relocations through work. Would there be an 'aha' moment for me that would enable me to shed more light on the countless studies that have been conducted to understand the impact of such a lifestyle? Looking at the HR literature it became obvious that this topic is of extreme importance to companies since they spend millions of dollars supporting corporate relocation. Strategies and programmes to retain and support top executives are part of HR policies looking to adopt a more holistic approach when dealing with international recruitment, providing realistic information about the social context of living conditions, a paramount consideration for families. Cross-cultural adjustment is linked to positive career outcomes such as career satisfaction, life satisfaction and intention to stay (Guo & Al Ariss 2105). In her talk at a class led by Dr Metka Hercog, Thusanthy Sinniah from the University of Applied Sciences and Arts Northwestern Switzerland (FHNW) School of Business highlighted some multinational company

practices seeking to confront the challenges of International Assignments. Socio-cultural factors play an important role in adjustment and, according to Sinniah, there is a growing trend for Cultural Awareness seminars. This is something that I too have noticed in my Coaching practice.

<table>
<tr><td colspan="3">Language skills</td></tr>
<tr><td>Social Intelligence</td><td>Ability to deal with conflict</td><td>Flexibility</td></tr>
<tr><td>Emotional stability</td><td>Good listening & coaching skills</td><td>Sensitivity</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">Value differences in people</td><td>Ability to understand non-verbal communication</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="3">Cross-cultural Awareness</td></tr>
</table>

Figure 2. Socio-cultural competencies, Thusanthy Sinniah 2015

As Switzerland is highly selective about issuing work permits and as companies also constantly review and revise their Talent Management policies in order to remain globally competitive (https://hbr.org/2018/03/the-new-rules-of-talent-management), the practices adopted by the local pharmaceutical giants grew more interesting. I had many questions at the outset. How can the success of relocation be measured so that companies can ensure a return on investment? What factors contribute to the failure of these moves and can these situations be mitigated in order to facilitate a smooth transition? 'While the traditional expatriation of HQ personnel to foreign subsidiaries continues to serve as a prominent and useful global staffing strategy, global organizations are simultaneously diversifying their pool of global employees (Mayrhofer, Reichel, &

Sparrow 2012) to meet the demands driven by the globalization of business. The mix of international assignment methods, beyond expatriation or home-country nationals, is felt with an increasing presence of host or third-country nationals at HQ locations (GMAC, 2014)' (http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09585192.2015.1052086).

By exploring this subject, I was actually looking for answers within, since this has been the context of my existence for as long as I can remember. My personal history as the daughter of an academic who moved with his family several times across the globe has given me a fluid view of mobility. After I got married, my husband and I also changed our residence several times and are currently living in Basel, Switzerland with our threechildren. Having lived in this 'mobile world' for so long, my interest in expanding the public and academic discourse regarding this phenomenon centred on striving to present the many experiences that inform mobile lifestyles and make them real.

Ethnographers face the question of methodology as a series of parameters which need to be defined in order to somehow isolate their subjects (Herod 1999). My complete immersion as an individual who has lived and experienced the many questions I probe created a fluidity of approach that I found to be invaluable. The nature of my experience allowed me to explore multiple levels and perspectives, whilst questioning my own assumptions at every turn. Who is able to gain more depth in a subject, an insider or outsider? For me, the many blurred lines only led to a better understanding of the myriad aspects of my subjects' lived experience. I therefore define my positionality as an auto-ethnographer seeking to 'research that [which] involves self-observation and reflexive investigation in the context of ethnographic field work and writing' (Marechal 2010: 43).

My recognition of underlying assumptions based on personal experience and own history is very strong and I have used it to further develop and question my material through probing my informants, sometimes matching their ideas and at other times opposing and questioning the reasoning underlying emerging themes. This circularity of approach allows for the expression of the complexity lived and experienced by my informants. After all, is it

ever possible to determine the exact cause and effect of life strategies given that they are often quite particular? Allowing such a broad spectrum of analysis at the beginning, however, is problematic in that there seems to be no focal point around which to centre the discussion. To address this, I wish to provide a flexible framework that can be used to determine the major perspectives, motivations and experiences of this kind of lifestyle so that companies and individuals are better informed when thinking about International Assignments.

v. Defining Corporate Mobility and Fieldwork

The global mobility of Corporate Executives and their families, and the issue of maintaining relationships as a result of relocation, may be regarded as a private matter. However, the impact on employee performance as a result of poor family adjustment to a new environment cannot be overestimated. Social networks need to be constantly reinforced and maintained in order to preserve ties with friends and relatives who live far away. Many issues crop up as a result of the 'hard work' involved in the task of 'keeping in close touch' and the realisation that social relations are affected. The 'emotional labour' involved in international mobility (Yeoh et al 2005) exemplifies how emotions play a major role in the complexity of mobile family life. Judgements vary as to whether or not irregular contact with other family members and friends is destructive of relationships and intimacy. Is it the rule that the fewer ties you have, and the weaker that they are, the easier it is to be mobile (Nowicka, 2005)?

Much research has been done to understand the adjustment process of families, particularly the accompanying spouse, in order to inform company HR policies and it is a growing field in the social sciences (Ackers 2005). In my research, viewing it through the analytical lens of mobility allows further exploration of the observable practices, imaginaries and experience of relocation on the lives of those who have chosen to move to Basel and make it their 'home'. Global Mobility is an essential component of a company's success (KPMG [2013]: International Assignment

Policies and Practices of Swiss Headquartered Companies), which is why understanding how to manage and possibly increase the chances of a smooth transition for mobile families is important. Although much is on offer already, and the company provides a lot of support, the narratives collected in my research point to varying degrees of 'settlement'.

As such, I focus on Corporate Executives who are highly skilled Management Leaders and work for the Pharmaceutical Industry, based in Basel, and their families. My connections with this group are through the International School of Basel where many Executives send their children and where my own children go to school. I have also had the opportunity, as a Professional Coach and Trainer, to conduct soft skills workshops on Personal Effectiveness to employees in various locations in Europe, and offered Coaching on an individual basis. This has allowed me to fully capture and experience the working environment conveyed by my interviewees and also in my own capacity as an external Associate Trainer.

These multiple layers of connections allowed me to build an easy rapport with my interviewees that often led to shared stories and greater understanding of the unique environment that our lifestyles create. The question of privilege often comes up within this circle and it is acknowledged as the result of 'many years of hard work' which can now be enjoyed, albeit only temporarily because the next assignment is looming, often after an average of a 3-year stay in one location. Of course there is also a 'price to pay' for this life: leaving family, familiar surroundings, friends, work … a sometimes exhausting list which tempers the feeling of exclusivity. The phrase 'first-world problems' is jokingly used to minimise feelings of discomfort and despair. The settling-in process can be difficult, yet the overarching idea of privilege can make it even more emotionally complicated by raising opposing feelings: '*we are so lucky to be able to experience this lifestyle, so why is this so difficult and why does the inability to speak the local language make me cry?*' (Ann).

vi. Mobility Factors

Whilst conducting my research, I have been fortunate enough to determine some of the motivating factors that went into the decision making process. The variables differ considerably from family to family but some of the major factors that resulted in the move to Basel are: career growth, adventure, international exposure for the children, a better lifestyle, more opportunities. I will unpack the various links which became clear in my data analysis, such as the effect of relocation on career trajectories for the working spouse but also for the stay-at-home spouse, how the age of the children impacts the decision, whether local language is a factor, etc. Some of the difficulties are common regardless of location but there are some that seem to be specific to Basel. The fact that Novartis and Roche have their Global Headquarters in Basel means that the top tier of Corporate Executives reside here at some point in their career. The various aspects of relocating to Basel, taking into account its topographical features, which I outline in Chapter 7, is what I have tried to capture through the many interviews and mark out what is important about this study.

The main approach at the outset was to allow the informants to describe their migration process as a fluid narrative in order to allow various perspectives and motivations to come to the fore. This allowed for loose connections around arrival, settling-in, school, work, daily life, language to emerge. By looking at how individuals constructed their stories, I was able to discern patterns that enabled understanding how they made sense of their move(s) and negotiated their everyday lives in Basel.

vii. Framework

In the following chapters, I present my field research as, using Grounded Theory (Strauss & Corbin 1999), I started to collect data and observations which I could analyse and probe with theories and questions that teased out the meaning of corporate mobility. Through peer discussions, literature reviews and participant observation, I was led to the emotions and the relational nature

through which, once understood, they can be used to add 'thick description' (Geertz 1973) to practices and corporate settings, and be leveraged to enhance leadership skills. This work synthesises the concepts of Migration, Globalisation, Mobility and Transnationalism through the emotions as *cultural vessels*. Movement and flows across boundaries (re)produce transnational social fields through everyday practices. 'Increasingly emotions are recognised not as individualised, internal psychological states but as fundamentally intersubjective and thus social and cultural in character' (Ahmed 2004 b: 9; Svašek and Skrbis 2007: 371). 'It has been argued that the more rapid pace of internationalization and globalization leads to a more strategic role for HumanResource Management' (HRM) (Novicevic & Harvey 2001; Scullion& Starkey 2000). 'In particular, a shortage of leadership talent is a major obstacle many companies face as they seek to operate on a global scale. The rhetoric of maximizing the talent of individual employees as a unique source of competitive advantage has been a central element of strategic HR policy in recent years' (Frank & Taylor 2004; Lewis & Heckman 2006). By moving beyond what is often seen as a transactional arrangement between companies and their mobile talent, I hope to provide further insights into the lived experience of mobile Corporate Executives and their families.

The chapters are organised into three main parts:

Introduction:

Chapter 1: Describes the fieldsite, my reasoning for pursuing this research and the context of this study

Chapter 2: Details the experience of the working spouse, stay-at-home spouse/family as they transition to Basel

Chapter 3: Profiles of some of the informants who participated in semi-structured interviews