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

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The logo of the University of Sussex, consisting of the letters 'US' in a stylized, bold, serif font.

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Abstract

A recurring question with regard to international student mobility/migration is why students go abroad. Most often, this question is answered by pointing out different factors, e.g. the students' expressed reasons for going abroad, specific psychological traits, or differences in economic and social capital. This paper, however, looks at the question from a processual perspective, asking how students become geographically mobile, thus perceiving studying abroad not as the result of (a one-time) choice, but as the outcome of different social and long-term biographical processes and events. The analysis is based on narrative-biographical interviews with German degree-mobile students who went abroad to another European country. By reconstructing the different contexts and trajectories from which their mobility originated, the role of previous mobility experiences, but also of critical events which influenced the paths of these students, is highlighted.

Introduction

Academic interest in international student mobility has certainly grown over recent years, since this phenomenon is part and parcel of several, often politically induced, developments affecting higher education and societies more generally. Within the European Union (EU), for example, student mobility plays a substantial role in the so-called Bologna Process, the creation of a 'European Higher Education Area' (Papatsiba 2006; Mechtenberg and Strausz 2008). It is also discussed more generally as an important dimension of the internationalisation and marketisation of higher education (Teichler 2004) and with regard to highly skilled migration (Koser and Salt 1997; Diehl and Dixon 2005). While most of this research deals with the wider implications of the students' geographical mobility, this paper goes back to the preceding concerns of migration research by taking up the recurring question of why students move to another country.

Surveying the existing literature, it appears that answers to this question are predominantly based on models pointing out various factors at different levels which are seen as furthering or impeding mobility, the so-called push-/pull-factors or drivers of/barriers to mobility (e.g. Gordon and Jallade 1996; Mazzarol and Soutar 2002; Szelényi 2006; Li and Bray 2007; Maringe and Carter 2007; Doyle et al. 2010). An elaborate version of such a model, which

lists factors on the international, national, institutional and individual level, is exemplarily set out in HEFCE (2004: 42), and some studies progress this approach to the psychological level (Frieze et al. 2004, 2006).¹ Insufficient foreign language proficiency, financial constraints or fears to leave one's family and friends, for instance, are regarded as barriers to student mobility, while the motivation to improve one's language competences and career prospects or limited access to tertiary education in one's own country (due to 'numerus clausus' regulations or the non-availability of specific courses) can be considered as driving forces. Furthermore, research on student mobility has repeatedly shown that the likelihood of going abroad is influenced by the students' socio-economic background, previous experiences of geographical mobility, and family members or friends who are abroad or who have lived abroad in the past. Thus, mobile students tend to have a higher social-class background than their non-mobile peers, often dispose of experiences of being abroad prior to their educational mobility and cite family members or friends as having had a positive influence on their decision to go abroad (West et al. 2000; Jahr and Teichler 2002; King et al. 2010; on German students cf. Müßig-Trapp and

¹ A noteworthy exception to these mechanistic push-pull models are those studies which argue, in the wake of Bourdieu, that studying abroad functions as an important mechanism in the process of social reproduction of advantage (Marceau 1989; Brooks and Waters 2009; Waters and Brooks 2010).

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

Associated with this line of reasoning is the fundamental theoretical assumption that going abroad is – in spite of the different constraints imposed (as represented in the model by the aforementioned factors) – eventually the result of (more or less) rational decision-making, involving an individual weighting of the pros and cons of studying abroad, considering all available options at hand and taking his/her specific interests and motivations into account. Surveying students' motivations for going abroad (or plans to do so) thus forms a central element in this vein of research, indicating rather consistently the same aspects in this regard: students want to improve their language skills and career prospects and hope to gain personally through the experience (i.e. getting to know other cultures, broadening their horizon etc.); some of them are also interested in working abroad later; whereas academically-related motives appear less important (Müßig-Trapp and Schnitzer 1997; West et al. 2000; Jahr and Teichler 2002; King and Ruiz-Gelices 2003; HEFCE 2004; Papatsiba 2005; Heublein and Hutzsch 2007; King et al. 2010). Differentiating between credit- and degree-mobile students, it turns out that the latter group is also motivated by a foreign university's prestige and emphasises more the employment-related aspects (West et al. 2000; King et al. 2010) – although a qualitative study by Waters and Brooks (2010) suggests that British degree-mobile students seem to be an exception, at first sight, from such a 'strategic' attitude.²

Despite all this accumulated knowledge about the socio-economic and demographic characteristics of mobile students, their reasons for studying abroad and the different facilitating as well as impeding factors, there remains something unsatisfying about this approach when

explaining the occurrence of student mobility. Rational-choice models cannot say anything about where those motivations that propel students abroad come from; they have to be assumed as given. Stating at the same time, however, that previous mobility experiences raise the likelihood of going abroad, implies a preceding process through which corresponding motivations are somehow formed. Similarly, it is empirically well-known that 'others' – most notably family members and/or friends – play an important role in bringing about educational mobility; yet, theoretically, it is assumed to be an individual decision-making process, thus abstracting from any social relations the student is embedded in. And even if previous mobility experiences and relational aspects are integrated in the model as context factors, the question remains as to exactly how they bring student mobility about. Lastly, such models remain somewhat opaque about the temporal aspects involved (cf. Abbott 2001). Does going abroad result from a one-off decision or from a trajectory involving different kinds of events and several decisions, not all of which are necessarily geared towards educational mobility right from the start? Does the order of such events then exert an influence on the occurrence of student mobility?

In a recent paper on existing theorisations of the occurrence of student mobility, Findlay (2011) regards the previously outlined models as 'demand-side' theorisations (since they ultimately try to explain such mobility by starting out from the students' perspective) and criticises them for using 'simple behavioural models of the choices made by students' without 'recognizing the importance of the cultural, social and economic contexts within which "decisions" are taken' (Findlay 2011: 164, 165). He argues, instead, that what is needed is a closer look at the 'supply side' of student mobility, i.e. the role of recruiting agencies, universities, government institutions and policies in directing the flows of mobile students towards certain countries. This aspect has been widely neglected up to now and deserves further

² Degree-mobile students are also referred to as engaging in 'diploma' or 'programme' mobility in some of the literature.

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 narrow focus of such 'choice models', without immediately abandoning the 'demand side', by asking other questions 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 research design and the methods used to approach this question empirically. It also discusses critically some of the choices made by the author in this regard, e.g. concerning the selection of respondents. The main part of the paper consists then of an analysis of the empirical material regarding three different aspects: the role of previous mobility experiences, the role of social relations the students have been embedded in prior to their departure, and the impact of time. By focusing on these aspects in relation to the process of becoming a mobile student, the paper attempts to delineate how those motivations which students usually report in surveys partly come about and how the trajectory which ultimately leads them abroad for educational purposes has been shaped by influences quite independent of their own making.

Research design and methods

The following empirical analysis is based on 22 narrative-biographical interviews with

Germans who studied abroad for an entire undergraduate or postgraduate degree. Contrary to prior research on student mobility, which mostly focused on credit student mobility (cf. for example Teichler 2002; King and Ruiz-Gelices 2003; Bracht et al. 2006; Parey and Waldinger 2011), degree-mobile students have been chosen here as the target group (for the scarce research on this group, cf. Wiers-Jenssen 2008; Findlay and King 2010). On the one hand, degree student mobility seems to play a far more important role numerically in some receiving countries than usually noticed. National statistics on higher education from the Netherlands and the United Kingdom – being among those countries which receive the biggest shares of German students going abroad nowadays (Statistisches Bundesamt 2008: 10, 18) – show that at least in these two countries credit-mobile students are by far outweighed by the other group.³ On the other hand, Gordon and Jallade assert that degree student mobility – or 'spontaneous mobility' as they call it – comes about independently from 'organised financial or structural support' (1996: 133), implying that this form of mobility is rather based on choice than that of those students following 'organised' mobility patterns (i.e. exchange programmes, the ERASMUS programme etc.). Given the introductory discussion and critique of the dominant push-pull-cum-rational-choice models, this makes degree-mobile students the far more interesting group to study (cf. Carlson 2011 for a more extensive discussion of this argument).

The sampling relied on 'snowballing', first via personal contacts, then via contacts of the interviewees; in order to minimise biases caused by this strategy, care was taken during the selection procedure to achieve a sample as diverse as possible in terms of gender, country and subject of study (for an overview of the respondents, see the table in the Annex at the end of the

³ In the academic year 2002/2003, only 22 % of German students studying in the UK were there for credit reasons (Sibson 2006: 110) and in the Netherlands their share accounted for barely 9% in the academic year 2004/2005 (NUFFIC 2005: 26, 30).

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 German media as 'NC-Flüchtlinge' (e.g. 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 (numerous 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. During that time period, the 'old', i.e. pre-Bologna, academic degree structure ('Magister', a 'Diplom' or the 'Staatsexamen') and a corresponding 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 before that. Although the 'new' degree 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 system so that there was no 'break' which 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 events occurring in the respondents' 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 students' itinerary on their own, 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 – to convince the ‘audience’ that 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 living abroad [...] I spent the last six 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, because I've lived 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 words like ‘always’ or ‘a lot’ and lining 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 parents [...] Not necessarily great 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 – that was always there [...]. And there 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 soul. [...] I didn't and don't find it 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 exchanges were the highlight. That's 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 also travelled as a child with my mother to Italy and was intensively aware of the fact that they speak a different language there. This 'internationalness' has always fascinated me. (Lisa)

Another way to emphasise the role of previous mobility experiences in becoming a mobile student is to tell a story of personal development in which geographical mobility is first something unusual and not necessarily sought after, but then turns into something desirable and delightful. Consequently, these stories do not start with references of travelling or living abroad; instead, they often stress the respondent's immobile upbringing in the beginning. Thus, Jakob contrasts his childhood in 'a rather stable milieu' in Bielefeld with his teenage experience of spending six months at a boarding school in Canada, where he was sent not exactly by his own choice, but because both his older brothers had been there before. Once there, he increasingly enjoyed it and even extended his stay for a few months in the end. In a similar vein, Hauke, originally from a very rural region in North Germany on the Dutch border, starts his narration:

Well, going abroad and getting a degree there – I wasn't really *at all* predestined to do that. [...] We're firmly rooted in our local area; almost the whole family – apart from a few exceptions, i.e. my sister and me – comes from the same area [...]. Been rooted there for generations. I went abroad for the first time [...] when I was 16 – I went to an English school, an English boarding school for a six-month exchange [...]. That was the first time I really came into contact with foreign countries. It definitely had an effect on me in a manner of speaking. (Hauke)

Later on, he remembers how he felt at that British boarding school at the beginning and how his situation changed for the better, concluding with an assessment of the impact this time abroad had on his further life:

My time there was a bit tough, I have to say. Like I said, the first time away from home alone and completely removed from one's usual surroundings. And you're simply the idiot, the stupid German that understands *nothing*. I mean, I was never bad at languages, nor at English, but you arrive and understand absolutely *nothing*. [...] Things were OK somewhat, after a while, I had my circle of friends who one could talk to, understand, and with regard to school things I got the hang of it relatively quickly. [...] I was always in everybody's good books, they could copy from me, that worked relatively nicely, because I was never the worst in maths. And I have to say that, in hindsight, that really was a turning point [...] because I knew: hey, you come completely unprepared, are thrown in at the deep end, fight your way through, it isn't a problem. (Hauke)

Whether previous mobility experiences are used to underline a long-lasting interest in foreign countries and cultures, or portrayed as a decisive turning-point in the respondent's personal development, the respondents employ this theme convincingly to get across that these experiences were felt as essential for setting them on a path towards renewed mobility. For a more theoretical understanding of why this is the case, it is useful to look at the concept of *mobility capital* as coined by Murphy-Lejeune (2002) in her anthropological study on mobile European students. In her definition, mobility capital is a 'sub-component of human capital, enabling individuals to enhance their skills because of the richness of the international experience gained by living abroad' (Murphy-Lejeune 2002: 51). It originates from four sources: family and personal history, the student's previous experience of mobility including his/her language competence, personality traits, and the first experience of 'adaptation' to a new surrounding which functions as an 'initiation' if the initial 'culture shock' is overcome in a positive way (Murphy-Lejeune 2002: 52-70). With regard to the

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.

Although Murphy-Lejeune mentions Bourdieu only in passing, there is some resemblance to his theoretical concepts – not least because of the term ‘capital’, invoking his distinction between cultural, economic and social capital (Bourdieu 1997). Indeed, Brooks and Waters (2010: 154) suggest that mobility capital should be better ‘conceptualized as a form of capital which exists alongside the others identified by Bourdieu [...] and which can be both converted into these other types and produced by them’. More importantly though, it seems that given the way Murphy-Lejeune depicts the effect of mobility capital – according to her, people with mobility capital dispose of a ‘taste for living abroad’, the ‘travel bug’, an ‘appetite for wandering’ (Murphy-Lejeune 2002: 51-52, 56, 59) – it should not just be thought of as a resource which people can draw upon as they like. Instead, it is essential to emphasise its incorporated nature – analogous to Bourdieu’s notion of embodied cultural capital (Bourdieu 1997: 48-50) – and conceptualise it as part of a person’s *habitus*, as an internalised disposition. Only then is it comprehensible why the ‘urge to travel’ (another expression used by Murphy-Lejeune to circumscribe the effect of mobility capital) should direct these young people towards further mobility, as Murphy-Lejeune argues (2002: 52).⁵ Seen that way, Murphy-Lejeune’s concept helps us to understand why most of the respondents place so much emphasis on their previous mobility

experiences to bring across why they studied abroad. From their perspective, these encounters with other countries and cultures built an essential element of their biographical trajectory, whose importance can only be fully acknowledged when perceived as the result of a process by which a specific *disposition* had been formed, which in turn impacted on their further courses of action, urging them to seek out new mobility opportunities.

The question remains, however, as to why the respondents ended up studying abroad and did not just travel from time to time or pursue a work placement abroad in order to satisfy the ‘travel bug’. If one understands mobility capital as part of a person’s *habitus*, it follows from Bourdieu’s theoretical reasoning that the *habitus* is not something purely deterministic which would prescribe concrete actions. Rather, as ‘a system of dispositions, that is, of virtualities, potentialities, eventualities’ (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 135), the *habitus* allows for a range of actions which occur, furthermore, only in a similar way if the *habitus* ‘is confronted with objective conditions identical with or similar to those of which it is the product’ (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 129; for a more extensive discussion of his *habitus* concept see Bourdieu 1990). Thus, we need to take a closer look at other aspects and dimensions which supplement the effect of mobility capital and play into the process of becoming a mobile student.

Going abroad as a socially embedded process

Another striking characteristic of the respondents’ narrations about how they became mobile students are references to other people, most often involving family members, friends, partners, teachers and/or lecturers at university. This resonates strongly with the argument brought forward by Brooks and Waters – directed against the prevalent notion of the individualised nature of transnational mobility in the existing literature – on the

⁵ Having said that, the narrations of those interviewees in my sample with an international family background clearly do not show an ‘urge to travel’; rather, living (and studying) abroad has a certain taken-for-grantedness for them.

'socially-embedded' nature of educational mobility and the importance of various kinds of social networks in explaining how and why young adults [...] decide to move abroad for their tertiary education' (Brooks 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 people's influence on the students' decision to study abroad can manifest itself in various ways – e.g. siblings, friends or other students from one's school/university 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 'love' as an important factor for migration processes). Both their investigation and this paper's analysis provide ample references on how 'others' partake in different ways in the process of the students becoming mobile – in some cases making it impossible to say exactly whose actions ultimately 'caused' student mobility. Again, 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 of student mobility: 'Once we admit that the 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 counsellors, or others. In all these situations, understanding the social structure of the decision becomes crucial [...]' (Abbott 2007: 17-18). By reconstructing four such 'situations', the following analysis attempts to work out the various ways through which 'others' impacted on the respondents' mobility trajectory. Just as in the preceding section on the role of previous mobility experiences, this passage focuses on the one hand on the different kinds of social relations emerging from the narratives, but

on the other hand also takes a closer look at how the respondents portray them in their narratives.

Encountering others

The involvement of other people – siblings, friends, acquaintances, teachers, etc. – in the process of becoming a mobile student is most tangible in those life stories in which the respondents recall a specific encounter as part of the chain of events which finally led to them studying abroad. The fact that these others are part of the main story-line – which also implies that without their appearance, the story would not progress in the same way – points to how influential these encounters were felt by the respondents for their own trajectory. Sandra, for example, remembers how her wish to study in London (shaped by numerous stays abroad before) suddenly became feasible when she met an Englishman in her circle of friends:

I had an international group of friends here in Berlin and it was evident for me, that it would be a dream come true to study in London. But it was more of a pipe dream, like owning a penthouse in New York, or something like that. And in this international group of friends was a guy who was a year older than me and was doing his Abitur a year before me [...]. And so I was chatting to him, asking him what he was doing now, and he said that he was going back to England [...] to study. I said: wow, isn't that great, it's easy enough for you, you're English, that would be my absolute dream. And he just said: hey, it's a lot easier than you think. And he explained to me: go to the British Council, get some advice there on studying, listen to what they have to say, take the documentation with you. (Sandra)

Similarly, Anja ascribes her decision to study physiotherapy in the Netherlands to an exchange she had with acquaintances when confronted with the question

of where to realise her idea of a vocational future:

Erm, I think it all began – I can't exactly remember when it was – when we did a test at the job centre, on what I was interested in, because I didn't really know in which direction I should go. One of the results was physiotherapy and I had two families here in Bielefeld for whom I babysat. One family came from Holland and were physiotherapists, and the other had a brother who was physiotherapist. And I spoke with them both, I think, and the Dutch family said: If that's what you plan to do, then you should definitely go to Holland. (Anja)

Another example of how others play an important part in bringing about student mobility is provided by Andrea who reflects on the role of her older sister (who had been in the UK for an exchange year herself) in making her study in the UK:

Yes... she just said quite bluntly: 'Andrea, go and study in England, that's the best thing for you' [laughs]. Not that I absolutely had to do it, or anything like that, but she was... she always managed to find things out, like: 'Come on, Plymouth would suit you! Or Portsmouth, I'll even come and visit you'. That's just the way she has always done it, dropping hints and showing me the options... or at least drawing my attention to the fact that these opportunities exist or that this would be a good way of doing it. (Andrea)

In these kinds of stories, the 'other people' are assigned the role of 'information brokers' whose help made the respondents aware of specific opportunities which were hitherto unnoticed or simply unknown to them. In those cases – like Sandra's, Anja's and Andrea's – where studying abroad started right after the Abitur (the German equivalent to A-levels), this move was most often influenced by someone from the personal milieu. But similar encounters, albeit in a more institutional setting, are

also recounted by those respondents who went abroad after having first studied at a German university for some time (sometimes with, sometimes without, graduating there first):

I got some advice from the ERASMUS officer [...]. And... well, she asked me: What do you want to do for your main degree, what do you want to specialise in? And by then I knew that I wanted to do something with environmental issues [...]. And then she said: Well... the UK etc... we've got something much better, apply to Denmark, they have an English-language Masters on offer that concentrates predominantly on environmental issues. [...] One of our lecturers had worked there as visiting lecturer [...] and he said: Yes, go for it, [...] I can highly recommend it. (Martin)

Just like Martin, many other respondents, whose educational mobility started, comparatively speaking, later than that of the first group, recall encounters with university lecturers, exchange programme managers or other students as an important step in the process through which they finally ended up graduating from a foreign university. Often though, neither the respondents nor the persons they talked to necessarily intended this from the very beginning. Martin, for example, initially went to Roskilde as an ERASMUS student, but enjoyed the Danish academic system so much that he decided to graduate there instead of returning to Germany (the same happened to Lisa who stayed in Sweden, finishing an MA course there). A similar change of thought is recounted by Petra who does not refer to another person, but whose trajectory was also influenced by existing institutional affiliations between her university and a British one:

[...] and then I managed to find out somehow that the FU [Freie Universität Berlin] had a kind of exchange programme with the LSE, where you could study for a year and then come back, and I had applied but not got the place. [...] but during the whole process

I'd found out that if I applied directly to the LSE, I could join their MA if I had already completed my Vordiplom [preliminary studies] and two semesters of my Hauptstudium [main studies], i.e. I wouldn't need to 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's 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 rather involve persons they have only met once and with whom only 'weak ties' (Granovetter 1973) existed before. Different from Brooks and Waters (2010: 146-153), who mainly refer to 'strong ties' as examples of social embeddedness, and also from the following examples in this study, this suggests that under specific conditions it is not necessarily a long-lasting, dense social network which sets students in motion or directs them towards a specific country/university.

Pursuing a partnership project

As mentioned before, studying abroad can also be linked to romantic reasons, e.g. because the partner lives in another country or because the stay abroad is planned as a shared project (cf. Brooks and Waters 2010). While most of the respondents in this study either did not have a relationship when they went abroad or were not deterred from doing so even if they did, some of those who were in a relationship acknowledge the influential role their partner played in the process. Anna, for example, recounts how her growing attachment to a Danish man,

whom she had met during a trip to India, made her stay in the UK and start studying there:

[...] and at some point we just said: OK, this is just ridiculous, either we give us a chance at being together, or we'll call the whole thing off. [...] And then we said: OK, let's give it a go. And because we always spoke English with each other, and because I already was in England and it felt like a neutral country, we said: OK, he should come here. [...] And we were both – Christian was six years older than me, so he was in his late 20s, I in my early 20s, and he didn't really know what he should do, and I didn't really know either what I should do, everything was a little bit up in the air. So the easiest and most useful thing to do, we both felt, was for us both to go to university. (Anna)

Tim, on the other hand, starts out by narrating how he and his girlfriend just wanted to go abroad for some time – initially on holiday, but as time passed, their project transformed into a more academically-oriented one. On being asked to re-tell in more detail how they got the idea to go abroad in the first place, he says:

Well, this wasn't originally my idea, it came more from her. She likes travelling, had done a year's school exchange with the USA, year 10, studied anthropology and ethnology, field trips here and there... and had always been fairly abroad-centric, having also spent a gap year in Latin America. And... she had planned it, I think, from the start, for her it was clear: during her studies, she wanted to go abroad again for a year by all means. And for me, I was a bit like: well, OK [hesitantly], I'll go along with it. In that sense, the impulse didn't come from me. (Tim)

Thus, both cases illustrate vividly how studying abroad resulted from the interactional dynamics within the respective relationship rather than from individual

decision-making. What is more, an interesting point about Tim's case is that he emphasises his girlfriend's previous mobility experiences for making them go abroad – he himself barely mentions travel, etc. during his childhood in his story and also admits to having never been abroad for a longer period of time before he started studying in the UK. This suggests that mobility capital can even exert its influence – at least via the 'strong' link of a relationship – on other people, thus allowing someone with little mobility capital to profit from another person's rich endowment of it, which is an interesting advancement to Murphy-Lejeune's idea.

Distancing oneself from others

However, among those interviewees who went abroad more or less subsequent to finishing their schooling (and had thus not studied at a tertiary level in Germany), there are also some who barely mention friends, partners or academics in their initial narrative. And even if they do, these references do not have the same 'event character' as in the examples given above. Only in the further course of the interview, when the respondents were asked to expand on specific episodes of their narration, did 'others' start to appear. At first sight, this might seem contradictory to the proclaimed social embeddedness of the process, but the following passages attempt to show that, even in these cases, 'others' played an important role in bringing about student mobility – albeit in a different guise. The following quote comes from the interview with Björn, who first did an apprenticeship after his Abitur in his home town in North Germany and then started studying in the Netherlands (and not in Italy, which he also considered). Being asked to recount again in more detail how he ended up going to Groningen, he reflects on the past situation in the following way:

At the time, my brother was studying in Ireland and doing an internship in the Netherlands. [...] The brothers of two friends had also studied abroad and

had come back by then, I mean, whilst I was doing my apprenticeship, these two men came back. They had been abroad studying for four years [...] and only seldomly came back. They were simply straight after their degree – just like my brother, by the way – all three were back home living with their parents and looking for a job in the region. That was my perception at the time – they were such a long way away, they never came home in between, they were idealising their home lives, and this was one of the reasons why I didn't go to Italy, but to Groningen. It was not so far away, it meant I could come and go in between as I liked and I continued to see how life developed for my parents. [...] I could develop my own life story in a relaxed manner, compared to my brothers and the others. (Björn)

The important point here is not that his older brother and the two brothers of friends had been abroad (and thus might have been positive role models for him), but that his choice of where to go to is explicitly made in contrast to them. In comparison to the quotes before, these 'others' do not represent something to be followed, but rather something which is perceived as undesirable or to be avoided. The next quote provides another example of how studying abroad can be related to distinction vis-à-vis others. Since Heike had not applied early enough to start studying in the UK directly after school, she 'treated herself to a break', as she expresses it, while waiting for offers from British universities, and, just to fill in time, attended university courses in her home town of Heidelberg. At one point in her story, she links her experiences there and the experiences of older friends to her intention to study in the UK:

[...] well, the two semesters I spent studying in Heidelberg, actually confirmed to me that it wasn't what I wanted, because I found it a bit... it wasn't tangible enough, I have to say. What attracted me to the UK was the system, it was easy to understand,

more structured and you knew that when it's over, it's over. And I was a bit put off having heard from older friends, this... of course, studying in Germany gives you incredible freedom [...]. But I was put off a bit by the fact that if you are not really disciplined, you might get stuck somehow. (Heike)

Being asked at a later moment in the interview if studying abroad has changed her personally in any way, Heike recalls her general attitude towards Germany and Heidelberg at the time before she left for the UK:

[...] when I left Germany, I was completely fed up with Germany, I found it very stuffy, everything was, you know, so bourgeois. I mean, Heidelberg is also an extreme, I have to say, I went to this grammar school that focused on the classics, everyone was 'Professor von und zu', I just couldn't wait to get away. (Heike)

By distancing themselves from others and/or their experiences, these respondents still acknowledge how influential these others were for their trajectory, even if initially there is not much room given to them in the narrative. This suggests that going abroad can not only occur because of positive relations people entertain – as in the aforementioned cases (cf. also Brooks and Waters 2010) – but might also be influenced by drawing symbolic boundaries towards others, i.e. 'conceptual distinctions made by social actors to categorize objects, people, practices, and even time and space' (Lamont and Molnár 2002: 168). In the examples given before, these boundaries very much centre on questions of identity – how the students define themselves in relation to others, who they want to be and/or do not want to be like – and these distinctions impact in turn on the students' decisions. Abbott (2007: 16-17) has made this very argument with regard to the process of college choice amongst American students about whom he says: 'The college choice process is an extended

phase of middle adolescence, embedded completely in the present-oriented identity contests of that age. It is all about who the student is and little about future education or even rational preferences about what the student will become, whatever the appearances imposed on it in retrospect'. If one substitutes 'college choice' with 'going abroad', his argument applies just as well for the point in question here: '[...] what is at issue in the process of [going abroad] is the literal identity of those who are deciding and [...] that identity is largely made by making meaningful connections and disconnections between self and various other groups. [Going abroad] is not just a matter of individuals making decisions. [Going abroad] is a language by which cliques talk to cliques, parents talk to children, guidance counselors talk to students, students talk to former students and so on' (Abbott 2007: 17).⁶ Thus, 'social embeddedness' does not only entail other people partaking in one way or the other in the students' lives and decisions. It is also relational in the sense that identity boundaries are drawn, separating the students from or aligning them with something or someone – with clear implications for mobility trajectories.

Joining in

Finally, two of the life stories hint at yet another way in which studying abroad is the outcome of a socially-embedded process, this time again of a more institutional kind. Georg and Felix, due to their parents' professional life, attended the European School in Brussels, which is part of a group of schools set up in different European cities mostly for the children of EU

⁶ One might ask at this point, why students do then report in surveys on their (career-related) motivations instead of conceding that their decision had a lot to do with identity concerns. Abbott's own remark to this is: 'Of course, students know better than to admit to such identity struggles. And so [...] a random panel of elite students [is asked] whether it is applying to certain colleges in order to help with career, in order to get good small classes, to study with senior professors, and so on. And the students dutifully report careerism and concern for their education, even [when] those things are often far from their minds' (Abbott 2007: 17).

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 the UK? [...] I would have to say that it had to do with outstanding conditions [...] at the European School. For 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 majority didn't go to Germany to study, but to the UK. Like many from the European School went to the UK anyway, not just those from the German-speaking class. (Georg)

[...] there were others in my class as well who had also thought about going to England [...]. So there had been discussions with other fellow pupils. [...] 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, [...] and he wrote my reference. Even though he wasn't my 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 the teachers' actions had a pre-structuring effect for directing these pupils towards a British rather than a German university. Especially Georg's account with its emphasis on the teachers' actions, and on how he was part of a majority of pupils doing the very same thing, conveys how going to the UK appeared as a very 'natural' 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 school in Germany, they weren't at all, they weren't even helped with the application, they weren't even given the idea. Well, this needs to come into one's mind in the first place. Why should I go to the UK?... In Germany, I think, it is still the first reflex – quite normal anyway, isn't it – 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 'transnational capitalist class' (Sklair 2001) by providing them with a cosmopolitan (or at least 'European') outlook on the world 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 children's further 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 pupils' interactions and if so, how does this in turn impact on the next step of their educational itinerary?⁷

The impact of the timing of events

A final issue when thinking about the process of becoming a mobile student – thought of as a sequence of events (cf. Abbott 2001) – is the role time assumes in it, i.e. the moment and order by which certain events occur. That timing indeed exerts a subtle influence can be seen when comparing those narrative passages in which the respondents report on how they applied for (foreign) university courses at the end of their school years. While Georg and Felix, for example, recounted their transition from school to university as smooth and effortless, Heike remembers how her move abroad got delayed for a year:

Um, well, I come originally from Heidelberg: this is where I lived and completed my schooling [...]. I'd already thought about going to England or the UK to study, because... just because I really liked the country, I'd always gone on holiday there and stuff, and because I wanted to be able to speak English fluently. [...] Somehow, I had chosen two cities, which I really liked, Edinburgh and London, and then I sort of had a year, er, because the

admission – you have to apply formally to the unis, there's a central applications service or something like that, [...] you have to apply to the individual universities and then you get an offer or not, and that takes a year. So I treated myself to a break, if you like. I enrolled at the University of Heidelberg, for English and Politics, just to do something, when really all I wanted to do was go abroad. (Heike)

That Heike applied too late in order to go to university abroad immediately after leaving school has to be seen in relation to how the application system for university courses works in Germany compared to the UK. Generally, pupils in Germany first receive their final grades and then apply for an academic course in order to start studying in autumn; for most subjects, the application has to be sent directly to the university of choice, only very few academic subjects are administered centrally by an institution (formerly known as the 'Zentralstelle für die Vergabe von Studienplätzen (ZVS)', since 2010 the 'Stiftung für Hochschulzulassung'). In the UK, however, pupils have to apply about six months before receiving their A-level results to the 'Universities & Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS)'; offers for courses are then conditional on meeting the required grades. Thus, knowing about this difference presents a first hurdle students have to take when they want to go abroad directly after leaving school.

What is more important, though, than the fact that some might have to take a one-year 'break', while others can continue immediately with their education, is that during this extra time, events might have occurred which could have altered Heike's original plan to study in the UK, making her instead stay on in the German academic system. For some reason, studying there could have turned out to be less daunting than initially expected by her or she could have made friends she found difficult to leave. Correspondingly, having to decide earlier about one's (educational) future than 'usual' also has an effect, as conveyed

⁷ This should not imply, however, that such practices are typical for every school which is attended by the children of diplomats, expatriates and so forth. Rudolf and Andrea, whose parents also belonged to that group and who attended a so-called German School abroad (cf. Moore 2008), rather recall how their school informed them about academic possibilities in Germany. This cautions against any rash overgeneralisation regarding the role these specific educational settings might play for the creation of a transnational mobile class.

in the following passage of Sandra's narration where she remembers how she reacted to receiving the offers from UCAS:

And somehow I had the luxury of having been accepted by four universities by the beginning of January [...] all of which required me to pass my Abitur. And I thought: I'll definitely pass, you haven't told me how good I have to be. In other words, I was partying from mid-January onwards, I couldn't have cared less. I only did my Abitur just to have it. [...]. In the last six months, I really – when my classmates started to get stressed, somehow trying to improve their marks, just being that bit better so that they could achieve the grades they needed for university – I didn't care because I knew: school was boring. I wanted to do the things that interested me, and those were the degree courses [in the UK]. In this sense, I really thought 'what the heck' and just worked a lot of my time, earning money somehow and spent my time doing other things, rather than thinking about school. (Sandra)

Although she adds that she applied to German universities as well, because she had the feeling that her parents would have liked her to stay, one clearly senses that this was no longer an option that she considered seriously, once she had been accepted in the UK. Similarly, Jakob remembers how the temporal order by which he received replies from different universities impacted on his move abroad:

Time also played a role. I'd applied to the ZVS, but by the time I'd received the ZVS' reply, I had already decided to go to Rotterdam. So that was completely immaterial by then. I just simply had the time, during my apprenticeship I had the time, to start applying to universities early on, which one might not have been able to do whilst at school [...] At that time, I don't think, whilst I was doing my Abitur, I didn't really think, which university in the UK can I apply to ideally? I didn't

really consider it. And I think, doing my apprenticeship, I organised that really well. (Jakob)

Thus, timing assumes in this regard a crucial structuring impact on the students' pathways. One might even conclude that the earlier studying abroad is decided upon (and applied for), the less likely it is that events occur which reverse the planned trajectory. Given the fact that the application process (that is, submitting the application as well as receiving answers) for some foreign universities, especially in the UK, preceded the one in Germany, these students did not make their decision about where to go to university at the same time: having already been accepted at a (foreign) university forestalled in a way any further consideration of alternative courses of action – even if they were accepted by other universities in Germany or elsewhere. Again, this clearly contradicts those theoretical ideas about rational decision-making referred to in the introduction, which usually assume that all possible options are carefully weighed against each other before a conclusion is reached.

Conclusion

Starting out with a critique of current approaches that account for the occurrence of student mobility by amassing a variety of factors associated with the theoretical notion of rational individual decision-making, this paper turned instead towards a processual perspective, asking how students *become* geographically mobile. To this end, the analysis of biographical narratives of Germans who had studied abroad explored how previous mobility experiences, relations with other people and the timing of the application process impacted on the students' trajectories in such a way as to bring about educational mobility.

For a more theoretical understanding of this process, the concept of mobility capital (Murphy-Lejeune 2002) proved to be helpful, since it facilitates seeing the

students' 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 habitus' mode of operation does not prescribe specific actions according to Bourdieu (1990). For this reason, the numerous references to other people in the respondents' narratives were used to gain insight into the social relations the students were embedded in at the time (cf. Abbott 2007; Brooks and Waters 2010). The analysis presented four typical 'situations' of social embeddedness and how these 'triggered' the move abroad and/or directed it in a specific way – as resulting from an encounter with others, as being part of a partnership project, as a result of processes of identity boundary drawing and, last but not least, as a consequence of attending a specific school setting. By pointing out how 'negative' relations can come into play as well in re-directing the students' trajectories and how 'strong' ties, in the form of partnership relations, allow benefiting from another person's mobility capital, the analysis has furthermore added substantially to the previous findings of Brooks and Waters (2010). In a last step, it was shown how the timing of the application process for academic courses, domestically as well as abroad, subtly influenced the respondents towards studying abroad, highlighting thus the hitherto unnoticed importance of time in accounting for the occurrence of student mobility.

Although this paper has only focused on these three analytical dimensions – mobility capital, social embeddedness and time – without providing a detailed reconstruction of each respondent's trajectory, it still allows for a closer understanding of how students are 'made' mobile – i.e. how their motivations to study abroad are shaped by preceding events and how their actions are grounded in time and social relations –

without simply invoking the usual idea of 'choice'.

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Annex

Table: Overview of the interviewees

	Inter- viewees	Year of birth	Gender	Country of study abroad	City/ University	First degree abroad	Academic field of study abroad	Start year of studying abroad
1	Georg	1978	Male	UK	Oxford	BA	Social Sciences	1996
2	Heike	1976	Female	UK	Edinburgh	MA	Humanities	1997
3	Björn	1974	Male	NL	Groningen, Hogeschool	BA	Architecture, Geography	1996
4	Sandra	1975	Female	UK	London, Univ. of Greenwich	BA	Economics	1995
5	Andrea	1979	Female	UK	Southampton	BSc	Natural Scienc.	1998
6	Rudolf	1978	Male	F	Paris, Sciences Po	Diplôme	Social Sciences	2001
7	Martin	1980	Male	DK	Roskilde	MA	Social Sciences	2003
8	Petra	1979	Female	UK	London, LSE	MA	Social Sciences	2003
9	Anna	1977	Female	UK	Lancaster	BA	Humanities	1999
10	Florian	1976	Male	UK	London, LSE	MSc	Management	~2002
11	Hauke	1978	Male	UK	London, Imperial College	MSc	Engineering	2004
12	Lena	1983	Female	D/F	Münster/Lille	Double Diploma	Social Sciences	2002
13	Christian	1974	Male	UK	London, North London Uni.	Diploma	Architecture	1997
14	Anja	1980	Female	NL	Utrecht, Hogeschool	BA	Health	1999
15	Jakob	1980	Male	NL	Rotterdam	BSc	Economics	2001
16	Lisa	1975	Female	S	Malmö	MA	Social Sciences	2000
17	Tim	1977	Male	UK	London	MA	Music	2002
18	Julian	1976	Male	CH	St. Gallen	Lizentiat	Economics	~1996
18	Susanne	1979	Female	UK	London, Royal Holloway	MA	Humanities	2004
20	Roman	1978	Female	UK	London, King's College	MA	Law	2004
21	Carsten	1973	Male	UK	Oxford	MA	Humanities	1997
22	Felix	1978	Male	UK	Birmingham	BSc	Economics	1996