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Just a Matter of Choice? Student Mobility as a Social and Biographical Process

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Schnitzer 1997; BMBF 2007; Heublein and Hutzsch 2007).

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research (cf. Millar and Salt 2008 for some preliminary survey results amongst UK university career services used by employers to recruit international students). However, one can also attempt to avoid the

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without immediately abandoning the

and following different methodologies. Thus, the question of *why* students go abroad needs to be turned into: *How* do they become geographically mobile? In doing so, attention automatically shifts towards a processual perspective: the usual assumption of the student as the main agent whose motivations cause the move abroad is relaxed and the influence of other actors and events that have been involved in the process of becoming mobile can be observed; studying abroad is not necessarily any more the result of a one-off choice, but instead the outcome of a sequence of events which in the end lead the student abroad.

The next section of the paper presents the

paper). Still, in view of the sample reached, two reservations need to be made. On the one hand, the sample contains none of those students who are often labelled in the

Spiegel Online 2006; Der Tagesspiegel 2010). This group comprises those students who want to study one of the subjects (e.g. medicine) for which places are administered by a Germany-wide central application system, but fail to do so due to the high entry restrictions (numerus clausus) set in these subjects. Thus, they decide to go abroad in order to study the preferred subject there (and often return to Germany after a few semesters). Given this dominant motive, their absence in the sample is not considered a major constraint. On the other hand, the fact that the respondents of this study started their academic career abroad between 1996 and 2004 indicates another specificity.

Bologna, academic degree structure

responding course structure were still in place in Germany; thus, the first academic degree could be acquired only after a study period of around five years (depending on the subject) with no officially recognised degree be

structure with Bachelor and Master was slowly introduced after the Bologna Declaration in 1999, all respondents if they started studying in Germany and not abroad anyway started out in the old

might have caused them to think about studying abroad for a Master. Due to the institutional changes in the German university system, this study might thus appear as somewhat dated, but the following analysis will point out aspects which are relatively unaffected by this change and can thus be said to play a continuing role in bringing about student mobility.

At the beginning of the interview, the respondents were asked by the interviewer to narrate their life until the present. They were asked not just to relate why they went

abroad, but to start at a point where they thought their story would make sense to the listening interviewer. This part was followed by questions mainly referring to what had been told, either to elicit more detailed accounts or to clarify aspects which were unclear. If the respondents had not talked about it themselves, they were finally asked how they had funded their foreign degree and if they had previous experience of travelling or living abroad.

Contacting the interviewees via a person they knew turned out to be an advantage, as most of the interviewees were willing to recount their lives, including more personal aspects such as relationship or family issues. The interview was complemented by a short questionnaire asking for basic socio-demographic information about the respondents themselves and their parents.

Since the paper does not regard student mobility as the outcome of a one-time individual choice based on specific motivations, the analysis pays close attention to sequences of actions and

narratives. At the same time, the focus is not just on what is told (the content), but to some extent also on how it is told (which aspects are emphasised, where are they placed in the narrative etc.; cf. Kohler Riessman 2008). Naturally, the respondents also refer to their motivations for why they studied abroad while narrating their life, e.g. the wish to be fluent in a foreign language and to experience another culture, the interest in a well-structured academic programme, the possibility (for men) to circumvent obligatory military or civil service and often also the desire to attend a prestigious university (although the last reason is frequently more noticeable from the actual choice of university than from the statements in the interview). But since this paper aims at highlighting aspects which either precede individual motivations or have an impact on the

motivational dimension has been excluded in the ensuing analysis.

The role of previous mobility experiences

Given the opportunity to tell their life and how they came to acquire a degree abroad, most respondents interestingly refer in their narrations to prior encounters with other countries or cultures. These references to previous mobility experiences strongly resonate with statistical findings on student mobility which point out that such experiences raise the likelihood of being mobile again (King et al. 2010). One should thus assume that these early encounters have a profound impact on the subsequent life course and, indeed, most of the life stories use this theme albeit in different ways

studying abroad was the consequential result of such experiences. Some of the respondents achieve this by starting their narration with a reference (almost in passing) to their international family background, in this way invoking the impression that it was, as it were, nothing extraordinary for them to end up studying abroad. The following two quotes⁴ of Rudolf, son of a German diplomat, and Andrea, daughter of an expatriate working for a German company in Japan, illustrate this point:

I actually started living abroad a lot earlier. My family are diplomats and for this reason I spent a lot of my youth

years of schooling in Paris, where I went to the German school. It goes without saying therefore that I was socialised somewhat in France and for this reason it was clear from the outset that at some point during my studies I would want to return to France or Paris. (Rudolf)

Basically... well, I ultimately studied in Southampton abroad for practically the whole of my

life. I mean, by the age of 18, I had only lived in Germany for three and a half years. And we mostly went to German schools, but the last one we went to was the German school in Tokyo. Well, Germany was not necessarily the target, well, the country I had to return to immediately for me it was more a question of where can I find what I really want to study? (Andrea)

But other interviewees who grew up in Germany also begin their life story by employing the theme of previous mobility experiences. The difference to the first two quotes is that since they cannot refer to parents working as diplomats or expatriates, they have to stress their international orientation much more thus using wo

up several instances of mobility in order to convey the importance of these experiences. Accordingly, Lena and Lisa start off by remembering numerous travel tours with their parents or school exchanges:

I had always travelled a lot with my

distances, but always in such a way that the whole family enjoyed itself. We went to Denmark a lot, to Holland a lot, camping sometimes, plenty of holiday cottages, that sense of travelling, experiencing new things somehow

are a few legendary trips which my parents undertook that as family legends have been recounted again and again and which really welded them together. This is why I think that travelling has always been a main theme anyway. (Lena)

Well, whilst at school, I always took part in school exchanges with heart and

difficult, relatively speaking, to learn languages, I never really had a problem with that when I was at school. Those were always the fun subjects, school

what made an impression on me a bit,

⁴ All quotes are translations from the German language and try to preserve the original turn of phrase as far as possible; omissions are denoted by square brackets, italics indicate that the speaker emphasised that word, two dots signal a short pause.

why I am interested in other countries. I

last point, one might think of Hauke and Jakob again: if they had not come to experience their school stay abroad so positively in the end, they might have refrained from going abroad again later in their life. By pointing out that the acquisition of mobility capital results from the interplay of these different sources, Murphy-Lejeune (2002: 56-59) also warns against seeing family influence as too overbearing.

socially-embedded nature of educational mobility and the importance of various kinds of social networks in explaining how

and Waters 2010: 146, italics in original). As Brooks and Waters (2010: 146-153) suggest in relation to their analysis of British degree-mobile students, other

decision to study abroad can manifest itself in various ways e.g. siblings, friends or

can function as role models, by having been abroad themselves, offering advice and reassurance. Furthermore, (foreign) partners or other romantic attachments can be the reason to develop the idea of going abroad or can considerably influence the choice of a country and/or institution (cf. Favell 2008 and Mai and King 2009 on rtant factor for migration processes). Both their investigation and this ample references fferent ways in the process of the students becoming mobile in some cases making it impossible to say exactly whose actions

this means a major departure from the previously criticised theoretical model with its focus on individual decision-making as a starting point for explaining the occurrence

decision is not a single person decision, we open the whole matter of choice to new causal models. Under certain conditions a clique may acquire the ability to virtually dictate the choices of its members. Similarly under certain conditions parents may dictate choices, or 0 1s,tate

the LSE, I could join their MA if I had already completed my Vordiplom [preliminary studies] and two semesters of my Hauptstudium [main

complete my degree in Germany. And then I thought, well, why not, that sounds much better than going there for a year and then having to come back and complete my degree anyway. (Petra)

The fact that the educational mobility of this group of students is strongly influenced by the in-built opportunities of the academic system, does not just point to the process of social embeddedness, but also underlines its (at times) specifically institutional dimension. They also differ to some extent from the other respondents mentioned before as the encounters they remember as influential for their educational mobility

decision-making. What is more, an

employees, but also open to others (cf. Hayden 2006: 18-19). When remembering how it came to their starting their BA degree at a British university, both of them refer to the school, to the other pupils there and to the role teachers played in the process:

Why I decided not to orient myself from Brussels back to Germany but towards

had to do with outstanding conditions

example, our English lessons were taught by native speakers, i.e. teachers from England, who in our final year, our last year at school, provided us [...] with the UCAS application forms and explained them to us, as well as assisting us with our individual applications. There was a great deal of support and information as well. As a consequence, more than half of my German-speaking class at the European School went to the UK. Thus, it was almost a, not just almost, the

but to the UK. Like many from the European School went to the UK anyway, not just those from the German-speaking class. (Georg)

well who had also thought about going to Eng

We also had... there was an English teacher at school who always looked after the students *very well*, in the sense that he gave us information, told us how the application process worked. And I can still remember, it was... he also when you submit your UCAS application, you need some sort of

reference. Even t English teacher, he assumed the responsibility of talking to various teachers and then writing the reference for me for the university. [ponders] Well, I suppose that also must have played a role, somebody being there, you know, who provided us with information and

ultimately facilitated the whole thing for us. (Felix)

In spite of the slight differences in the way both respondents recount the past situation, their quotes clearly convey that -structuring effect for directing these pupils towards a British rather than a German university.

how he was part of a majority of pupils doing the very same thing, conveys how going to the U

thing given the circumstances. Thus, in a way, his example is quite complementary to those respondents mentioned before whose actions were determined by doing something in contrast to others. Later on in the interview, Georg compares his path to Oxford with that of other Germans he became friends with there, acknowledging again the influential role the school played:

Many of my friends, also in Oxford, who went there, took a bit longer to latch onto the idea of applying there; at

idea. Well, this needs to come into ace. Why should I go to the UK?... In Germany, I think, it is still the first reflex quite to orient oneself within Germany. (Georg)

Previous research on the children of diplomats, expatriates or other transnationally mobile professionals has highlighted the important role educational institutions play in the formation and social reproduction of what is often called a

by providing them with a cosmopolitan (or

and a thereby associated habitus, as well as fulfilling important networking functions for these communities (Hayden 2006; Shore and Baratieri 2006; Waters 2007; Moore 2008). But the scenario remembered by Georg and Felix further suggests that research should also take a

closer look at how such schools might actually pre-structure decisions with regard to the child's educational trajectory by providing specific information and support. Why does the school offer such a service? How is such information taken up by the children and their parents? Does it become part of the parents' interactions and if so, how does this in turn

in the following passage of Sandr

motivation for mobility as being linked to a habitual disposition that dates back to earlier encounters with foreign countries and cultures, but that at the same time favours the re-enactment of such experiences. In contrast to Murphy-Lejeune, though, it was argued that such a disposition alone is not sufficient to explain education-related mobility, since the mode of operation does not prescribe specific actions according to Bourdieu (1990). For this reason, the numerous references to other people in the

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Annex

Table: Overview of the interviewees

Inter- viewees	Year of birth	Gender
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