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# Setting out for new shores! An explorative analysis of agency in youth employment mobility

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## ABSTRACT

Based on biographical interviews from an intra-European youth mobility study in Luxembourg and Norway the article aims to contribute to the debate on how to understand and account for complexities of agency in youth intra-European employment mobility. Critically reflecting and operationalising Emirbayer and Mische's conceptualisation of agentic orientations in the field of intra-European employment mobility of young people, we a) explore the usefulness of researching agency from a relational perspective, we b) elaborate on how young mobile reflect their manoeuvring under perceived contingent moments and we c) augment our ken of the complex interlacement of habit, imagination and judgement with (contingent) employment mobility contexts and young people's concrete employment mobility practices. Our results emphasise the importance of considering how differently agentic orientations interlace with contingent employment mobility contexts ranging from radical self-realisation, adaptive interplay of self-realisation and situational constraints and agentic orientations strongly bounded by situational constraints. In addition, the empirical analysis shows that some of the theoretical propositions of Emirbayer and Mische's approach have to be revisited.

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## Introduction

The rise in contributions to the field of agency has led to a confusing, contested theoretical and conceptual complexity regarding the concept (Alexander 1992; Clausen 1991; Evans 2007, 2002a; Giddens 1984; Heinz 2009; Biesta and Tedder 2007; Hitlin and Elder 2007; Hitlin and Johnson 2015; Sen 1985; Ziegler 2011).<sup>1</sup>

Hence, it is not surprising that certain scepticism has arisen regarding not only the theoretical concept but also its empirical merit. To put it critically, the term 'agency' has taken not only the role of a so-called 'red herring in social theory' (Loyal and Barnes 2001, 524) by producing more misunderstanding than clarity to the matter but has also produce confusion regarding its empirical application (Hitlin and Elder 2007, 34).

According to the large but still incomplete body of evidence most of the controversy stems from:

- (a) treating agency as something oppositional to structure, which leads to a metaphysical decoupling or dualism (Fuchs 2001, 24; Bakewell 2010, 1690; Sewell 1992, 4; Loyal and Barnes 2001, 524; Lacroix 2014, 5),

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- (b) conflating agency and contingent structural aspects of situations, which makes it theoretically and empirically difficult to explore the interlacement of both (Bakewell 2010, 1969; Giddens 1984, 14; Turner 1986, 972; Skrobanek and Ardic 2016),
- (c) the absence of a clear definition of agency and its components (Emirbayer and Mische 1998, 962; Bakewell 2010, 1689; Fuchs 2001; Loyal and Barnes 2001, 518),
- (d) the scarcity of systematic empirical investigations, which disaggregate agency and scrutinise how different dimensions or layers of the concept are in fact interlaced with contextual aspects or circumstances in concrete practice situations (Archer 2010; Coffey and Farrugia 2014, 461; Emirbayer and Mische 1998, 962; Hitlin and Elder 2007, 34; Loyal and Barnes 2001, 518; Skrobanek and Ardic 2016: 40)

One of the most prominent endeavours for tackling this has been Emirbayer and Mische's (1998, 973) 'relational pragmatics perspective' introduced to the debate about two decades ago. Emirbayer and Mische take the last desiderata as a starting point for scrutinising of how agency could be understood from a relational perspective, how the concept could be disaggregated and how agency could be systematically empirical investigated.

However, although Emirbayer and Mische's contribution seems of great value for understanding the interlacement of agency with contextual aspects of concrete practice situations research addressing the issue in general and their concept in special are still scarce.

Taking this desideratum as starting point for our argument in the following we will reflect on a) how their proposed agency concept can be applied to research, b) how it can practically inspire the analysis of qualitative, narrative mobility data for expanding our understanding of how the agency of young mobile people is interlaced with contingencies, hence contexts, of concrete mobility moments and c) based on our empirical investigation what are pros and cons of Emirbayer and Mische's approach.

For doing this, we will first disassemble the concept of agency into its smaller analytical parts 'habit', 'imagination' and 'judgement'. In a second step, we will make use of these analytical parts for our case, the temporally embedded processes of intra-European employment mobility of young people. By this we hope to show on an exemplary case, how these analytical dimensions can help us in 'locating, comparing, and predicting the relationship between different kinds of agentic processes and particular structuring contexts of action' (Emirbayer and Mische 1998, 1005). We will use qualitative, biographic (employment) mobility data to expand our understanding of how the agency of young mobile people is interlaced with contingencies, hence contexts, of concrete mobility moments. In a next step, we want – based on our findings – reflect about two central aspects of Emirbayer and Mische's approach: a) about variations regarding how actors under given circumstances adjust to 'the various temporalities of their empirical existence ... in more or less imaginative or reflective ways' (Emirbayer and Mische 1998, 1012) and b) about variation regarding the 'forms' and 'contents' of 'habitus', 'imagination' and 'judgement', regarding the 'contextual groundedness' of actors agentic actions and regarding distinctive types of 'agentic patterns'. By that we will demonstrate various possible ways that interview participants relate to given circumstances in the context of various temporalities, that 'habitus', 'imagination' and 'judgement' are characterised by interpersonal heterogeneity rather than homogeneity, that our respondents – against the prediction of Emirbayer and Mische – to a different extent live in the past, present and future while adjusting to the different mobility temporalities and that habit, imagination, and judgment are of varying significance for our respondents' capacity for 'creative and critical interventions' (Emirbayer and Mische 1998, 1007). Additionally, we argue based on our results that Emirbayer and Mische (1998) may be overly optimistic in their relational approach regarding the role of embedded agency in shaping outcomes due to contingent practices. To put it more bluntly, they assume that every actor has – although embedded in and related to contexts – the power to change outcomes. However, that cannot always be the case: by assuming this the authors overlook, for instance, the unequal distribution of resources which directly impacts the degrees of freedom for manoeuvring.

## Employment mobility as ‘case’ for researching agency-structure-interlacement

Since employment mobility of the young is framed by life course-specific characteristics of contemporary youth age and institutional frameworks which foster or hinder young people’s mobilities (Blossfeld et al. 2005; Heinz 2009) this type of mobility appears as an exemplary case for investigating young people’s temporally embedded mobility engagement. Employment mobility produces changing situations that ‘demand (or facilitate) the reconstruction of temporal perspectives’ (Emirbayer and Mische 1998, 1005). Like other forms of mobility practices employment mobility combines the dynamics of both the ‘routine breakup’ and ‘instability’, ‘planning’ and ‘decision making under structural constraints and institutions’ (Heinz 2009; Evans 2007, 2002a; Schlimbach et al. 2019; O’Connor 2014) as well as strategies of ‘resettlement’ and ‘re-establishing stability’ under given circumstances (Bygnes and Erdal 2017). It thus marks ‘biographical development in distinct periods of time’ (Geisen 2010, 13). This qualifies employment mobility of young people for observing the dynamic linkage between different kinds of agentic practices and the structuring impacts of the ecological settings of their practices (Emirbayer and Mische 1998, 1005; Heinz 2009, 1991; O’Connor 2014) as well as to carve out the emergent and ‘mutually constitutive’ elements of young mobile agency ‘within the contingencies of the moment’ (Emirbayer and Mische 1998, 962; Tran and Vu 2018, 168).

Bearing in mind that mobilities ‘emphasise the changing, floating, fluid nature ... of regular as well as irregular moves of people on the ground regardless of time or destination’ (Cohen and Sirkeci 2011, 7; Sheller 2014; Urry 2007) they seem – from our point of departure – most eligible for empirical research tackling the social and historical embeddedness (Mills 1959, 7) of young people’s agency in the context of their international employment mobilities (Lacroix 2014). Thus, studying young people’s employment mobilities empirically provides a unique inside into how and what kind of agentic patterns evolve in interaction with the circumstance the young are confronted with, how habitual, prospective and judgemental dimensions of young people’s practices correspond with the ‘temporal-relational contexts of action’ (Emirbayer and Mische 1998, 1002; Cuzzocrea and Mandich 2016; Tran and Thi Phuong Vu 2018) and how agentic and structural aspects of the moment become efficacious (Archer 2003, 1995).

Latest research indicates that employment mobility – among other inter-European types of mobilities of young people – is strongly interlinked with institutional realms that frame the employment trajectories of young people (Schlimbach et al. 2019, 15). The results ‘reinforce theoretical characterizations of agency as situationally, temporally and social dynamic’ (Schlimbach et al. 2019, 26). However, pointing to a central shortcoming of scarcely existing research Schlimbach et al. conclude that approaches are needed which entangle the multifaceted biographical experiences young people make during their movement and which help to capture young people’s perceptions before, during and after mobility events (Schlimbach et al. 2019, 26; see also Kmiotek-Meier et al. 2019, 32).

It is exactly this desiderate where our paper finds its starting point putting in focus the interplay of habitual, prospective and judgemental aspects and therewith wants to explore agentic process by means of Emirbayer and Mische’s work. In doing so, we hope to enrich our understanding of how ‘temporal-relational contexts’ – here employment mobility practices of the young people – ‘constitute the patterns of response that shape agentic orientations’ (Emirbayer and Mische 1998, 1005) and how these agentic orientations – seen from a habitual, prospective and judgemental perspective – shape contingent employment mobility context realities (Emirbayer and Mische 1998, 1003; Bygnes and Bivand Erdal 2017, 168). This will help us to entangle young people’s employment mobility experiences in the historical context of their biographies, and to reconstruct the embeddedness of their employment mobility practices (Schlimbach et al. 2019, 26; Cuzzocrea and Mandich 2016; Marcu 2017; O’Connor 2014). Applying Emirbayer and Mische’s idea of the ‘habitual’, ‘imaginative’ and ‘judgemental’ and scrutinising the concepts interlinkage in concrete mobility practices in the field of youth employment mobility hasn’t been done so far. Hence, our contribution does not

only amplify our knowledge regarding the agency-contingent context-interplay (Emirbayer and Mische 1998, 1003; Archer 2010) regarding employment mobility but it utilises in a new, unique and very concrete manner an abstract theoretical concept – prominent in theoretical debates (e.g. Heinz 2009; Evans 2007, 2002b; Tran and Thi Phuong Vu 2018; Schlimbach et al. 2019; O'Connor 2014) – for empirical analysis.

### **Accounting for agency from a relational stand – putting the theoretical ground for empirical analysis**

Reflections about agency and its elements have marked a turn towards a *relational interlacement focused* perspective in agency embeddedness research (Archer 1995; Bakewell 2010; Emirbayer and Mische 1998; Emirbayer 1997; Emirbayer and Goodwin 1994; Barnes 2000; Depelteau 2013; Lacroix 2014; Liang and Liu 2018; Biesta and Tedder 2007; Powell 2013; Sewell 1992). From the relational interlacement perspective agency can be understood as 'the temporally constructed engagement by actors of different structural environments – the temporal-relational contexts of action – which, through the interplay of habit, imagination, and judgement, both reproduces and transforms those structures in interactive response to the problems posed by changing historical situations.'<sup>2</sup> (Emirbayer and Mische 1998, 970).<sup>3</sup>

According to Emirbayer and Mische's argument the *habitual* enables actors to become engaged – in a less reflective manner – in different contextual environments. Hence, it is a central precondition to realise practices in more routinized activation process (Bourdieu 1984, 170; Emirbayer and Mische 1998, 971; Wacquant 2016, 67) fostering 'the selective reactivation by actors of past patterns of thought and action, as routinely incorporated in practical activity, thereby giving stability and order to social universes and helping to sustain identities, interactions, and institutions over time' (Emirbayer and Mische 1998, 971). However, being 'agentic' implies also to *imagine* what can be next in relation to actors' 'hopes, fears, and desires from the future' (Emirbayer and Mische 1998, 971). This imaginative vision of 'looking ahead' is indispensable for person's agency: it 'represents the capacity of the individual actor to reflect and occasionally attempt to alter her position within the wider social structures' (Hitlin and Kirkpatrick Johnson 2015, 1438; Mills 1959, 5) and it generates 'possible future trajectories of action, in which received structures of thought and action may be creatively reconfigured' (Emirbayer and Mische 1998, 971). The judgement aspects, however, relate to (perceived) constraints and possibilities of the actual situation, including material, social, and conceptual resources as well as structural and institutional conditions.

But how exactly habit, imagination and judgement conflate with the temporal situational contingencies and how are the components interlaced with each other? How do individual lives in general and individual agency in special unfold in concrete situations (Brannen and Nilsen 2005, 412)? And how constitute 'temporal-relational contexts the patterns of response that shape agentic orientations' (Emirbayer and Mische 1998, 1005) which in turn shape the idiosyncratic temporal practices towards existing contexts? To prevent any de-contextualised 'big' theoretical argument, definition or dogmatism regarding agentic action in the context of employment mobility – that from our point of view has caused countless misunderstandings and discussions regarding the agency<sup>4</sup> – one possible way is to empirically scrutinise how exactly habit, imagination and judgement conflate with the temporal situational contingencies and how the components are interlaced in peoples practice. The answers to be given here are therefore not of theoretical kind. They have rather to be answered empirically by focussing on how actors describe and interpret their practices while referring to the complex interlacement of ascribed personal and situational properties, its varieties and complexities.

Thus, taking the case of intra-European employment mobility of young people as a starting point for illustrating the complex interlacement of agency and the given structural contingencies of the situation, we proceed with analysing the interplay of the habit, imagination, and judgement and investigating *how* individual agency based on these three components unfolds in concrete temporal mobility practices (Tomei 2011, 9).

## Data and analysis

In order to demonstrate the usefulness of the chosen explorative perspective for elaborating the complex interlacement of mobility practices with given structural contingencies of the situation, we provide an in-depth analysis of three exemplary cases from an intra-European mobility study conducted in six European countries.<sup>5</sup> These three cases became recurrent and exemplary to the rest of the data and hence we think they illustrate our argument in most vivid way.

The joint project designed a multiple case study that facilitated a focused analysis of agency and employment mobility contexts interlinkages. Using comparative case-based cross-national methodology 206 interviews (combining a narrative and a semi-structured second part) with young mobile youth were conducted in the partner countries of the project.<sup>6</sup> Since we here only focus on employment mobility our three exemplary cases stem from a sub-sample of 30 employment mobility focused interviews with young people carried out in Luxembourg and Norway.<sup>7</sup> The interviews were identified through various channels: with the support of youth organisations, through social media, as well as snowballing sampling. The data were collected by the researchers from two countries who analysed them using qualitative software programme Maxqda. The interviews were conducted in English and transcribed in full.

While using a comparative case-based methodology, we do not aim to be representative or serve 'typicality' (Brannen and Nilsen 2005; Nilsen and Brannen 2014). Rather, we want to highlight central patterns of the interplay of habit, imagination and judgement in young people's employment mobilities for uncovering variations in individual employment mobility agency and in 'the meaning that people give to their lives and how their agency is shaped in and by different layers of context' (Brannen and Nilsen 2011, 614). Using the narratives of the young, we reconstructed based on the reflections of the interviewees habitual, judgemental and future related layers of their employment mobility experiences.

For our analysis, we used a theory-informed coding strategy (Miles and Huberman 1994, 58). Based on our theoretical reflection we started our data analysis with the three of Emirbayer and Mische's theory informed master codes 'habit' (HaA = indications for 'selective reactivation of past patterns of thought and action'), 'imagination' (ImA = indications for reflections and attempts of the young to 'alter' his position within given structural constraints) and 'judgment' (JuA = indications of planning, choice and decisions under perceived structural constraints). In a next step, we generated sub-codes – for example, HaA<sub>-SRP</sub> (selective reactivation patterns), ImA<sub>-PFT</sub> (possible future directories), JuA<sub>-P/NJ</sub> (practical/normative judgements) – to mark off for analysis reasons concrete segments or so to speak concrete analytical sub-dimensions of the master codes (Miles and Huberman 1994, 58). In a third step, we analysed the so generated information with regard to 'CG-CONTEXTUALLY GROUNDEDNESS' of habit, imagination and judgement and concluded based on this information regarding the existent type of 'AP-AGENTIC PATTERN'. For coping with the complexity of the data material we focused on smaller parts of the interview, that is, a sequence within one narrative horizon 'that seeks to reconstruct layering the social meanings from the process of the action' (Flick 2009, 353), and moved gradually towards another interview sequence. The first step developed codes and the coding tree was continuously revised throughout data analysis of the three interviews. Data analysis was discussed between both authors including discussions that allowed a comparison of the similarities and differences.

The references and continuous crosscheck work were done in parallel to these three case studies particularly regarding the analysis of 'habit', 'imagination', and 'judgement', regarding the interlinkages between these dimensions and the conclusions drawn with respect to the 'contextual groundedness' of the three dimension and regarding the agentic pattern represented by the case-specific coupling of 'habit', 'imagination', and 'judgement'.

Below we provide a condensed discussion highlighting the most vivid aspects of the three dimensions in the process of moving abroad for employment by young people. The three cases – Nicolas<sup>8</sup> from Luxembourg, Greta from Greece, and Nika from Iceland – provide an insight into the interlacement of situational characteristics under which the young live and unfold a practice to move abroad for employment.

### ***Why not be mobile? Living in the present and being open to opportunities***

Nicolas is a young man from Luxembourg. He is in his late twenties and has a broad mobility experience; he has lived in other countries since he finished high school in his country of origin. While he chose a university in the south of France to have fun with his school friends, he decided on pursuing a Master's degree in Belgium because he was looking for a more demanding and interesting path. He found his first job placement in Germany, where he has been living for one year. Nicolas is open for opportunities and has not fixed his plans either in his present nor his future. His cultural capital (language skills) as well as his mobility experience allow him to stay flexible without seeing any hindrances to mobility.

#### ***Habit***

Nicolas has been continuously mobile since leaving school. Thus, employment mobility appears to him not as something one has to think twice about but as a habitualised routine. During the interview, Nicolas makes several accounts regarding staying open to opportunities that one comes across in his life. He left Luxembourg for Germany on his brother's recommendation; he decided to move there more out of curiosity and never fixed the move within a certain timeframe. Having been to different places, he describes himself as open and fundamentally positive to the idea of moving elsewhere, but also open to the idea of coming back home afterwards. As he puts it himself referring to his move practice:

I was not really looking for it but when it came, I was not opposed to it; I was like: why not?

This habit of being open, of staying flexible as well as of having the credo to get along in any place and country with regard to employment mobility is characteristic for Nicolas. His openness and flexibility when it comes to potential destinations is based in the particularity in his living context: having received a Master's degree allows him to be competitive and to become engaged in various activities in different countries.

As a result (regarding the habitual aspect), Nicolas is open and follows the directions of where he can apply previously obtained skills without seeing any barriers or hindrances in his way. Talking about of being consistently mobile and independent he would feel out of place when his mobility would be restrained or if he had to stay in the country of origin due to social, cultural or structural constraints.

Nicolas is crossing from education to employment and this shapes his decision to look for other opportunities that fit his habitual practices – namely, of being mobile:

Absolutely, I would absolutely call it a transition year, [that year] for me was coming back from University, looking for a job, couldn't find one, uhm, being back with my parents. So, when the opportunity came to go to [town A in Germany] I was like OK, I will be living by myself again.

During the interview Nicolas' narrative uncovers how flexible he stays in grasping an employment mobility opportunity; on the one hand, he emphasises a lack of constraints, or aspects that might hinder his employment mobility, such as, for instance, a personal relationship. On the other hand, it is his habitual routine of being mobile that leads him to his first employment abroad, and consequently continuing a life he is used to, that is, being on his own, away from his parents and independent.



## **Imagination**

Nicolas' imaginative vision of the future is not one characterised by concrete planning, but rather a position of staying open for what the present holds or offers. His decision to acquire a job abroad is shaped by a specific environment that overlaps with his individual situation. In his wider social environment, going abroad for employment is not as common since most of the Luxembourgers who study abroad subsequently return for employment. Nevertheless, by not wanting to get just *any* job and thus behave like most of his friends, going abroad is a better option:

95% of the people I know of my friends live in Luxembourg . . . I, I am the only one who is living abroad, and, friends are calling me: when are you coming back, when are you coming back, you know?

Nicolas' imagination to move lies in the evaluation of this social environment that young Luxembourgers evolve in and come to after graduating from universities abroad. For Nicolas, mobility is triggered by not wanting to be bound to a known place at that certain moment. He is not opposed to his home place; he is aware of its advantages, such as security, stability, and good salary. However, for now, in his late 20s, Nicolas is searching for spontaneity and new experiences, which is what he believes to find in another country.

Nicolas' imagination of the future has the central aspect of remaining open towards the social environment and enjoying the life opportunities that present themselves, whether they be negative or positive. Moving abroad follows in Nicolas' case a 'why not?' rationale, based on envisioning of an open individual mobile future.

## **Judgment**

Having worked and lived abroad for some time, Nicolas explains that he is not set on a destination and that his opportunity to realise mobility is not restricted by any social factors. Thus, he defines the decision to go abroad by that of an opportunity, rather than of structural forces or constraints. He explains that deciding was not difficult and did not include complex factors to be considered. He confirms this with statements, such as:

Getting my first job in a really nice town, there was nothing that could have kept me at that moment.

In the same fashion, he stays open towards the future: he keeps the idea of moving back to Luxembourg open, and from today's perspective he is flexible towards possible scenarios of how his mobility career could develop in future. In the same manner, he stays flexible towards his career opportunities and gives the impression that his mobility practice is completely unrestricted.

Thus, the first case of Nicolas presents a first possible pattern of habit, imagination and judgement interplay and a specific case regarding how agency is interlaced with the contingencies of concrete mobility moments. In this pattern, the habitual aspect (HaA) is rooted in a kind of dispositional individualised 'mobility openness' or 'mobility flexibility', which, is not much axed in the past but more in the present and future and which keeps mobility decisions between alternatives as much as possible open (ImA). His decision(s) to find an employment abroad are based on explicit weighing up mobility alternatives against his current situation at home, perceived structural constraints and perceived options where he could go. Hence, at the core of his agency are judgements focused on best alternative trajectories realisation (JuA).

## **Step by step towards realising life objectives in mobility: Imagination of the future**

Greta is a young woman in her mid-twenties, she is from Greece, skilled (holds a BA degree) and is currently working in the financial sector in Luxembourg. The narrative of Greta encompasses a certain vision for her future to live in the UK, which she plans to realise by moving first to



Luxembourg. Throughout her interview, Greta's argues that her decision to become mobile was conscious and informed, although having little information about the countries she wanted to go. This is evidenced when she says:

Yes, then my final destination is [city A in the UK], but to get there, I feel that I should have more experiences in what I do ... to go there.

Greta refers to the UK as the final destination due to her personal situation. Towards the end of the interview she mentions that the UK is where she wants to end her mobility journey.

### **Habit**

Greta's habit is that of being determined to go to the UK in the future; her decision to do so is primarily rooted in the socio-economic situation of her home country as well as the mobility trends of her compatriots who are constantly mobile. In considering possible destinations for her mobility she emphasises how her mobility is grounded in the difficult economic situation in the present:

No, the thing is, I mean, the way things are in Greece right now, everybody is ... looking around, and depending on the languages you speak, ... you're a bit limited if you don't go for England, then ... your next options are international countries.

Greta seems embedded in the social contexts of the country of origin as well as in the destination country. As the interview reveals getting on the move is rooted in a kind of collective mobility habit among young people from Greece:

I think that eh, for Greek people, the, what makes sense, is to move to [city A in the UK], bec-, yeah, because eh, most people do a Master in [city A in the UK], so, the next step is to find somewhere to work there and stay, and due to language barriers of course you're more comfortably moving in a country like [city A in the UK], but then, I, I'm here in Luxembourg for a year, or so (I: okay) and I ... think that I, Greek people are coming more and more.

Greta relates her habitual orientations to the concrete mobility moment – here especially the socio-economic situation in her country of origin. She compares herself to other young people in Greece who are in a precarious situation and according to her perception have few chances for the future. The unstable future – she argues – affects people who are in employment, like herself, as no one is secure in the long run. In the narrative of Greta for young Greek people, becoming mobile and going to another country appears somehow as a 'routinised' answer to forcing social and economic conditions.

### **Imagination**

During her interview, Greta mentions that she has no clearly defined expectations regarding her 'stopover' in Luxembourg. She rather imagines her stay from the viewpoint of her future mobility steps, in her case moving to the UK. She needs a place where she can enhance her professional qualities in an international environment. From that viewpoint, Luxembourg is imagined to be a suitable place:

In, in [city A in the UK], you're one of a million. There the demand is quite high, so you might ... be able to find something, but it's gonna be ... very ... entry, entry level, so you will start by distributing coffees, and eh we already had some experience in Greece, so it was just easier to go, it's the second-best choice, because you can come through, eh with English. Any other destination would be more difficult to.

The UK is closely linked with her future in her personal and professional life; from that viewpoint, Luxembourg plays an essential role as an intermediate step for her professional career. She keeps her arrangements for the near future flexible with a view to the environments she is embedded in both

the country of destination and the country of origin. Greta's views have structured her mobility from Greece to Luxembourg with the imagined destination being the UK after she has gained the skills she perceives as necessary to actualise this plan.

### ***Judgment***

As we see in the case of Greta, she is looking for a place that meets her criteria. These criteria have been shaped by the socio-economic situation in her country of origin as well as the prospective personal arrangement of her future in Luxembourg and the UK. Within such a constellation of aspects, Luxembourg meets her personal expectations of a possible temporary destination along her journey to future residence in the UK. In that way, she envisages Luxembourg as an international spot where she can speak English in her professional as well as her private life. She relates her professional life to her own present situation, her age, her education she received in the country of origin, while at the same time staying open-minded and flexible towards future mobility opportunities due to an unfamiliar environment in the new destination:

I knew that I won't make the change a lot of times so I thought, that if I don't do it now, I will, I will do it more reluctantly, at 30, so if it fails, it's okay I can always go back or find something else, but eh for now, it felt good . . .

Greta evaluates the former situation in her home country according to her qualifications, her ambitions, and goals. She is consequently sensitive of the moment when she became aware that her former living context no longer fitted her expectations, professional qualifications and expectations; thus, she sought out an environment appropriate for her situation and her future objectives.

The case of Greta provides an illustration of a more complex interplay of past patterns of 'thoughts and action' (HaA), of 'possible future trajectories of action' (ImA), and of her 'practical and normative judgements among alternative possible trajectories' (JuA). A first characteristic of the case is that that mobility practice is grounded in a 'habitualised' mobility orientation mainly induced by the practices of peers and living situation in her home country. The second characteristic results from this case-specific interplay of habit, judgment and imagination is, that her mobility practice is less based on 'proofed' decision frames (past experiences regarding 'routines' and 'recipes') but more based on a situational plan related rational towards future mobility practice which keeps the time frame of a kind of 'double future development' open.

### ***Challenges in going on with the habitualised while imagining a better future***

Nika is a 26-year-old woman from Iceland. She moved to Norway 9 months before the interview took place. When describing the process of becoming mobile, she characterises her life as driven by many dreams, ideas and visions on the one hand, but with difficulties related to perceived insecurities on the other hand. Key habitual aspects which become evident throughout the interview are a good quality of everyday life, the prevention of insecurity and good prospects for the future. She decided to move because of the perceived difficult life conditions in Iceland. Both she and her partner found a job in Norway before they moved, as their Icelandic network opened doors for them in Norway.

### ***Habit***

Nika has never been mobile for a longer time than now; all her past stays abroad were holiday-related. She travelled to other countries but – as she accentuates – stayed in Iceland for most of her life. Moving to another country appears as not only a personal but also an economic and socio-cultural challenge, which she would circumvent if the circumstances would allow it. Salient issues for Nika regarding her habitual orientations are security and hope for a better future. During the initial narrative part of the interview she addresses her past economic situation, pointing firstly to payment and money

When I was going home from work, and I was paid I called my (partner – anonymization) and said now we have to go. It was very little paid, so it is not easy (in Iceland), it is very expensive, you cannot save money to buy a house or apartment and the salary is not good.<sup>9</sup>

She further contextualises her habitual orientations regarding the circumstances she has been confronted with before moving to her new destination. Thus, her habit regarding mobility is in many ways affected by the interlinkage of habit and the perception of her contemporary living situation. She attributes specific challenging characteristics – from her perspective mainly hindering factors for the realisation of her habits – to the situation in Island:

You have to do everything is in right order in Iceland, education then meet with somebody, and then you can think about buying and then kids. Because when you have kids before you all do these, it gets so expensive. Therefore, you cannot do anything ... In Iceland we always think about the future, we were nervous about everything, what will happen, is this going to be fine.

Regarding the habitual aspect, in the interview Nika appears to be a sensible person who focuses on both material and immaterial investments. She ‘maps’ the situations and adjusts the ‘picture’ regarding her habit. While noticing a strongly bounded realisation of the security of her habitual orientation, economic wellbeing and wealth, the problematic employment circumstance and socio-economic insecurity turned her thoughts towards the idea of leaving.

### ***Imagination***

Regarding her mobility, Nika has a quite positive view of what the future holds:

I think when moving to a new country you will never lose; you always learn something new.

She further reflects on how challenging daily life in the destination country could be but underlines her positive view of the expected challenges. Nika interlinks the future in the destination country with her habitual orientations regarding the challenge of perceived insecurity:

I thought it will be easier in Norway, I suppose to get to the places we want to be faster; we can save up money here, and we can maybe build the house.

At the same time, while she believes in a positive future scenario, Nika points out the openness of the situation – the possibility to think differently and to develop something new:

I also wanted to try to do. ... But, actually I don't know! ... It [Norway] gives me the feeling to think about the future.

The imagination to do something new further points to a kind of habitual development caused by the emergence of a ‘employment mobility option’. Thus, the case of Nika also gives an account of how habit can change under certain circumstances, that is, dissatisfaction with a recent situation and the mobility experience overall.

Although she does not have a clear picture of how the future will be, against the backdrop of the present she imagines that in any case the future will turn out better under mobility.

### ***Judgment***

Nika's case illustrates how the process of becoming mobile is triggered by a negative accounting of the chance for realising habitual orientations according to perceived contextual constraints with which she is confronted. Hence, for Nika the option to move for employment reasons has become an attractive alternative since she interprets the given situation as a threat regarding the realisation of her habitual orientations. To move becomes an answer through which her habitual orientations can again be achieved. The outcome of this process is a straight decision that she made herself.

So, I called him [partner] and said we had to move.

She further contextualises her judgement by drawing a connection between her own situational interpretation and a collective imagination of the situation:

In Iceland, we always think about the future, we were nervous about everything, what will happen, is this going to be fine, but now we have started to learn a bit more just take one day in time and then see how it goes.

Nika's case shows how habitual orientations are put in question by certain life circumstances, and how habit-based action grows to be viewed as an obstacle to advancing in the country of origin. However, in connection with the image of a better future, she imagines ways of maintaining habitualised economic- and security-oriented expectancies; the judgmental dimension is embedded in this interlinkage of the habitual and imaginative orientations.

Nika represents a complex pattern of habit, imagination, and judgement and a much stronger interlacement of agency with situational characteristics. Concerning the habitual dimension, mobility has never been a leading decision frame or routine for Nika since mobility would imply a break-up of routines and insecurity (HaA). However, induced by a negative perspective at the economic situation in her home country and the therefore growing malfunctioning of mean-ends relations mobility evolves as an imaginable perspective for the future (ImA). Hence, a perceived threat to habitual orientations – which are fostered by feelings of insecurity caused by structural changes in the environment – ignites thoughts about and a final judgement regarding mobility (JuA).

## Synthesis

The analysis of our contrasting cases points out the interlacement of habit, imagination, and judgement in a particular (historical) situation in which young people practice intra-European employment mobility. While in the case of Nicolas we find a looser 'grounding' (a more or less 'silence' of structural aspects) in the narrative regarding his mobility, Nika represents the other side of the continuum. In her narrative situational characteristics come much stronger to the fore (a more or less 'noise' of structural conditions). Hence, context seems to have a more substantial impact on her habitual orientations and ignite – via a 'crisis of the habitual' – a knock-on effect on her imaginations and judgements regarding her mobility practice. In the case of Greta, we find a shining relational dynamic between habit, imagination and judgement in temporality. Her grounded mobility seems to be characterised by an oscillation between 'noise' and 'silence' of the structural depending on the temporal given context. Thus, the three agentic orientations have – against the predictions of Emirbayer and Mische – different dominant tones in the chordal triad of habit, imagination and judgement and thus represent three different agentic patterns.

All three cases indicate the embedment of habit or imagination or judgment in perceived contexts. However, the cases bring to the fore the strong variation what is concluded from the situational framing. Nicolas narrative frames his mobility practice as something personal, driven by chances and opportunities, while acting flexible, experimental, or 'enfranchised'. Hence, he seems less contextual grounded – although he is! – and bounded by self-realisation. The narrative of Nika on the other side of the continuum is characterised by a challenging insecurity perception and hopes for a better future induced by faced contextual challenges. Her narrative regarding habit, imagination and judgement are strongly contextual grounded and hence it is to be concluded that her agency, respective agentic pattern is foremost bounded by structural challenges. In contrast to the former both cases, the narrative of Greta indicates rather an oscillating importance of intra- and interpersonal aspects regarding her mobility practice over the course of time. Hence, the case Greta can be placed somehow in the middle of the two extremes. It stays for a more adaptive interplay of self-realisation and context-related aspects in employment mobility practice.

## Discussion

Taking the confusing complexity of agency concepts and understandings as starting point, we firstly theoretically discussed how agency could be explored from an interlacement perspective and – while applying the concept empirically – focused later on analysing how habit, imagination and judgment of young people in the context of their intra-European employment mobilities comes into effect.

In line with the proposed argument, we have thought support from Emirbayer and Mische's relational agency approach and have applied their theoretical perspective on agency for analysing employment mobility of young people empirically. Taking their relational perspective as starting point, we applied the authors' perspective to our cross-national research example – namely intra-European employment-related mobility of young people. Framing our analysis regarding the three core dimensions of Emirbayer and Mische's agency concept – namely habit, imagination, and judgement – we demonstrated how this concept can be applied and is suited to understand case-specific patterns of the interlacement of the three dimensions in a concrete mobility situation. Based on the analysis of three exemplary interviews, we have discussed three possible ways in which habit, imagination, and judgement come into play during employment mobility and how these three pillars of agency are – to significant varying degrees – 'contextually embedded'.

Our analysis (Table 1) shows substantial variations regarding how actors adjust to 'the various temporalities of their empirical existence . . . in more or less imaginative or reflective ways' (Emirbayer and Mische 1998, 1012) under given circumstances which from our point of view is downplayed by Emirbayer and Mische's approach. It further indicates strong variation regarding the 'form' and 'content' of 'habitus', 'imagination' and 'judgement' for the three cases Nikolas, Greta and Nika which has direct consequences for their agentic patterns. While Nikolas is 'bounded by self-realisation', Nika is bounded by context and – in stark contrast to both – Greta in an adaptive interplay of self-realisation and temporal contextual groundedness tries to unfold her agentic orientations. This variations regarding the 'contextual groundedness' of actors agentic actions and variations regarding types of 'agentic patterns' are not properly considered in Emirbayer and Mische's perspective on agency. Our analysis provides evidence that the three cases in focus here a) relate differently to given circumstances in the context of various temporalities that b) 'habitus', 'imagination' and 'judgement' are characterised more by interpersonal heterogeneity than homogeneity, and that c) habit, imagination, and judgement are of varying significance among our respondents' capacity for 'creative and critical interventions' (Emirbayer and Mische 1998, 1007) in the context of employment mobility. Additionally, the results indicate that our respondents – against the prediction of Emirbayer and Mische – to a different extent relate to the past, present and future while adjusting to the different mobility temporalities. Finally, our results provide ground to assume that Emirbayer and Mische seem to be too idealistic in their assumption that agency always shapes

**Table 1.** Schematic overview of orientations in three selected cases.

	Nikolas	Greta	Nika
Habit	flexible, open and adaptable	contextual influenced and planning	determined and planning; pronounced security orientation
Imagination	focused on plan realisation	staying open and flexible	focused on security and hope for a better future
judgment	adjustment to structural constraints for own objectives while staying flexible for alternatives	opportunity over constraints (give it a shot)	strong adaptation to constraints (hand-over-hand-movement)
Contextually grounded	less	oscillating	strong
Agentic pattern	Bounded by self-realisation	Adaptive interplay of self-realisation and context related aspects	Bounded by context

outcomes due to contingent practices. Our three exemplary cases remind us about the unequal distribution of resources which directly impacts the degrees of freedom for manoeuvring. While Nicolas and Greta have a high degree of freedom for manoeuvring and changing outcomes, Nika has not. And this inevitably points to inequality issues regarding 'relational pragmatics' (Emirbayer and Mische 1998, 1012) which seem to be ignored by Emirbayer and Mische.

This fosters three conclusions: First, we observe a continuum regarding the role of structural constraints in the agentic employment mobility patterns; from a more situational-individualised less salient to a more salient and thus influential role in the context of young people's employment mobility. Hence, contextual constraints frame agentic orientation but their salience or noise in habit, imagination and judgement strongly varies among young mobile people.

Second, the relational perspective on agentic orientations introduced by Emirbayer and Mische (1998) allows on the one hand for identifying forms of interlacement of habit, imagination, judgement in a concrete (historical) situation under particular social circumstances, and fosters therewith a deeper understanding of the embedment (Emirbayer 1997, 287) of agentic orientations young people express while practicing their (employment) mobilities. However, on the other hand it overlooks the fact that a) habit, imagination and judgement are not always marked by equal intrapersonal salience, b) that habit, imagination and judgement are 'differently embedded or grounded in the various temporalities of peoples empirical existence' (Emirbayer and Mische 1998, 1012) and that habit, imagination and judgement as well as resulting practices are marked by inequalities while shaping outcomes. Although all people might have agentic capacity, they have varying chances for 'making a difference' (Giddens 1984).

Third, taking Emirbayer and Mische's theoretically elaborated conceptualisations of agency as a starting point – here especially the interplay of habit, imagination and judgement, our argument demonstrates the empirical fruitfulness of the concept. By following this perspective, the varying form, content and interplay of the three dimensions, through the prism of employment mobility practices of young people, becomes visible. More specifically, looking at employment mobility as a process indicates how agentic patterns under perceived circumstance are case specific, indicating that agency in mobility is 'inseparable from the transactional contexts' (Emirbayer 1997, 287). Hence, by describing and understanding the different compositions of habit, imagination and judgement as key pillars for agency and their embeddedness in structural characteristics of a historical situation helps us to arrive at a deeper understanding of these complexities and thus gives reason to believe that the used approach can be a helpful tool for further research in both mobility and migration studies.

## Notes

1. These are merely several examples of the various contested theoretical and conceptual perspectives on agency.
2. Emirbayer and Mische use the terms *iterational*, *projective* and *practical-evaluative* in an interchangeable manner with habit, imagination and judgement. Since the latter terms are at the core of Emirbayer and Mische's definition of agency we decided – mainly for the reason of terminological rigour – to use only these terms in the following discussion.
3. In this sense, Emirbayer and Mische's are heading in the same direction like the morphogenetic approach (Archer 1995) where agency and structural components 'constitute different levels of stratified social reality' and 'possesses distinctive emergent properties which are real and causally efficacious but irreducible to one another' (Archer 1995: inside front cover; Bakewell 2010, 1696).
4. Following Loyal and Barnes (2001, 518) 'Thus, in speaking of action and its antecedents, it makes no practical difference whether the language of causation is employed or that of choice and agency' or as Fuchs (2001, 39) would describe it 'Agency and structure, and micro/macro, are not opposite natural kind but variations along a continuum'.
5. The project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 649263.
6. Partner countries are Luxembourg, Hungary, Romania, Spain, Germany and Norway. Interviews were conducted regarding the following types of mobility: employment, higher education, vocational training, pupil's exchange, entrepreneurship and voluntary work.

7. Framed by the case-study design of the project the partner had to do carry out two case studies – in the 5 relevant mobility fields employment, higher education, vocational training, pupil's exchange, entrepreneurship and voluntary work – together with one of the other consortium partners. In our case, we focused (aside a second case focused couple) on employment mobility.
8. Personal names, geographical places like cities, locations, etc. (but not countries) have been pseudonymised to guarantee the anonymity of the interviewed participants. They have been changed according to the rules of transcription and are put in square brackets.
9. The selected interviews for the discussion of the article were conducted in English with non-native speakers. The grammar and vocabulary were preserved as the interviewees used them.

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