

HISTORICAL AND MODERN PERSPECTIVES ON MOBILE LABOUR: *Parallel case study on Finnish and Estonian cross- border worker stereotypes and masculinities*

Pirita Frigren*¹, Keiu Telve**²

¹ School of History, Culture and Arts Studies, University of Turku, Finland

² Department of Ethnology, University of Tartu, Tartu, Estonia

* E-mail: pirita.frigren@jyu.fi

**E-mail: keiu.telve@gmail.com

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Abstract



Parallels are drawn between representations of early 20th century Finnish maritime labourers on foreign merchant ships and present-day Estonian blue-collar commuter workers who work in the construction sector in Finland. We ask how the workers at both the times comment the media representations of them and how the possible analogues can be understood. The study focuses on two themes: stereotypes and masculinity ideals related to mobile work. The data comprise seamen's letters, construction workers' interviews, and media sources. By combining anthropological and historical analyses, we show that, rather than being occupation specific or related to time, certain features related to mobility, physical work, and gender tend to reappear in different kinds of circumstances. The features are characterised by the paradox of positive expectations and negative prejudices. We suggest that present-day discussions on cross-border work benefit not only from comparisons between different areas and occupations but also from historical juxtapositions.

Keywords

cross-border work • mobility • stereotypes • masculinity • parallel studies

Introduction

In the 21st century, cross-border work-related travelling has become common. Commuting work is seen as a characteristic of the post-industrial world, where a worker can choose the place and time of work (Sandow & Westin 2010: 434). However, work-related mobility has been present for centuries. As historians of migration and mobility point out, the era that preceded modern nation-states meant living in ethnically, linguistically, religiously,

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and culturally pluralist contact zones. In these zones, ordinary people moved for trade, seasonal means of livelihood, wars, and for many other reasons. (Lucassen & Lucassen 2009: 347–377; Moch 2003: 76–83; Ojala-Fulwood 2018).

Mobile labourers mediate new knowledge and push the limits of local norms in both the country of origin and the receiving country (Grzymala-Kazłowska 2015; Keough 2006: 446). Cross-border commuters are exposed to other cultural habits and unite the dual lifestyles of mobility and life back home. This movement can also bring along clashes of values that can be productive for the home society but can potentially create conflicts (Aitken 2010).

In this article, we draw parallels between early 20th century Finnish mobile maritime labourers who worked on foreign merchant ships and present-day Estonian blue-collar workers who commute to Finland. We have chosen these two cases because they represent a typical group of mobile workers in their respective time and country of origin. We thereby compare two different times, occupations, and geographic contexts. Yet, both occupations are physical demanding, involve constant moving between home and abroad, living in homogeneous male communities, and have represented an acknowledged contemporary method of ‘earning more abroad’.

The approach of this study is cross-disciplinary in terms of the data and methods that we use. By combining anthropological and historical analyses (Green 2004: 45–46), as well as by looking at personal and media data side by side, our aim is to juxtapose mobility, physical work, and masculinity in two different spatial and temporal circumstances, rather than build a historical trajectory for mobile work from past to present. Like historian Peter Baldwin (2004: 6–18) argued, historical research is never isolated from comparative approach although it involves unique and particular materials, as part of the process is to evaluate what is unique and what is general in the phenomenon studied. Here, comparisons are drawn not only between different countries but also between different epochs as questions of the present societies are often linked to the past; yet, this is not typically explicitly pronounced in the historical research (Green 2004: 47). Temporal paralleling requires spanning the diachronic context of the two empirical datasets (Haupt & Kocka 2004: 25–27). In the early 20th century, Finnish seafarers (then citizens of the Finnish grand duchy of Imperial Russia) lived in the point of time where international mobility in and outside Europe was growing. In the present-day case, the Estonian cross-border workers witness the post-Cold War era where liberalising mobility is first and foremost linked to the growth of the EU. In the following, we will juxtapose the most relevant parts of these two diachronic contexts.

Unlike today’s flexible work schedule, maritime work in the early 1900s was spent in the isolation of a ship under the strict discipline of a captain (Hinkkanen 1989: 302). Nevertheless, sailors’ work provides a historical example of mobile work that often led to transnational lives, as thousands of seamen entered international labour markets and spent months or even years abroad, most often aboard a British, Norwegian, Swedish, Australian, or North American vessel (Kaukiainen 2016: 111–114). Work abroad was eased through special maritime working permits (*meripassi* in Finnish) in the late 19th century, although still much mobility occurred via illegal desertions from domestic vessels. At

the same time, mass migration to North America and Australia was flourishing. Today, occupations such as construction work, domestic and care work, and transportation are the most typical jobs that make people commute internationally. In Estonia, two major groups working abroad are craft-related and manufacturing workers (Krusell 2013). After Estonia became part of the EU in 2004, working in other countries became legally easy for Estonians. Finland became their first choice because of the linguistic and cultural similarities and its geographical closeness. There are an estimated 30,000 commuter workers from Estonia to Finland (Statistics Finland 2013). Like Finnish seamen 100 years ago, Estonian cross-border workers rarely settle in the new country. Rather they commute weekly or twice per month and stay at home for a long weekend (three to four days). The fieldwork shows, however, that they do not see their working in another country as temporary. They have permanent work contracts, and rather, they see cross-border commuting as a well-calculated career choice (Telve 2016). Likewise, Finnish seamen worked abroad with temporary contracts (typically only one journey) with foreign shipping companies, but these contracts might become long and led easily to new recruitments so that they eventually made altogether a long career (Frigren 2018: 96). In this sense, their relation to the foreign employer resembled that of the Estonians' case.

The research questions of the article are: (1) How are mobile work and workers represented in the early 1900s and 2000s by the workers themselves and the media? (2) What kind of parallels are there and how they can be explained?

More specifically, we are concentrating on two topics. Primarily, we discuss negative stereotypes about mobile workers and how the commuters themselves see them. As the stereotypes are broadly attached to blue-collar masculinity, we secondarily consider their relation to the positive ideals of hard work and male breadwinning. Following Catharine Lutz's ideas, Carla Freeman (2001: 1008) writes: 'not only has globalization theory been gendered masculine but the very processes defining globalization itself the spatial reorganization of production across national borders and a vast acceleration in the global circulation of capital, goods, labor, and ideas'. Indeed, as labour mobility has been dominated by men ever since the beginning of modern globalisation and imperialism (Acker 2004: 29; Connell 2000: 47), we find it interesting to discuss how this has been reasoned over time despite the fact that there has always been a mobile female population as well. In addition, as the historian John Tosh (2005: 179–184) has pointed out, the very act of migration and leaving the home country for better living was gendered masculine in the 19th century ideals, underlining braveness, strength, and taking responsibility of one's own fortune.

Both of our cases represent almost completely male-dominated occupations. At the turn of the 20th century, the gendered division of work in seafaring was challenged since female workers entered passenger liners, mostly as catering and service personnel (Mäenpää 2003). Even today, only 35% of all Finnish seafarers are women and they are mainly working on the service sector on cruise ships (Kirvesniemi & Mäenpää 2016: 138). Comparing this to the situation of Estonian cross-border workers today, only a minority (15%) are women (Krusell 2013). Despite the significant growth of female-led transnational occupations, in

our cases, the hegemonic breadwinning norms are visible in the structures and culture that regulate mobile jobs – women should stay home and look after the kids (Mills 2003: 43). Interestingly, these norms were very much formulated in the turn of the 20th century within the growth of mass migration, paid labour, and guest work such as seafaring (Burton 1991: 180–192) and are still affecting the image of mobile work.

Previously, masculinities of mobile work have been discussed largely occupation specifically. This has been the case especially in maritime history where the popular images and stereotypes have been attached primarily to maritime workers as a group of their own and not to them as a part of mobile and itinerant working groups (e.g. Begiato 2015; Burton 1991 and 1999; Creighton 1991; Hinkkanen 1989 and 1992). Bergholm (2015), for instance, looked at the post World War II stevedoring sector in Finland and how work in ports generated a ‘bachelor-style’ working culture that underlined individualism and loosened connections to home, although in the same time, many of the workers were married and there were also female workers in stevedoring business. Bergholm’s aim was to broaden the spectrum of masculinities and gendered categories other than just simplistic generalisations like ‘working-class masculinity’ and ‘middle-class masculinity’ (Bergholm 2015: 114–126). In our analysis, we suggest that it is fruitful to look at different occupation groups side by side to see whether prejudices, stereotypes, and cultural perceptions rise from even broader background than that related to certain occupations and their working culture.

Data and informants

To draw parallels between the cases, we use primarily personal data (interviews and letters) and secondarily media data (online newspapers, magazines). With this combination of sources, we reach not only depictions of mobile labour in general and made by others but also the ways in which the workers explain and understand their lifestyle themselves. The focus on expectations and stereotypes towards mobile work life was determined to be central in the analysis. Moreover, the different nature of knowledge that the sources bring allowed us to see even more parallels of working abroad in two different times. The main and mutual limitation for historical and qualitative interview material has been that the research questions of this article were not in the focus when our data were generated; in the historical case, the data were produced in the early 20th century, and in the present-day case, it was derived from the ethnographic field work made for other purposes. The importance of the topic was raised through the analysing process, and we have depended on already existing material and how it covered our area of interest. The empirical material that this article is basing on is much broader than we are able to bring out in the text, and the cases presented are only some of the examples that we consider particularly representative.¹

As for the historical case, we analyse the archival materials of Ivar Mikael Airila, a reverend of the Finnish Seamen’s Mission in London in 1912–1919.² Out of this collection, we concentrate on 76 letters and postcards from sailors and their families in 1913–1918. In these

materials, seamen working on foreign ships ask the pastor for help, such as taking care of their post, money, and passports. However, as this era comprised the exceptional years of the World War I, many mobile workers wrote to the Finnish pastor just to keep in touch and say they were alive (23/76 letters can be regarded as simple reports on how and where they are). The wartime and seamen's personal contacts to Airila – as well as the fact that letters were restored and archived by Airila's relatives – generated a unique collection of ordinary sailors' own 'voices' that are uneasy to reach from the more distant past. Yet, the collection is selected from the very beginning as these mobile seamen who neither took advantage of the Seamen's Mission's services nor had any reason for writing hardly sent any letters. Some letters are longer and more descriptive, while others comprise just a few lines. Many of them show a clear religious commitment, which means that the data represent those sailors who were at least to some extent like-minded with the mission. Meanwhile, the letters depict seafarers' work life and include comments regarding some stereotypes attached to itinerant sailors too, so do also the letters from mothers, wives, and siblings who wrote to the pastor to ask about their lost family member.

As a complementary source, we read articles from the Finnish Seamen's Missionary Magazine, *The Seaman's Friend* (*Merimiehen Ystävä*). The magazine argued for the urgent need for spiritual and social welfare in seaports, and thus, the authors (typically the pastors themselves) used, produced, and reproduced the stereotypes and images of Finnish sailors' behaviour in foreign ports (Hinkkanen 1992: 66–67). Its audience was broad: the seamen and their families as well as the wider public who were interested in the mission or had supported the organisation with charitable actions and donations. The magazines, found through the Finnish National Library's digital collections, can be interpreted as coeval discourse that aimed at educating seamen as workers, citizens, and male breadwinners. Hence, they are signals from the middle-class authorities' attempts to shape and control the ideal mobile workers (Burton 1991: 179–189; Dennis 2011; Nevalainen 2015).

As for the case study of modern Estonian commuting workers, we analyse qualitative ethnographical fieldwork material that combines half-structured interview material and online media sources such as daily newspapers' online versions, readers' comments to the newspaper articles, and also discussions in the Estonians in Finland groups on Facebook. Long-scale qualitative fieldwork was conducted among Estonian male blue-collar and skilled labourers to understand how transnational living changes the lives of people. The fieldwork began in 2013, and altogether, 30 interviews have been collected, transcribed, and analysed. The age of the informants varied significantly and included people in their 20s–50s, with the biggest age group being 25–39. Most of the key informants worked in the construction sector; some had permanent contracts with Finnish companies, and a few did short-term projects in both countries. In all, 25 articles published between 2011 and 2014 in Estonian newspapers and on online news channels³ were studied by using careful content analysis. The articles were chosen for their public relevance based on feedback from newspapers' online forums and Facebook groups. The ethnographic data collection was wide and concentrated on opening different perspectives of Estonian men working in

Finland.⁴ Even when the data were not collected focussing on stereotypes or self-positioning, these topics were very present during the analysing process.

The Finnish seamen that our data comprise were part of the Nordic maritime labour force whose average age in the 1910s was 27 years; however, their ages ranged between 20 and 40 years in different positions and on different steam and sailing ships (Ojala, Pehkonen & Eloranta 2016: 32–34). The two cases provide good comparison also in that they are similar in terms of age. However, the line between childhood and adulthood has changed over time. In the beginning of the 20th century, it was still common that girls and boys started to work regularly after turning 16 although the legal adulthood was 21 years. In addition, working-class men used to get married at young age, so that they were typically younger than upper and middle class men when starting marital life (Gaunt 1983: 16–18). When it comes paralleling the social class position of workers in the two cases, similar notes on historically changing meanings turn up as well. In the historical case, the sailors are identified with the working population whose legal position had only some decades before changed more independent after abolishing legislation of patriarchal employer–employee relations. Modern Estonian cross-border workers can also be categorised as blue-collar or working population; however, their class position is much more flexible. For instance, being a construction worker can be just one phase of life or can lead to a more middle-class position as an independent entrepreneur in the construction business.

Stereotypes shaping the mobile labour image

Cultural studies' researcher Jyrki Pöysä (1997: 22–23) defines a stereotype as 'a result of social evaluation which is targeted at other people as a group or category, not as real, living individuals'. This definition is relevant also when we think how generalised images of mobile workers are produced, reproduced, and used and is also met and commented by real, living mobile workers themselves. Mobile workers are typically seen as an anonymous mass labelled with various intersections such as their ethnic or national background, colour, religion, worldview, language, skills, and gender (Donato *et al.* 2006: 6). Despite that cross-border workers are both men and women, both in the beginning of 20th century and today, the cultural image of cross-border mobility is visibly very masculine. This recreates the pattern where this career opportunity is mostly acceptable for men and characterised by outsiders as stressful work that creates unconventional behaviour.

Seamen, regardless of their national or ethnic background, have historically been portrayed as more or less a race of their own, distinct from landlubbers. This portrayal includes not only many positive working qualities such as endurance, jolly character, and a widened picture of the world that served even positive qualities for the whole nation (Begiato 2015:120) but also very many negative ones such as loose sexual morals, violence, and drunkenness for which they were seen unsuitable to stable family life and taking care of themselves (e.g. Burton 1999: 84–86). Loose behaviour in ports was represented particularly negatively in the late 19th and early 20th century social reformist discourse,

when seamen were increasingly valued in terms of what kind reputation they produced of their home country and its landsmen (e.g. Dennis 2011: 176–177, 183). The Finnish Seamen's Mission was, just like its international peer organisations, strongly a pro-temperance movement and saw itself as a fighter against the 'devastating sins' of ports. The magazine *Seaman's Friend* repetitiously published educative instructions for sailors how to cope in seaports such as 'Do not hire a room in a lodging house in which there is a tavern or inn which pimping, drinking, drunkards, or other filthiness is tolerated, it will ruin you' (15 August 1897: 124). This kind of 'fatherly' advice show that seamen were seen as child-like victims of vices, unable to take care of themselves (Fink 2011: 47–49).

Although stereotypes on sailors may seem occupation specific, they have parallels outside of this industry and era. Present-day mobile labourers in various occupations are perceived as having a similar lack of control and similar loose ties to their home country and family. Mobile workers seem suspicious both in the destination and in the receiving country, especially when the situation of people coming and going is new for the society. When behaving patterns change, the old conservative norms rise up, increasing the risks of a scandalous reputation (Aitken 2010). In our data, we can find how a sensational newspaper headline or documentary is the starting point for a rumour, such as stories about double families, law-breaker Estonians in Finland who are drinking and driving or aggressors in pub fights and Estonian construction workers who steal from their employers. In Estonian and Finland press articles, the collective narrative of Estonians working in Finland is a greedy, self-seeking, angry man who is stressed and physically exhausted of working abroad and wastes his hard-earned money too willingly.

These stories have parallels in depictions of seamen's drunkenness and violent assaults in the press, where the whole occupational group was likely labelled negatively. Pastor Sigfrid Sirenus reported in the *Seaman's Friend* in 1910 how establishing the seamen's church in Antwerp had been going. He mentioned how he met a couple of 'tramps' right when he arrived. In a personal letter to his friend, he wrote how these Finns slept outside and in the railroad wagons and boozed all the money they could earn. His friend ended up telling this story further in Finland, and soon it appeared in the press as a general depiction of Finnish sailors abroad. Sirenus wrote that many Finnish seamen were very angry with him for a while because of this (1 October 1910: 176). This is a typical example of how a few cases of unwanted behaviours of mobile workers gave fuel for wider generalisations (Frigren 2018: 109–115).

Interestingly, seamen rarely saw themselves through the negative images of itinerant and loose lifestyle. Their comment on these is mainly silence, even though many letters and postcards refer to problems in terms of employment, housing, and uncertainty of getting back to Finland again. The seamen just simply report their travels to the pastor. On the other hand, the Seamen's Mission responded to the generalisations by making a distinction between 'real' sailors and those 'fake' sailors who caused trouble. Most often, the troubles meant – very obviously in terms of the mission's temperance ideology – heavy drinking, or to be more precise alcohol was the ultimate reason that led to the sins and that corrupted the upright working men and turned them being 'false sailors', at least those with weaker

natures. For instance, in 1906, when four Finnish seamen were reported having attacked the janitor of the Finnish Seamen's Mission in San Francisco after the tumult of the earthquake of 1906, they were labelled as drunkard sailors (*Seaman's Friend* 1 December 1906: 188). Again, in 1907, when pastor Karl Erik Lindström reported from Brooklyn, NY, he claimed that those boozing men 'who were not seamen at all' hanged around in the missionary station and drove away the 'real seamen' who would read Finnish newspapers and send letters home (*Seaman's Friend* 1 April 1907: 70–71).

As Estonian commuter workers experience shows, stereotypes are very resistant and strengthened by prejudices descended from cultural imagination and anecdotes. Two very common aspects discussed in the public sphere about commuter workers are money and living conditions. In both categories, men are depicted as reckless. During the interviews and in Facebook groups, many colourful stories are shared about how mobile labourers live in debt and even during the wintertime live in trailer parks in Finland or share one room with other eight men. Martin, an Estonian construction worker who has worked in Finland for years, wrote an ironic short story about Estonians' life in Finland in a discussion of a Facebook group that very much unites all the stereotypes represented also in the media:

Hello! Where I can find an employer who would not pay a salary? My life is too good, I would like it to be worse! He could pay me at first a hundred euros, and give some beers and cigarettes, no need for more. There could be arranged accommodation – a garage would be fine. Especially when there are some cars, so the engines could do all the heating. Of course, I prefer a mattress, no need for a bed. Especially when it is a dirty aired that needs to be washed at first and after that you have to inflate it by yourself. I can also share the mattress with another guy, maybe with one who takes a shower once per week and whose feet smell. And every day an employer could get on my nerves that we have to end this project very quickly, could you do longer hours? Of course it is by phone because he himself is in Estonia. And at the end, when I take a Viking [Line] ship to Estonia, I am doing everything I can so that everybody would know that I am earning so much more than they do and thanks to me everything gets done in the first place. Damn you, I have built half of the Finnish country.

As the previous example shows, mobile workers can even make fun of the image of cross-border commuter workers. In the case of seamen and Estonian blue collars, a strategy stressing individuality is used to distance themselves from the negative images. Mart illustrates this:

There are laws everywhere and when you break the law, you get your punishment. I think that Finnish people evaluate every Estonian separately. You can find jerks everywhere. We have them in Finland, we have them in Estonia. It doesn't mean that everybody is like that (Mart, b. 1968).

We suggest that workers deal with the stereotypes by repeating what the society and culture seem to expect from them as men. There is a certain ambivalence always present in mobile

working men's lives – on the one hand, their mobile lifestyle is somewhat suspicious, marginalised, and made fun of but, on the other hand, it fulfils the masculine ideal of breadwinning and earning. In the following, we continue by looking at how this paradox is depicted and lived.

Masculinity and transnational labour opportunities

As described earlier, the narratives and images of mobile labour are very resistant to change, often seeing work-related mobility as a dominantly male enterprise. Our material suggests that in both cases, men adapt or at least take a stand on male-breadwinning ideal, no matter if they are married or unmarried, young or aged, or skilled or unskilled; their relation to it is connected with their experiences and time spent abroad. In case of present-day cross-border workers and among sailors, going abroad is also seen as a ritual of coming of age, the symbolic zest of being able to bear hardships and take responsibility. Exactly these motivations draw men to deploy their skills in another country to meet the dream of the self-made man who can return home once he has managed to save enough money to stay there.

Meeting male-breadwinning ideals

According to maritime historian Valerie Burton, British seamen's labour organisations adapted the social norm of male breadwinning by the late 19th century to such an extent that they argued on men's responsibilities toward their families when urging for better pay and working conditions. Highlighting the male duties was an attempt to enhance the popular image of seafaring occupation and underline its connection to heterosexual masculinity and the occupation's importance to the nation and its economy (Burton 1991:189–190).

On the Finnish maritime sector, the breadwinning ideal was extremely visible in the Seamen's Mission magazine, where pastors repeatedly reported how much seamen have managed to save and send money home instead of spending their wages for selfish purposes (e.g. *The Seaman's Friend* 1 April 1907:73). In the missionary discourse, abandoning breadwinning duties was understood as falling into deep traps of sins and deviation (Dennis 2011: 190). However, saving for the family was not just propaganda; many men took advantage of money transferring systems and asked reverends to help them verify that their families in Finland had received their money. Very often, although, unemployment, impoverishment, alienation, or other reasons made it impossible for men to send any money. Concern over this was especially manifested in the letters that wives and sisters wrote to the pastor in London. In some letters, the same discourse that the Seamen's Mission used of 'fighting against the sins of seaports' was repeated, such as this in one from a sailor's wife who had not received money from her husband for eight years:

When he left home he said that he is not going abroad for having fun but for earning money for his family. But it seems like he has let the world seduce him and neither has he fought against sin. [...] My son and I have been forced to live on low women's pay (22 March 1914).

A couple of seamen who wrote to Airila commented on their choices against the expectations of family support and breadwinning. These lines were mentioned in passing, whereas the general tone in the letters is brotherly and mostly positive, just telling their greetings to the pastor:

On many lonesome evenings, my thoughts are in London and in the work of a sailor. I think my life here down under [in Australia] is so selfish and worthless [...] I have come across with "the wilds" [Aboriginal], the real and natural people who don't know more about the world than their little surroundings [...] they are happier than any civilised people (16 December 1918).

Although rare, some seamen mention their sorrow for letting their family members down. In these comments, one can not only find expressions of disappointment in their unsuccessful trial from rags to riches but they also explain the situation with their own nature as incapable for committing to partnership and family life, thus acknowledging the perception of sailors as a restless human 'race' (e.g. 17 September 1918).

Our sources tell about the demanding balance between expectations as a family member and as a person who is forced to be away from home. Many times, just as we can see from Estonian families, the husband feels the responsibility to secure the family's well-being and through difficult times (economic crises, losing a job, need for extra income) they are under pressure to find an economic solution. Sometimes, the only reasonable option is to go to work abroad. Cross-border commuting can help men find a way to fulfil their masculine duty to provide their families (Dickinson 2005: 394). An Estonian husband and a father, Silver, describes it as follows:

Because of them I am working there [in Finland]. It is not for me. For my sake, I could sit at home all day long. It wouldn't be a problem to work in Estonia (Silver, b. 1981).

Although working abroad is depicted as available to anyone, it seems to be self-evident for families that it is the man who should work abroad because skilled labour in the male-dominated trades is better paid than typical 'women's jobs' such as cleaning and care work. At the same time, working men have traditionally been part of labour market sectors that depend more on skills and experience than on language skills (Hagan, Lowe & Quingla, 2011), which makes active cross-border commuting tempting and realistic whenever also the outer preconditions for labour mobility are manageable.

From the perspective of gendered consequences, working abroad regenerates power dynamics. It may not only increase the independence of the home-staying partners (mostly wives) but also make the family member staying behind dependent on cross-border worker's income and work rhythm (Donato *et al.* 2006). In the interviews with construction workers,

it appears that men may also try to protect their families from the hardship of a new culture sphere and constant travelling so they ‘sacrifice’ themselves and leave abroad for work. Tõnu, a father of two kindergarten-age daughters, describes the responsibility as follows:

It was just when the economic crisis was starting. I was a machine operator. I could still work there, because my youngest child was at that age that they could not make me redundant. All around workers lost their jobs and the same thing would have happened to me. [...] It is a very important indicator to go – you have a loan on your shoulders. The payments did not allow to stay at home to wait what is going to happen. The car lease pushed me forward, small children take their part (Tõnu, b 1975).

Even when his wife had a responsible position in a local social care institution, neither her responsibility for the family nor her input to the family’s economic well-being is mentioned during the interview. Tõnu felt the full duty for making ends meet.

Dream of a self-made man

Working abroad is accompanied with hard labour, stressful work situations, and being away from one’s family. Often, short-term cross-border commuting is seen as a temporary solution (Sandow & Westin 2010: 434). People dream about saving money to be able to buy an apartment, renovate a house, or start a business. Dreams of a better future life encourage to endure present hardships.

Experiences of young Estonians show how the masculine ideal of working abroad highlights independence and coping on one’s own, although close relatives sometimes help in getting the job. Mobility helps them to pursue avenues unavailable for them due to their families’ poor socioeconomic background. Often young boys idealise the life of a commuter worker. They hear stories that highlight the pretty side of the transnational work: economic stability, staying at home for many days in a row, and curious experiences. For unmarried youngsters, working abroad can also be seen as the first steps towards acquiring economic stability so that at some point later in their lives, they can start to think about starting a family.

The same goes for Finnish sailors who often took their first jobs as youngsters. If there is one occupation that has produced a genre of its own of adventure stories and memoirs, it is seafaring (on comparisons in British naval popular culture, see Begiato 2015: 121). This not only motivated young men go to sea but also depict the first voyage as a rite of passage, a gate from a landlubber to a real mariner, from a boy to a man (Creighton 1991: 147–153; Hinkkanen 1989: 305).

Although the masculine mobile worker ideal is characterised by strong virtues of earning, hard work, physical fitness, and responsibility for the family, and even if the culture of cross-border commuting is a collective experience, today’s workers highlight individuality and deciding for oneself as key factors. Individuality is even emphasised in the case of sailors in the 1910s who worked in the tight hierarchical community of the ship

crew and even though Finns used to end up together on the same foreign ships. Perhaps, the emphasis of individuality was the reverse outcome of choices that gave very little space for self-determination, which posed them as foreign workers often on the lowest ladders of the workplace hierarchy. This may be typical for precarious mobile occupations (on similarly highlighted individuality among the interwar-era stevedoring workers, see Bergholm 2015).

There were sailors who were left alone in foreign hospitals or who worked as the only Finn aboard. Their letters to the Seamen's Mission reverend reflect the representation of the 20th century self-made working-class man who is a master of his own fortune. They wrote what kind of journeys they had taken lately just like depicting an adventure story. However, as they wrote to a Lutheran physician of souls, the tone of some letters is – as an opposite of individualism – very religious and fatalistic; only God knows where their next step will take them.

As analysing interview materials has brought out, Estonian men especially value characteristics such as self-confidence, individuality, and taking responsibility for one's work. Living and working abroad can be stressful, and in many cases, cross-border workers share a workplace and accommodation. A problematic colleague can potentially make the time abroad even less tolerable. They persevere because this gives economic security and because their effort is required to reach the goals:

If he is an okay guy who can do everything, then there is a need for him in Finland. We don't want some kind of bumbling. We all have the same chances [everybody has to make an effort]. (Silver, b. 1981)

As men point out, strong individual characteristics increase the odds of finding success in the future. Additionally, individuality and self-confidence are seen as a starting point for transnational entrepreneurship. Estonians in Finland are always trying to find ways to start a business to be able to spend more time in Estonia and to have a flexible working schedule but at the same time not lose the higher income. Sailors would dream of advancing in rank to shipmate or captain despite their modest and poor background, something that was possible in theory but happened seldom (Ojala, Frigren & Ojala 2017).

Conclusions

This article provides a parallel discussion on two mobile occupations that in their respective time have played an enormous role in providing earning opportunities for men who are able and willing to leave their home country temporarily for work. Our study shows that mobile working men's life has been under the influence of the expectations of the home society both in the early 20th century in Finland and in the early 21st century in Estonia. In both cases, their life is characterised by paradox. On the one hand, the positive masculine expectations of earning, breadwinning, and becoming independent motivate them to work abroad. On the other hand, the distance from home makes them subject to negative stereotypes such as deviant behaviour, irrational spending of money, and selfishness. We see this ambivalence

regardless of the different times, occupations, and contextual location of our cases. Why do they remain from time to time? One explanation is that global and structural mobility patterns are explained as if they were solely individual projects and results of individual choices and personal character. This way certain personality traits are seen as explanatory factors for why some people are more motivated to work abroad than others, such as having an adventurous and careless mindset. Individuality, adventurousness, and carelessness, in turn, are all highly gendered as masculine features. In the same time, the mobile workers are not only individuals trying to earn for themselves and for their families but also icons of their home country and as such vulnerable to spread both positive and negative reputation. This was one reason why education of seamen as decent citizens became an important task for the Seamen's Mission.

It seems evident that while mobile and cross-borders workers try to make sense of their irregular lives, they are forced to encounter and take a stand on the cultural images attached to them as an imagined group of people. For Finnish sailors and Estonian construction workers, going abroad for work is not a voluntary option but rather a necessity caused by the complex mixture of gender norms and economic distress. Even still, in both groups, we can find expressions of self-determination. Going abroad is seen as the men's own decision wherein they take full responsibility for themselves, especially for the young boys. Others, although, say that they are mobile because those at home need economic support. The main difference is likely in the worker's age and family status that has different meanings in different historical, geographical, and professional contexts. Regardless of age or marital status, however, men always take some kind of stance on male-breadwinning ideals.

There are also similarities in the ways that working men perceive themselves. Clearly, they try to distance themselves from those compatriots who they regard as the origin of negative stereotypes. Here, the line between real seamen and real commuting workers is drawn between them and opportunists in it to make easy money and take advantage on the system. They believe that if they work hard, they will be seen as individuals and valued according to their skills and work, and not according to the cultural or ethnic images or stereotypes.

Another clear similarity is that skills and physical ability increase the motivation for mobile work. We can hardly find mention of difficulties in adjusting to the local language or culture as a total barrier to mobility. Additionally, both groups of mobile workers tend to travel together with their landsmen. The seamen often wrote of the other Finns among the crew, while in the Estonian case, men are often recruited collectively through networking. This means that individuals face the expectations towards them together with others who are in the same situation. This collective nature of mobile work is also visible when it comes to introducing the lifestyle to newcomers. Again, a certain ambivalence exists though. Being mobile for earning can produce experiences of disappointments and unsuccessful earning, and these experiences are faced alone.

In both cases, cross-border work is a way to achieve a better life in the future, and in some cases, the risk is rewarded. Cross-border work goes on – it existed a century ago, ten years ago, and definitely will continue in the future. As women are globally taking a dominant

share of mobile occupations, there will probably be interesting changes in perceptions of gender, work, and family in the near future. Long-term studies and comparisons between past and present help to observe these changes.

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Notes

1. We have translated the data examples from the original language, Estonian, Finnish, or Swedish (in the case of Swedish-speaking Finns).
2. The archive was donated to the National Archives of Finland in 2016, and it can be used only with the permission of the descendants.
3. Including Estonian newspapers *Eesti Päevaleht*, *Õhtuleht*, *Postimees*, and *Eesti Ekspress* and online news websites www.err.ee and www.delfi.ee.
4. Data were collected for a PhD thesis *Family Life Across the Gulf: Cross-Border Commuters’ Transnational Families between Estonia and Finland*.

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