

Guest editorial: Living in a “bubble”: global working communities and insulation in mobile contexts

Introduction

Globally mobile workers are often depicted as isolated individuals and families, who navigate crises and hazards more or less on their own (Dabic *et al.*, 2015; Bader *et al.*, 2018; McNulty *et al.*, 2019). However, experiential knowledge suggests that in the case of, for example, assigned, and self-initiated expatriates as well as multinational professionals, their assignments are rarely undertaken as isolated individuals (Fechter, 2016; Puchmüller and Fischlmayr, 2017). Rather, it has been documented that mobile workers across the globe seek contact in ways that suggest the existence of distinct communities (Cohen, 1977). These groupings can in some instances become secluded collectives that effectively insulate foreign nationals from the local socio-cultural environments. In this situation, it is not uncommon to observe nationality-based bonding in places where global mobile workers work on international assignments. In some instances, they are even physically isolated in gated communities (Lauring and Selmer, 2009). Alternatively, globally mobile employees and professional experts can sometimes unite around shared identities and values (Harrington and Seabrooke, 2020; Zhang *et al.*, 2021). Although some research has been conducted on mobile work communities, this theme has generally received limited attention and many questions remain unanswered. This could, for example, be in relation to their ultimate purpose, their acceptance and rejection criteria and their robustness.

The aim of this special issue is to improve understanding of this under-investigated theme in global mobility research using the theoretical lens of the concept of “community,” whether virtual or physical. Community is a central subject in the social sciences that has been studied extensively in various domains (Delanty, 2003). The concept typically refers to a group of people who share views, values and norms and, traditionally, has been contrasted with “society” as a concept. In this sense, community represents an organic form of intimate belonging that departs from the rationalized forms of social order in societies at large (Tönnies, 1887). Communities and groups often are formed by the intention of sharing attributes and thus distinguishes individuals from other people by use of social categorization mechanisms (Tajfel and Turner, 1979). In organization theory, this view of community as the spontaneous forming of human fellowship has informed concepts such as informal organization (Roethlisberger and Dickson, 1939) and organizational culture (Parker, 2000; Van Maanen and Barley, 1984). Yet, in general, mobile work communities have been neglected in theoretical and empirical discussions. Conceptualizing and empirically studying the communities of globally mobile workers raises specific challenges. Theoretically, the communities of professional sojourners differ from the communal groupings envisaged in domestically oriented social science literature. Assigned expatriates, self-initiated expatriates, multinational professionals, globetrotting employees as well as international blue-collar workers are not residing permanently in a specific place. In any location, different individuals are constantly arriving and leaving the space of the community. Such communities are therefore transient and dynamic, serving the immediate needs of individuals and families without strong attachment to other members of the group. Overall, scholars have hypothesized that a major reason why global workers are attracted to



building communities among themselves is the need to create a shelter against the complexities of cross-cultural and cross-national encounters (Cohen, 1977). The challenges the newcomers face might differ from locals' everyday life and this motivates global workers to seek each other's help. Evidence suggests that internationally mobile workers often form isolated nation-based communities that shield them from the otherness of their foreign surroundings (Guttormsen, 2018). An informal community based on the shared national or professional identity may provide a setting where assigned expatriates, self-initiated expatriates and multinational professionals can alternately maintain or suspend their *personal* cultural ethos in favor of keeping intact the expatriates group's own sense of cultural identity (Yunlu *et al.*, 2018; González *et al.*, 2021; Yu and Ren, 2021). In short, they manufacture an *ad-hoc* community. Whether this is based on nationality or other factors such as occupation is still only scantily understood.

The call for papers for this special issue invited prospective contributors to think of mobile communities in terms of "bubbles" (Cohen, 1977; Van Bochove and Engbersen, 2015; Spiegel *et al.*, 2017; Zaban, 2015). Bubble is here seen as a rich metaphor that succeeds in capturing the two dimensions of professional mobile communities, i.e. their capacity simultaneously to offer shelter and forge collective identity. Bubbles are fragile, as they can burst at any moment. And yet, when they are intact, bubbles shelter those inside from the influences of the outside world. Our point of departure is that the bubble metaphor reflects both the transient nature of mobile working communities as providing temporary contexts for a set of mobile individuals, as well as the ostensibly robust boundaries providing shelter and relief from the surrounding complexity and strangeness.

Contributions to this special issue

The study of expatriate bubbles is an important field not least because a large number of expatriates live in mobile work communities. However, the dynamics of expatriate groups living and working in foreign countries is still a relatively overlooked topic. Contributions to this special issue seek to address the gap in knowledge by offering differing research-informed perspectives on global mobile work communities. The articles adopt varied conceptual and methodological perspectives, covering different sub-topics within this field and discussing multiple manifestations of bubbles across the diverse geographical and cultural spaces of Asia, Africa, Europe and the Americas.

In the opening contribution to the special issue, the qualitative inquiry conducted by Primecz in Dubai sheds light on how "bubbling" is practiced in this Emirate by defining strict boundaries depending on stereotypes of nationality, race and status. Primecz's article examines the construction of three distinct groups - "Westerners", "Expatriates from the East" and "Emiratis" - which, whilst cohabitating the social space, nonetheless maintain strict identity boundaries. Primecz's detailed analysis of "Westerners", for example, demonstrates how the category of "Europeans" makes invisible the customary divisions between Eastern and Western Europeans that are commonly found in other parts of the world, particularly in Europe itself.

In their article, Van Bakel and Vance address the challenges faced by foreigners working in Denmark. They identify three cultural elements that could be used to define how bubbles operate in the Danish context: homogeneity, the value placed on equality and the public-private divide. It is the homogeneity and inward-looking mentality, the authors contend, that make it difficult for foreigners, as outsiders, to imagine themselves living in anything other than a bubble and, from this insular perspective, to perceive "Danes" as comprising and representing a "tribal nation".

The subsequent article by Végh, Dúll and Nguyen Luu explores how the pandemic impacted on the social networks produced in the bubbles of expatriate families adjusting to

living and working in Malaysia. They observe that the pandemic provided supporting conditions that engendered friendship and communality in bubbles; conditions which, in turn, facilitated both adjustment and repatriation processes. Friendship emphasized the sense of “feeling at home” and being “feeling like a family” again when returning after the long period of losing face-to-face contact with relatives and family.

Authored by Ryan and Silvano, the fourth contribution to this special issue, discusses the complexities of bubble formation and maintenance by addressing the gap in studies of the legalities designed to regulate circulation and displacement of expatriates. Their research focuses on the insolation and alienation experienced by mobile workers as a result of being beholden to legal requirements of the J-1 visa program in the USA. One of the distinctive elements of the scheme that Ryan and Silvano identify is the role played by the “sponsor”. This figure is construed by workers as adopting a patronizing disposition toward them and functions, symbolically, to strengthen their own sense of communitarian ethos. The sponsor also determines their legal relation with the host state according to the particular ties that the US Government decides should apply. The nature of these ties, in turn, is informed by political agendas that dictate relations between the host nation and the home countries of J-1 visa recipients.

Peltonen and Huhtinen base their contribution on an ethnographic study of a community of Finnish expatriates working in a “City” based in Southeast Asia. They explore the theoretical framing of symbolic boundary formation and management as well as the application of differing “modalities” – cultural, moral and spatial – of boundary work. Symbolic boundaries are internally constructed and maintained by the expatriates in a way that is intentionally independent of the immediate spatial and cultural contexts. Almost defiantly detached from place, the meaning of “nationality” is negotiated by Finnish expatriates within their bubbles on the bases of particular constructions of “Finnishness”; a category that is established by the performance of rituals, celebrations and other collective social activities in both private (members’ homes) and public spaces (such as, bars and restaurants).

The article by Papafilippou and Efthymiadou explores the important role that bubbles play in supporting work identities. They use their empirical research on self-initiated expatriate engineers working in Bristol to introduce the concept of the “protective” bubble; a space created not to isolate but to help cope with expatriates’ experience of foreignness and to strengthen their sense of professional belonging.

In the seventh article of the series, Miao, Gaggiotti and Brewster engage explicitly with the metaphorical dimension of “bubbles” by discussing their extensive fieldwork experiences in Africa, Asia, South America and Europe. They propose a model to visualize the complexities of the use of the “bubble” metaphor, in particular, its porosity and malleability, suggesting the need to challenge the conventional thinking that expatriate bubbles can be conceived exclusively to isolate and separate members.

In the final article of this special issue, Kars-Unluoglu, Guneri Cangarli, Yurt and Gencer explore the role of physical and virtual bubbles in the formation of transnational communities and processes of adjustment among Turkish self-initiated expatriates in London. By using the concept of “dissonant harmony-seekers” and the analogy of “foam”, the authors challenge the conventional thinking that social identity is central to the creation and maintenance of rigidly fixed bubbles.

Contribution to future research

The papers in this special issue aim to introduce a variety of research perspectives and offer fresh empirical and conceptual insight into the dynamics of mobile working communities. While there is always a need for advancing our current understanding on expatriate

“bubbles”, the aim of this issue is to examine critically aspects of mobile work communities that are relevant to international human resource management (HRM) but have yet to be fully acknowledged or integrated within mainstream studies.

It is our hope that the papers in this special issue, taken in combination, might serve not only to delineate current frontiers in international HRM and expatriation research but also inspire work on new (and, perhaps, as yet unidentified) themes. The research represented in these selected contributions will, we trust, encourage much needed further empirical and conceptual studies that might advance our current understanding of expatriation and mobile work communities.

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