

# Practice and Knowledge “Over There” and “Here”: A Cultural Analysis of How Mobile Highly Skilled Professionals Create Meaning With Comparison as a Tool

Helena Pettersson  
& Katarzyna Wolanik Boström  
Umeå University  
Sweden

Magnus Öhlander  
Stockholm University  
Sweden

## Abstract

*Comparison is a way to make sense of reality, e.g., by contrasting places, “cultures,” or practices. It may present different degrees of something, create a dichotomy, and imply a hierarchy of values. The article analyzes how comparison as a tool is used by highly skilled Swedish professionals when they talk about participating in international work mobility and their subsequent return to Sweden. Empirically, the analysis is based on 46 interviews with Swedish medical professionals and 30 interviews with scholars in Swedish Humanities.*

**Keywords:** high-skilled labor migration, Sweden, mobility, comparison

Understanding the world through comparisons is an everyday act all humans are practicing. In this article, we analyze how two groups of highly skilled Swedish professionals use comparisons in order to sort out their choices, aims, and impression of international mobility. We focus on narratives about embodiment and interviewees’ experiences when perceiving changes that happen through geographical movements between different physical places and between national borders. The overall aim is to present a cultural analysis of how professionals create meaning with comparison as a tool. The specific aim is to synthesize earlier studies of mobility among medical professionals and scholars within the humanities (see, e.g., Pettersson, Wolanik Boström and Öhlander 2015; Wolanik Boström 2018; Öhlander, Wolanik Boström and Pettersson 2019), and to analyze how the two interviewed groups use comparisons to organize their understanding of their stays abroad and return to Sweden. It might be “Swedish” ways of doing things compared to other ways, or academic systems with different demands on mobility and internationalization. We discuss how the interviewees make use of comparison, what different types of comparisons are made, and what momentum they create.

In the following, we will start with an outline of comparison as a practice of every-

day life. We will then present how comparison in our material could be understood as a way of organizing and understanding aspects of mobility intersecting work life and private life. We focus on three themes: risk-taking and safety, family life, and “home” and abroad.

### **Comparisons as a Practice of Everyday Life**

In classical anthropological literature, we have many examples of comparisons and how comparisons are used in order to create the world for the anthropologist, for example, building archetypes through comparisons, with descriptions of black and white situations. On the other hand, some comparisons are not precise, with few contrasting elements (Lévi-Strauss 1969; see Candea 2007; Ehn and Löfgren 2001; Ehn, Löfgren and Wilk 2015).

Comparison as everyday practice is a cultural phenomenon and aims at, e.g., understanding and evaluating, but also for self-improvement. By conducting comparisons, we can create meaning, sort out information flows, and make interpretations on how the world is constituted. To make comparisons is a fundamental cultural process in which we, as humans, distinguish between things and phenomena and relate to them, both in the past and present. Comparisons are a well-used tool to make sense of reality, e.g., describing places and cultures as interconnected and contrasting them to other places and cultures (Wolanik Boström and Öhlander 2015, 7). Furthermore, comparisons may make sense of different degrees of the same phenomenon but may also be used to create dichotomies (Miegel and Schoug 1998, 14). In both cases, they imply a hierarchy—something is “more” or “less,” “better,” or “worse” than something else.

Comparison can also help to understand (non)existing differences and as a tool to sort things out. We use comparison as a strategy to make the depicted world more understandable, e.g., related to the understanding of bodies, phenomena, materiality, and narratives. In the same way, comparisons may be used in order to understand certain positions, practices, and values. Comparisons can work as a marker for choices and for choosing the “right” thing. They are acts of confirmation and corroboration, serve as motivation and incentive, justification and vindication, and rationalization and clarification. To make comparisons thus creates order and sorts things out. With comparison as a method, categories can be created, and the world can be organized, e.g., in dichotomies or equalizers. We focus here on different modes, forms, and purposes of comparison. In our previous articles about highly skilled mobility, we have used Pierre Bourdieu’s notion of capital: cultural, academic, and symbolic capital. Bourdieu’s concepts are one example of how comparisons have been theorized and developed into an analytical framework with conceptual tools (Bourdieu 1984; 1988).

Comparison as a strategy often results in dichotomies, i.e., a conceptual dualism, organizing things in different (binary) categories, or splitting a category into two sub-categories (Miegel and Schoug 1998:14; Wolanik Boström and Öhlander 2015:12). As mentioned above, it also quickly results in hierarchies: one component is, at least implicitly, regarded as “better” in some way. In our material, what is perceived as “Swed-

ish” work life and family life is often presented as the well-known, secure, well-functioning—though sometimes maybe a bit dull, schematic and organized—, as opposed to the extraordinary, adventurous, and exciting—though more dangerous or old-style—during the stay abroad.

From a cultural analysis perspective, we understand humans as maintainers and facilitators of values and ideas, practices, and skills, both as professionals and in private. Comparisons can be defined as an everyday and active method for humans to actively create and re-create culture. With comparisons, old and new experiences define and challenge peoples’ experiences, as well as thought styles, practices, and lived lives. In everyday culture, there are ongoing negotiations on how to define the world. In this article, we try to understand how our interviewees do that in terms of comparisons, to form, compare, and motivate their career choices, and how comparisons relate to their private lives.

Comparison—as a method of understanding culture as opposites—is central in our lives and research, but it is also strongly criticized. In our text, we have chosen to highlight two domains, namely everyday life and research. Here, thus, we use the perspective of cultural analysis as it provides the ability to analyze how similarities and differences in people’s experiences, views, and values affect their ability to understand and collaborate through a phenomenological approach.

## Data

Our point of departure is 46 in-depth interviews with Swedish medical professionals and 30 in-depth interviews with Swedish humanities scholars. In the former group, physicians work in international charity organizations in the Global South, specialized physicians involved in research and clinical practice going abroad to other Western clinics and research centers, and medical molecular biologists. Among the humanities scholars, there are historians, philosophers, and Romance language scholars. All these professionals took their medical exams or Ph.D. in Sweden and lived and worked in Sweden before their stay abroad.

The 3-year study of the scholars in the humanities is at the time writing still running and is an offspring from the 3-year project on the medical professionals. The interview-samples of medical professions only included those who have been abroad for longer or shorter work stays, while the sample of professionals in the humanities included both persons with and without experiences of longer or shorter work stays abroad.<sup>1</sup> The physicians/medical researchers and molecular biologists went to other countries in ‘the West’ (e.g., United States, France, Australia, the United Kingdom) while physicians who took assignments for international aid organizations worked in countries in Africa, Asia, and South America. While not all of the humanities scholars did spend more extended periods working abroad, all of them regularly attended conferences in different parts of the world. Some of them also had international collaborations with colleagues who could include shorter visits to other countries. Others had spent time as postdocs in other countries, as participants in teaching exchange programs, or were visiting researchers.

Interviews were based on open-ended questionnaires and focused on work-life and practices of internationalization (e.g., postdocs, assignments, exchange programs, meetings, conferences), with a special emphasis on new knowledge and insights gathered from working abroad for a limited time. Themes included the process of moving abroad, the stay there, and the subsequent return to Sweden. However, the interviewee was allowed to freely develop and/or go in-depth on themes they considered to be important from their own experience. Interviews were conducted in Swedish, digitally recorded, and transcribed verbatim. Quotes in this text have therefore been translated to English with minor revisions for better readability. All interviewee names are pseudonyms. Interviews followed the guidelines for research and ethics for the Swedish Research Council.

We wish to bring together cultural comparisons from work, family life, and leisure “over there” and “here” with the cases presented here. The “over there” refers to the place where the interviewee conducted research abroad, and the “here” refers to Sweden upon return. Interviewees used such or very similar expressions when referring to places abroad as “over there” or their home country as “here.” The use of “over there” and “here” was also an easy distinction for the interviewees to make, to be able to sort their experiences out, and to compare and distinguish.

### **Comparisons and Hierarchies**

The knowledge systems our interviewees inhabit in their everyday professional work is, by definition, a system of comparisons, both among the group of researchers in medicine and the humanities, but also among the medical doctors. The groups in our studies are part of a more extensive system with institutionalized comparison regimes. During the last years, the number of different types of ranking systems for universities has risen, with such actors as the *Times Higher Education* and the *Shanghai Index*. There is also a constant discussion on how to compare different journals, citations, merits and publication types, expertise levels, not to mention the collected data and experimental or methodological settings in itself. This is also the case for university hospitals and medical schools (see, for example, Stack 2016; Soh 2017). A central part of the university is to try, testify, compare, problematize, falsify, and confirm. All these actions are based on comparisons. They aim to understand and/or explain phenomena of nature, technology, culture, and society through scientific arguments and results (de Rijcke 2016; Hammarfelt and de Rijcke 2015; Hammarfelt et al. 2016). As researchers enter the global arena for higher education and move abroad, there are immediate mechanisms for comparisons. The very fact that you have decided to move physically from another space, from a particular institution and country to another country, is itself an act that is based on decisions derived from comparisons.

Further, higher education funding systems included acts of comparisons, where evaluators read, select, and compare different applications with each other, where projects are compared and, in the end, chosen for funding. Here, it is not only the research plan or research idea but also the merits and skills visible through CVs and publication lists. The entire academic world is indeed embedded with acts of compari-

sons and systems where comparisons are explicit. As a community in which merits are regarded as the most fundamental work objectives, there is a constant discussion about comparing different types of merits (Dussage, Helgesson, and Lee 2015). This includes gendered aspects of merits and how work-life and gender expectations affect academic productivity (Aiston and Jung 2015).

Added to this, we may also keep in mind the influence of new public management regarding research output and management steering. Academics have been living with different types of evaluation systems for a long time, and thus, comparisons are a method of understanding everyday life, not only actual work processes. With the act of comparing academic systems comes the idea of “the west and the rest.” As shown in several studies, it is vital for researchers to cooperate and publish with researchers in different parts of the world to gain more citations. Researchers who cooperate and publish with researchers from different continents have a broader range of citations, spread out on different continents (Leisyte 2016; Oravec 2017; see Kreber and Hounsell 2014)

At the local level, different indicators measure up the researcher’s productivity and merits. Since the so-called autonomy reform, it is up to each university to create indicators and measurement tools in Sweden. However, universities also know that they need to relate to, if not apply and completely follow, the international rankings and measurements. The interviewees who are researchers are well aware of these tools but respond differently depending on their disciplinary background. Researchers in molecular biology, for example, are embedded in a global academic comparison system. This is also the case with the philosophers. The historians and researchers in Romance languages are aware that they are compared with and measured with a more science and medicine oriented ideal of being mobile. As for the medical doctors who are also researchers and the NGO doctors, their experience of being abroad is in Sweden compared with what they could have done while working in Sweden to enhance their career within the Swedish health system.

### **Mobility and Comparisons—a Reflexive Making of the Before-well-known Well-known Again**

To be mobile and make comparisons may be considered a taken for granted procedure. There is something cohesive with the two concepts of comparisons and mobility. Mobility as idea and practice is the expectation to experience something “different” in the new place. The practice includes moving bodies between places. Thus, mobility per se is supposed to mean a change, and thus form a ground for comparisons. The taxonomy of the word mobility and the relationship with the word “movement” can thus be understood as an act of agency. It is a conscious undertaking to move the body from one place to another. In a recent article, Öhlander et al. (2019) discuss highly skilled professionals within medicine and the humanities, and their experiences of living in (at least) two different countries for professional reasons. Here, the move from Sweden to another country and then back again may imply an act of comparison (e.g., towards the lack of movement). The article discusses how their interviewees, upon

return to Sweden, related to their time abroad through an analytical concept that we call “cultural jet-lag.” The “cultural jet-lag” aims at the norms and values, and social and cultural experience a person brings with them upon return to their home country after being abroad for a longer time. The interviewees had what Öhlander et al. define as a cultural and social delay of both everyday values and work-situation and had to adjust.

What is unique with our data in relation to comparison is that the interviewees not only move from Sweden to a foreign country but also move back to Sweden. This creates a double type of comparison: interviewees not only make comparisons with their experience in Sweden and abroad but also when they have returned to Sweden. There is a change in individuals’ geographic places and physical spaces, experiences, and interactions. Within work-life, there is an obvious comparison people make: the comparison of salaries and competences.

To move from one workplace to another internationally is also a choice, and to make a choice can also be considered a risk. For the groups we have studied, working abroad was an element of risk-taking in different ways. The actual gains—e.g., professional learning or higher merits—were grounded in concrete comparisons the groups dealt with. The interviewees reflected on their current Swedish research environment, which was able to maintain good quality. However, they had become mobile academics in order to strengthen their knowledge, e.g., to learn more about their specific research area from world-leading experts while being post-doctoral researchers, an important first career-step after the Ph.D. exam. The interviewees talked about curiosity and “adventure” alongside more rational explanations for choosing to move. Although it could economically and in terms of merits mean a setback compared to staying in Sweden, they were driven by a curious mind and striving to learn more.

Choosing to move from Sweden and (even temporarily) abandon the Swedish welfare system was considered to be a challenge, both for researchers and physicians. Several of the researchers we interviewed pointed out that the notion of the welfare systems security and the Swedish labor market employment logic are factors that prevent mobility, both at junior and senior levels. It requires a certain level of risk-taking, and even adventurousness says, for example, one of the molecular biologists. The idea of striving for the best research environment and being curious did not always match the ideal of security. There were challenges for the individuals who chose to be mobile, and they made constant comparisons and risk calculations on the benefits of staying in Sweden and being included in the Swedish welfare system. Examples were comparisons of health insurance, the pension system, etc. versus going abroad and working in a new environment with a much more vulnerable situation regarding social security, competence in that country’s research funding system, and leaving friends and colleagues they know. The molecular biologist Sofie compares Sweden and Germany:

It’s a hassle, especially if you decide to have children while being abroad. I had one kid while being abroad and that is tough. In Sweden, you have the day-care system, subsidized by the government but in Germany.... Everything is so expensive, and the daycare center it is more like “child storage.” No pedagogical program for the kids or

pedagogical education among the staff.

Some interviewees compared and made risk-calculations through individual questions: What will happen if I leave, and what will happen if I do not go? The molecular biologists and the philosophers argued that staying in the Swedish system would create a risk for them not to be able to be competitive, to apply for attractive research positions, and research funding. To stay was safe, but in the long run, the short risk of moving abroad might pay off later in their career. The molecular biologist Clara argued that a move was necessary:

I knew early on that I had to go for a post-doc abroad after my Ph.D. exam. Otherwise, I wouldn't be able to continue as a researcher. Of course, you want to start your own research group, but that is not possible without becoming independent as a researcher, and the post-doc is an important part of that.

In general, the group of scholars in history did not consider mobility as a necessary career choice. They also compared the gains of staying in Sweden to the actual risk of going abroad, where staying would increase the possibility of having temporary appointments as senior lecturers and thus, through Swedish work regulations and laws, after two years, become fully employed by the department.<sup>2</sup> However, one of the historians who had received a permanent position as a lecturer immediately after the Ph.D. exam considered the career as a researcher being in danger due to the permanent lecturing position. A permanent university teaching position within the Swedish university system includes 80% teaching and 20% competence development. Thus, you must apply for external research funding to be able to conduct research to a more considerable extent.

Some of the medical practitioners considered their time abroad as something that, in retrospect, risked their Swedish career. Several of them concluded when they came back to Sweden that their time abroad did not count. Going abroad was risky, and the effect was losing something instead of gaining something. On the contrary, the researchers in medical molecular biology and philosophy emphasized that they would be affected negatively if they were not part of an international research community through physical mobility, including experiences, merits, and networks from other academic workplaces (see Pettersson 2011).

To be both curious and “adventurous” were described as positive professional driving forces that created both breadth and depth in the profession – and, implicitly, contrasted them to the colleagues who lacked these characteristics. Some interviewees were aware that mobility could be a career risk, while it is necessary for the actual learning and development process as a researcher. In the field of bio/medical molecular biology, mobility after the public defense in the form of a postdoc position is considered central to being able to apply for new environments and thus to develop as a researcher:

Jennie: Well, how else would I learn something new? I wanted to learn about new

methods, and there was no one in Sweden who worked with it, but there were, for example, in Germany and the USA. So, in order to be able to develop as a researcher and learn the methods, I had to move!

Wanting to learn new methods and to develop one's scientific competence area directly depended on a more extended stay abroad, which required curiosity as well as risk-taking. The interviewees from molecular biology and philosophy compared Sweden with other countries with a larger number of inhabitants, universities, and state-of-the-art research environments. Sweden is a small country with a limited research infrastructure and with limited scientific platforms. The development of such infrastructure is thus a priority at the political level (Government Office 2020: 52). To be able to reflect on, compare, and seek out what the single individual would like to learn was presented as central.

Curiosity as the driving force for the mobility practice can then be discussed as a scientific virtue and professional foundation, but also it is selective. It must be integrated with an ability to compare, select and make risk-analysis. "I am a person driven by my curiosity," says the molecular biologist Steve, when describing his main motivation to go abroad. However, at the same time, the researchers are highlighting their career development and career motivations as well as curiosity when describing their motivations for moving abroad as post-docs; they are driven by both curiosity and the academic career system, especially in medicine.

The curiosity theme is regularly mentioned also by the physicians working for NGOs. Here, curiosity is also used as an alibi for the interest in gaining knowledge about other places. Monika, an NGO physician, says:

What prompts me as well is my egoistic curiosity; I am so curious at how things truly are in different places in the world, how the culture works, how the people are. I will not stop travelling before... well, I cannot, because there are always new things that I am curious about.

The physicians who worked for international aid organizations used their wish to do some good in the world, curiosity, or being adventurous, as a means for comparison with the colleagues who—even with a pronounced interest in medical aid—still decided to stay at home. "Well, of course it was difficult, in the beginning there was no AC, nothing, just a fan and flies and lizards that walked right in, but in some way, I got used to it pretty quickly," says one physician about the situations while stationed abroad. In this group, the apparent risk-elements were the dangers of epidemics or military conflicts in places around the world where they were stationed, whereas the Swedish society was considered a very safe country.

## **Comparisons of Family Support and Gender Equality in Different Countries**

To compare family support and gender equality are returning topics in our studies of

Swedish highly skilled migrants. Sweden has, for a long time, been considered one of the countries with a more even gender balance compared to other countries, according to World Economic Forum (2018) and World Value Survey<sup>3</sup> (Hellum and Oláh 2019). Even though we have a set of interviewees with different professional backgrounds, they work in Sweden and have experiences from family support through both the Swedish welfare system and Swedish family politics.

As the interviewees compared work-life abroad and in Sweden, some of them also compared family life before, during, and after mobility. The notion of family is continuously imagined, negotiated, and affirmed in everyday practice (Shinozaki 2014). Family mobility also relies on imagining life in new places, planning or organizing the move to “other” places, with sometimes very different “geographical imaginations” (Bauder, Hannan and Lujan 2016; Doherty, Patton and Shield 2015: 195; Riaño et al. 2015, Wolanik Boström, Öhlander and Pettersson 2018). In our previous and current projects (Pettersson 2011; Wolanik Boström and Öhlander, 2016; Wolanik Boström, Öhlander and Pettersson 2018), we have problematized temporary international mobility from Sweden and how family ideals are described. Both researchers and medical practitioners talked about the (implicit) images and ideals of gender contract, family life, and parenthood, and how these images and ideals were negotiated or challenged by moving abroad.

Most of the interviewed NGO doctors mentioned the societal security of Sweden compared to the more hazardous regions of the world, mainly in the Global South, where it would be difficult to bring partners or children on an assignment. The hazards of conflict-ridden or catastrophe areas, with no childcare or English-speaking schools available, was a stark contrast to the Swedish system with local municipality run schools, low crime rates, and a welfare subsidized school system. The NGO doctors also compared the contrasts between the “local” and the “expatriate,” where the incoming physicians lived on compounds reserved for the “expatriate” team and received security services.

If the safety demands could be met, bringing family and children along to *safe* areas in the Global South, with good infrastructure, was considered to be very educational due to the possibility of seeing different aspects of the world, and even the experience of being perceived as “different” and exotic. Peter recalled his first visit to a potential work in the Global South, in societies with lesser developed industrialization, democracies, and care functions than the Global North.

Well, the first thought was that this is a nice center but it is impossible to bring children over here, you could see what was around [the compound] and it was a bazaar area, it was incredibly messy and there were children beggars running around and carrying their younger siblings and you felt like no, this is just too much, it is impossible... but then you realize that you can have an everyday life side to side with this.

Among the doctors who went to other Western countries, the contrast and comparisons are not this drastic, but they are still in the center of narration. Anita had got an offer to stay in a research institute at Harvard. She said she was not extremely career-oriented,

but she wanted to do some meaningful research and had learned about a program for single mothers. She applied and received stipends. She also hired a nanny, “which I *never* could have had [in Sweden].” That leads to a more accessible work situation with a full-time job, without interruptions. Her daughter had been well cared for and had attended an excellent-quality school, and Anita had thrived.

Some interviewees talked about how the stay abroad challenged the ideal of an equal relationship, dual careers, and respectful parenthood, which were implied as a self-evident norm in their Swedish life. Because the stay was temporary or “parenthetic,” the experienced deviation from a Swedish gender script seemed acceptable (Wolanik Boström and Öhlander, 2016, Wolanik Boström, Öhlander and Pettersson 2018).

While for the doctors, mobility was more optional, for the molecular biologists, it was expected and considered crucial for their future career. A returning topic was childcare while working outside Sweden. Within the Swedish system, the municipality had provided day-care at a low cost. Organizing family life with two work-oriented adults required reliable day-care and was the reason why some of the interviewees had decided to return to Sweden, from both European and overseas countries. For others, the stay had prompted more focus on the family, learning how different school systems worked, helping the children with homework, and regarding it as “an adventure.”

Earlier research has problematized gender aspects of work mobility and family life, e.g., women as “trailing spouses,” getting more “domesticated” and meeting different expectations of expected gender performance (see, e.g., Lundström, 2014). In some of our cases, a spouse could not get any work and experienced a more socially conservative and economically vulnerable lifestyle “at home” (cf. Lundström and Twine 2011; Klekowski von Koppenfels 2014; Lundström 2014; Doherty, Patton and Shield 2015). The interviewees in our studies also made comparisons on expectations on the labor market and concerning gender equality. Several interviewees had a partner without work permits in the countries they moved to, like the United States and New Zealand. The following partners were not at all used to be stay-at-home-parents. They also struggled with local expectations that they were considered people who were taking care of the entire household. What was considered dubious in Sweden was accepted and sometimes expected in their foreign context.

Here, the comparisons with the in Sweden norm of parallel careers among partners, gender equality, and institutionalized day-care for children were considered markers for life quality and were also the arguments for forming a good life. Several interviewees defined life as a mobile professional as something that broke the ordinary organization of everyday life; here, mobility could be used as an excuse for more traditional gender roles or temporary childcare solutions. This type of comparison was defined as problematic, but not long-lasting and thus short-term, and therefore justifiable (Wolanik Boström, Öhlander and Pettersson 2018).

Another comparison the interviewees made was the treatment of children and which part the children took, or at least were considered to have a voice when the fam-

ily was going to make crucial decisions. Mobility was considered to be such a decision. Even though the interviewees defined the children’s mobility as something positive and useful cultural experience, the children’s situation abroad compared with their Swedish situation caused guilt. To not do something that was considered only “for the best of the children” was controversial. Challenges like entering a new school system in another language and learning and adjusting to foreign social and cultural contexts were discussed with some guilt. Peter said that when he worked for the NGO in an Asian country and his children went to an English school, and it was very different from the more laid-back Swedish school system:

It was tougher than in Sweden, I mean the four-year-old had some homework to do every day, and a school uniform and tests and grades for both of our children. But then, we were not so very worried about homework, when we went for the talks with the teachers, they were concerned that he did not do his homework (smiling) but we thought: Never mind, it will probably be all right anyway.

The majority of the interviewees who were post-doctoral researchers did not have children when they moved abroad, but a few of them had. Lars, a researcher in molecular biology, moved with his wife, a post-doctoral researcher, and child to France. He described a situation full of confusion when trying to apply for a place for his child at a French day-care. He laughed at the situation and compared it with the applications in Sweden through the municipalities. In France, he said, “my postdoctoral mentor gave the day-care center a call, shouted at them, and then it was done, we had a place for our child there.” According to Lars, this experience exposed a society with the unequal treatment of parents and unequal treatment of children’s access to day-care.

Tina, another molecular biologist, moved to the US for career reasons to develop as a researcher. Her children’s deep resistance to that was considered as being a big quandary. When she brought up such aspects, like considering the children’s perspective when planning her own professional life, she was met with very little understanding in the United States. The reaction she received was not to worry, and to remember that the children should not have anything to do with the decision making, like “It is not their business” or “It will be fine, why should you dwell on that!”. To consider children as individuals and as active family members with their feelings and emotions was very different in the US compared to Sweden.

The interviewee Victoria, a doctor working as a clinic researcher, was talking about the driving force behind leaving Sweden for work abroad:

Partly so, I think it is useful for the children to live elsewhere. And then I and my husband had been traveling and backpacking around in Australia and felt that, yes, but it would be fun to test and work there. And that there was the possibility that I knew this kind of service. As a fellow then in endocrine surgery, which is also good for the job’s sake. So that’s why we started talking about it, that it would be fun.

As the above quote states, the interviewees define an experience of living elsewhere as

useful for the kids. Several of the interviewees state that being exposed to something different is central, and they also use comparison to persuade other family members to be more positive about moving abroad. Traveling and experiencing something new, exploring a new country, these people constitute a kind of general driving force interwoven with professional curiosity. Mobility is also linked to the desire to discover, to have new experiences. One of the molecular biologists, for example, used the idea of being culturally exposed to a new society and culture as an argument to not stay in Sweden.

Maria, working as a clinician and researcher, also argues about curiosity and mobility as a way to get new energy for research:

And then maybe I had lost my eye for the research because I felt that maybe it was really right to make this choice, I would have done in some other way, maybe invest in the clinic first and research. / --- / But then I started to think about that if I should do it, if I should go and research after my thesis then it will be pretty soon, you cannot wait as many years as ever and when I was started with those thoughts so I was at some meeting and met {inaudible} in child surgery in Philadelphia where I finally ended up then and started talking to him and he was like very very welcome, wisdom came and research with us if you arrange your own financing. But of course, I was very welcome and that made me kick this sparkle that maybe I should try then I started searching for money.

A more general curiosity in other places and cultures is interwoven with considerations about which research colleagues it would be valuable to cooperate with. This was, however, to be combined with comparisons and negotiation of gender expectations, lack of welfare systems, and the risk and possibilities for family members like children to adjust and function during the time of being mobile and living in a foreign country.

### **Home and Abroad**

When being abroad, being open-minded in general, is considered to be a necessary personality trait, both professionally and socially. In the interviews, several mentioned that the visit abroad gave important insights professionally. Curiosity on people's actions, the workplace's organization, and linguistic and cultural contexts can be instrumental: By comparing and with gained knowledge from other ways of organizing work differently elsewhere outside Sweden, a medical professional can understand what is going on to change the Swedish workplace more in-depth. In our studies, a general curiosity of the world – perceived as *different* from the well-known Swedish reality – was an important driving force for moving abroad. Other languages, cultures, organizations, and social structures were interesting. For example, molecular biologist Anna says: "I have always thought it is fun to travel, to go to different places and meet a lot of new people. I think that is fun. See how it is in different places simply".

With the experience of what it is like to live abroad and be in the linguistic minority, one can understand that it might be easygoing and relaxing to spend time with people

talking your own language and sharing similar cultural values. These comparisons the interviewees conduct and reflect upon affect the view of the Swedish workplace, the recruitment of staff, how you treat people in the lab and at the department, and thereby developing as a scientist and becoming a good research leader in the future.

The interviewees reflect on everyday occurring variations in lifestyles, values, norms, and ways of organizing work at their workplace. Values regarding work pace, how people organize work together in research groups or individually, patients' behavior demands and treatment, and expectations on health care were topics brought up. Also, the everyday social interactions, how people socialize at work, and their spare time in Sweden and their previous foreign workplace were considered.

A different topic that was discussed was comparisons between hierarchies in work life. The hierarchy in Sweden is described as relatively flat, while countries like the UK and the US are used as examples of more hierarchical work relationships. One of the interviewees compares his experience of hierarchies and responsibility in the United States and Sweden. The US, he considers, is more hierarchical than Sweden. In everyday professional life, it plays out as an independency, where he, as a co-worker, is trusted to take responsibility, make his own decisions, and does not need to go and ask for permission for each task. He emphasizes that responsibility is given early, which also boosts self-esteem. He thus emphasizes that the gained knowledge and experience during years in the US. Here, an openness to the fact that people “can do different things than here [in Sweden]. So that I become independent in that way, and I take it with me.”

Being mobile and comparing cultural traits in a different setting enhanced the cultural sensitivity and the insight that everything could be thought or done differently (see also Wolanik Boström and Öhlander 2015; Öhlander, Wolanik Boström and Pettersson 2019). These comparisons are not just an intellectual endeavor but also an embodied experience. The molecular biologist Marty brings up a moment of self-reflexivity and an outsider's gaze on his situation. He and his family moved from Sweden to the United States. His wife did not have a job in their home-city at that time and was bound to find social interaction dependent on their research contacts but also outside a work-environment. This made Marty reflect on the importance of parks and outdoor facilities as meeting places for immigrant:

After our stay in the United States, I can upon my return to Sweden understand why immigrants socialize together in clusters. It is easier to socialize with people in your language. And it is not strange that people want to eat the specific food they are used to. I mean, that is what we sometimes enjoyed as well in the US. So, yes, I think I understand immigrants today rather differently. Off course it is nice to socialize in your own group and talk in your own language.

Comparisons evoked by mobility contain firsthand embodied, emotional, and intellectual experiences. Upon returning to Sweden, after living and working abroad for a longer or shorter period, several interviewees describe feeling like a stranger in a cultural context that had been taken for granted. We have called this feeling of being

a temporary stranger “returners’ cultural jetlag.” When the interviewees experienced the cultural jet-lag, they realized they had adapted to their temporary home country. In their mind, Sweden, was assumed to be the “normal,” but on return to Sweden, the Swedish was suddenly strange, and the unknown. Parts of the Swedish society had changed, but some interviewees also had to learn how to be “Swedish” (Öhlander, Wolanik Boström and Pettersson 2019).

Firsthand experiences of other ways of living and doing things made cultural comparisons necessary to sort things out upon return to Sweden. Cultural comparisons were a way to handle a short period of cultural and/or professional disorientation and set the cultural bearings again. The reflections and cultural comparisons in cultural jetlag did not always mean that the interviewees returned to life before the period of international mobility. One example of how the return to Sweden furthered comparisons and insights on how one changed as a researcher comes from the interview with Maria. She worked for 12 months as a researcher in the US. In the interview, she talked about how she has been “infected with this American mentality.” She describes her experience in an American research environment as something that has affected her in becoming good at focusing on possibilities and less on the difficulties or disadvantages of each project. She also stresses that her time being abroad in the US affected her motivation on how to realize an idea. Here, she also emphasizes the experience of being in another country and at another workplace as something transformative: “I have become a little infected with their way of working and just wanting to get better.” That transformative experience is ascribed to the change of workplace, country, research environment, and mobility.

Several interviewees told us about how the cultural jetlag resulted in new cultural bearings. They changed as persons, their views of themselves as professionals, their ways of organizing work in research teams, and challenging their previous idea about developing a workplace professionally. There are also stories about re-adaptation, such as re-learning how to eat lunch and having a “fika,” an almost institutionalized workplace coffee break in Sweden at 9.20 am and at 14.30 am are also expected to socialize with your co-workers.

The comparisons between home and abroad serve as a method for the interviewees to rationalize their choice of moving abroad and returning to Sweden. They use their examples of comparisons to formulate both their idea of family and social relations and compare their work abroad and the return to Sweden. It is the return, and the comparisons they make upon return, that make their professional mobility and foreign work-life transformative. The return created a double level of reflexivity, not only by comparing the move to one or several foreign countries, but also a return to what is considered to be home.

### **Conclusion: Comparing and Contrasting Work and Everyday Life in Relation to International Mobility**

In this paper, we have analyzed how comparisons as an everyday practice are used by medical professionals and scholars in the humanities to understand experiences

of international mobility. The focus has been on mobility intersecting work life and private life as this becomes visibly in mobility as risk-taking, mobility and family life, and “home” and being abroad. The interviewees make comparisons regarding their professional experiences, but moreover, everyday life, attitudes towards gender and equality, and societal structures. Overall, comparison is used as a way of orientation in the sometimes-complex life as an internationally mobile, highly skilled professional. Comparison sorts out and gives meaning to new experiences and helps to get the right cultural bearings when arriving at a new site in a “foreign” country and different professional work cultures.

Furthermore, comparison is a tool to deal with “cultural jet-lag” after moving back from abroad. In this way comparison, as an everyday practice is a way of learning and a way of simplifying complex experiences of, for example, unfamiliar cultural contexts or the returnees’ temporary feelings of being a stranger when meeting familiar cultural traits upon return home. Being a mobile professional and using comparison to understand new experiences contributed to enhanced cultural sensitivity and widened the perspectives resulting from the insight that everything could be thought or done differently.

### Notes

- 1 A long period of time abroad could be up to 24 months or in rare cases more. A short period of time abroad could be between a week and a few months.
- 2 According to Swedish work regulations and laws for government run institutions in higher education must offer a permanent position for anyone who has been employed two years on temporary basis, including academics, <https://akademssr.se/jobb-lon/anstallning/anstallningsformer>.
- 3 <http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/>.

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