





Reconciling transnational mobility and national social security: what say the welfare state bureaucrats?

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Reconciling transnational mobility and national social security: what say the welfare state bureaucrats?

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ABSTRACT

The welfare state was constructed to ensure the well-being of a sedentary population, consisting of citizens living within the territorial boundaries of the nation. However, mobility patterns change, and more people lead lives that criss-cross national borders while drawing on different sources of transnational social protection – the welfare state included. Now, the daily work of bureaucrats involves delivering national social security benefits to transnationally mobile recipients. Through encounters and casework processes, these welfare state bureaucrats observe how ‘transnationals’ deal with complex regulations and make use of the social security system. This article explores bureaucrats’ perceptions of individuals’ agency and behaviour as they reconcile their transnational mobility with national social security. It builds on data collected during ethnographic fieldwork in the Norwegian welfare administration, including 36 interviews, participant observation and informal conversations. The analysis identifies an institutional perspective of transnationals’ agency as shaped by their level of regulatory awareness and compliance. The bureaucrats observe some types of transnational behaviour to be more prevalent than others. As the article concludes, these bureaucratic perspectives have major implications for transnational social security delivery and how the welfare state accommodates transnational mobility.

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Introduction

National social security systems were created to ensure the well-being of a population largely living within the state’s borders. As citizens become more mobile, however, the circumstances surrounding welfare delivery are changing. People who travel or reside across borders may remain attached and entitled to state welfare, and these new transnational patterns are affecting the nexus of relations between the state and the people. Welfare state bureaucrats are encountering new challenges as they deliver social security benefits to an increasingly transnational population. Transnational mobility blurs the division between who should and should not be protected by the state (Faist et al. 2015). As gatekeepers, bureaucrats must consider how mobility patterns shape people’s eligibility for and use of social security benefits.

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Drawing on empirical data collected at the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration (known locally as NAV), this article investigates bureaucratic perspectives on how transnationals navigate Norway's social security system. The question guiding this study asks: How do welfare state bureaucrats perceive individuals' agency and behaviour as they reconcile their transnational mobility and national social security? To answer this question, I analyse encounters between bureaucrats and transnationals as the bureaucrats describe them. I build on both explicit explanations and indirect accounts communicated through the examples bureaucrats choose to illustrate transnationals' agency and behaviour.

Bureaucrats handling welfare administration encounter people who are transnationally mobile in a variety of ways. In their daily work, the bureaucrats deliver benefits to recipients who have spent, are currently spending or plan to spend time abroad. They, therefore, observe how individuals deal with transnational mobility and national social security. On the basis of these observations, the bureaucrats generate perceptions on transnationals' agency and behaviour, and from there, they draw generalisations. This was illustrated by a statement from a bureaucrat unit leader on highly mobile Norwegians: 'Well that's an archetype: They move all around and time flies by. Suddenly, they're retired and wonder, "When do I get my pension?"' But no, they don't get anything. They're no longer insured here.'

To varying degrees, bureaucrats have discretionary power in assessing social security eligibility. While regulative guidelines and contextual information steer their decision-making, prior experience and institutional norms influence the process. How bureaucrats perceive and categorise individuals can thus affect case outcomes (Liodden 2016; Lipsky 2010). Though seldom addressed, institutional perspectives on transnational social security delivery reveal how welfare state structures work to accommodate an increasingly mobile population.

I use the term 'transnationals' to refer to individuals who are engaged in transnational mobility while maintaining ties to the countries between which they are mobile. This conceptualisation reflects discussions on the frequency and degree of transnational practices, including differences between 'core' versus 'expanded' transnational activity (Levitt 2001) and 'strict' versus 'broad' transnationalism (Portes 2003). Transnationals' mobility can constitute either a core/strict or an expanded/broad cross-border activity: people can be transnationally mobile more or less frequently, or stay in different countries for longer or shorter periods of time. As long as they remain attached to two or more countries while physically crossing international borders, they may be considered as transnational. The term 'transnationals' encompasses a range of people, and is not restricted to any particular migrant groups. In this study, the category includes migrants, non-migrants, Norwegian nationals, and other nationals who are transnationally mobile and attached to Norway through their entitlement to Norwegian social security. Transnationals include non-migrants in the sense that they can engage in transnational mobility without changing residency (Carling 2008). I use 'bureaucrats' to refer to NAV employees, comprising both policymakers and street-level bureaucrats delivering social security to transnationals (Lipsky 2010).

Researching the nexus between welfare states and transnational mobility

Institutional analysis and research on transnational social protection and relations between welfare states and migration are all relevant for studying bureaucratic

perspectives on transnationals' use of social security. Highlighting divergences in research on social protection (including state-provided social security) and migration, Levitt et al. (2015, 2) argued that 'ongoing, isolated conversations must be brought into a more integrated, expanded dialogue'. By shedding light on the links between a welfare state's social security and transnational mobility from an institutional perspective, I aim to expand the discourse and begin some bridge building in this area.

Researchers are becoming more interested in the nexus between transnational mobility and social protection.¹ While most work 'still sees individuals as living in discrete nation-state units', current research on transnational social protection brings transnationalism into the conversation (Levitt et al. 2017). Such studies assess how formal or informal social protection affects transnational individuals' strategies, agency and mobility (Bilecen, Çatır, and Orhon 2015; Coldron and Ackers 2009; Faist et al. 2015; Gehring 2017). Yet, if there is an individual perspective, there must be an institutional perspective – that is, the subjective viewpoints of state employees working in social protection delivery, and how they observe transnationals' agency and behaviour.

It is important to study how social processes form institutional experiences, and how those experiences in turn shape institutional practices. After all, institutional practices can contribute to the production of subjectivities, categories and inequalities (Billo and Mountz 2016; Fassin and Kobelinsky 2012; Smith 2005). In the case of Norway, institutional analyses have examined bureaucrats' experiences with immigrants (see e.g. Friberg and Elgvin 2014; Liodden 2015), though research that transcends immigrant categories to encompass a broader group of transnationally mobile individuals is scarce.

Alongside the widening debate on transnational social protection, research on the welfare state and migration offers a valuable framework to explore bureaucratic perspectives on transnationals' agency and mobility. In recent decades, literature on welfare states and migration has boomed. When states experience increased or new forms of mobility, the otherwise stable relationship between national welfare systems and citizens is perceived as under threat (Giulietti and Wahba 2012; OECD 2013). Quantitative enquiries have addressed correlations between the generosity of states' welfare provision and mobility, focusing in particular on immigration flow volume. The scholarship debates the 'welfare magnet hypothesis', the phenomenon of 'benefit tourism' and the importance of benefit portability for migrants (see e.g. Borjas 1999; D'Addio and Cavalleri 2015; Holzmann and Werding 2015; Verschueren 2014). Broadly speaking, these studies find that mobility patterns are affected by states' welfare regulations. How and the extent to which people's mobility is affected, however, remains vague.

In investigations into the subject through the lens of individuals, some qualitative studies have focused on migrants' access to social protection and welfare systems (see, e.g. Bendixsen, Jacobsen, and Søvig 2015; Dwyer and Papadimitriou 2006; Giner-Monfort, Hall, and Betty 2016). Yet, few qualitative studies address the link between individuals' agency and mobility and national welfare regulations. Those that do tend to stick to particular migrant groups, focus on mobility as a one-directional, one-time occurring event, and fail to cover commonalities within the broader group of transnationally mobile individuals (see e.g. Coldron and Ackers 2009; Gehring 2017).

This study, therefore, cross-pollinates research on welfare states, migration and transnational social protection with institutional analysis, and helps further and integrate these multiple conversations. As the welfare state and migration discussion is broadened to

include transnational mobility, formal state social security becomes part of the discourse on transnational social protection. Viewing the link between individuals' agency and mobility and welfare regulations through an institutional lens adds dimensions to the established way of researching the nexus between welfare states and transnational mobility.

Methods and context

The article draws on empirical data collected during fieldwork in the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration (hereafter 'the welfare administration') between October 2015 and June 2016. The focal fieldwork location was the national office for international social security, which oversees social security benefits for recipients travelling or residing abroad. Other units of fieldwork were the Directorate of Labour and Welfare, the national office of social security control, the national service centre for international social security, the national centre for border services, the national office for retirement pension, a regional office for family benefits and two local social security offices.² The dataset draws from 36 semi-structured interviews, two of which were group interviews, and five occasions of participant observation.³ I also collected supplementary data at public events organised by and for the welfare administration, and through several informal conversations, such as during lunch breaks.

The study's methodological framework is institutional ethnography. This approach focuses on the experiences of individuals within institutions and the social relations in which they are embedded (Smith 1987, 2005). Once an organisation develops informal norms and values, it may be described as 'institutionalised' (Selznick 1957). Institutional ethnography uncovers relations that are woven into the daily life of an organisation, and examines its institutionalised norms, values, perspectives and practices.

To get on 'the inside' of the Norwegian welfare administration, institutional ethnography proved ideal. I was able to observe everyday work practices while waiting around offices between interviews, attend meetings, and converse extensively with bureaucrats (outside our formal interviews). I was also invited to observe parts of casework processes as carried out by individual bureaucrats in their offices. The five specific instances of participant observation I carried out included two sessions where I listened in on 33 phone calls with transnationals. I also attended two internal meetings: a weekly roundtable during which all the caseworkers got involved to solve some difficult cases; and a casework training seminar. My final instance of participant observation was a staff lunch, which ended up running particularly late due to an animated discussion on migration and mobility. Through these observations, I witnessed first-hand how experiences with transnationals shaped institutional perceptions and practices.

In the interviews, I sought access to the bureaucrats' 'work knowledge' (Smith 2005, 151), as well as their understandings and knowledge areas as individuals. I made clear that I was not solely interviewing them as welfare administration representatives and that they were free to express subjective standpoints. We spoke of their own experiences and opinions regarding work and personal issues. Enquiring about their familiarity with migration and mobility, I learned that personal experiences or interests compelled many to work on transnational matters. A caseworker at the national office for international social security stated: "The majority of us work here precisely because we find

the international aspect to be more exciting [than the national]. It makes it more challenging, but also more exciting.' Not everyone had a keen interest in international issues, however, and many had no personal experience of transnational mobility.

The structural framework of the welfare administration crucially influences the development of institutional agendas, practices and knowledge (Christensen et al. 2009; Egeberg 2012). The interviewees included in this study worked across five administrative levels, and the extent to which they encountered transnational clients varied across levels. As institutional theory has prior provided, the most notable differences appeared between the so-called street-level bureaucrats and the more administrative bureaucrats (Lipsky 2010). The street-level bureaucrats – including front-line staff, caseworkers and unit leaders – each had their own unique encounters with the transnationals. While front-line staff had the most in-person dealings, caseworkers and unit leaders largely interacted with transnationals through paperwork, postal and electronic correspondence and phone calls. The bureaucrats with more administrative roles, including the administrative leaders and the directorate staff, seldom interacted with clients directly. Rather, they experienced them indirectly, through communication and interaction via subordinates. As will be elaborated, the administrative levels appeared less relevant for establishing perceptions of transnationals, and more relevant in terms of implications for work practices.

After the Second World War, the social-democratic Norwegian government expanded its social security and social services (Pedersen and Kuhnle 2017). The principle of universalism had gained consensus in Norway in the 1930s and was manifested in the post-war development of an insurance scheme. A major aim was to make social insurance independent of class or income level. Supported by economic growth, the Norwegian welfare system was continually refined, and by 1966, all social rights were compiled in the National Insurance Scheme (Kuhnle 1994).

Norway's welfare system shares characteristics with other Nordic countries. Together, they gave rise to the 'Nordic welfare model', which in the last 25 years has received international acknowledgement for successfully combining the objectives of economic growth and societal equality. In Norway, the social security system protects the entire population from social risks, such as unemployment, sickness, old age and disability. A distinct feature is that all social security benefits and welfare services are public, meaning they are state-provided and largely financed by general taxation (Pedersen and Kuhnle 2017).

Today, membership in the insurance scheme is generally contingent on residency and employment (Warnes 2002). In principle, everyone becomes a member if they reside in Norway with the intention of a 12-month or longer stay, or if they work in Norway (even if they reside abroad). Membership entitles them to Norwegian social security (Christensen and Malmstedt 2000). However, regulations differ concerning for whom, where and for how long social security benefits can be exported (Andresen 2015b). The temporal dimension is highly relevant for transnationals' eligibility for benefits. Several exceptions to the rule exist, but a general requirement for maintaining one's membership in the insurance scheme is to spend annually less than six months or less than 12 consecutive months abroad. Specific benefits also have spatial and temporal requirements. Unemployment benefits, for instance, can be exported for a maximum of three months and parental benefits can be exported for 12 months. Retirees are required to have resided in Norway for 20 years to export their retirement pension if they are no longer insurance scheme members (Andresen 2015a).

Since international social security agreements affect Norwegian legislation, bilateral and multilateral agreements enable people to export benefits, transfer insurance rights they have earned and be members in other states' insurance schemes (Brochmann et al. 2011). The most influential of these is the European Economic Area (EEA) Agreement, through which Norway is included in the EU's internal market. The advanced internal market system regulates the transferability of rights and the portability of benefits within the EU. While each state has the right to create a unique social security system, coordination regulations determine in which country a citizen should be insured when two or more states are involved (Andresen 2015a).

Reconciliation of transnational mobility and social security

When asked what they believed hampered transnationals seeking to reconcile their social security and mobility, the bureaucrats highlighted regulatory complexity as a key issue. The multiple sets of legislation that regulate the social security entitlement of transnationals within and across Norway's borders constitute a complex system. Understanding which regulations were relevant in individual cases, and how they should be applied, was a recurring struggle for bureaucrats and transnationals alike. Many bureaucrats were sympathetic, noting that reconciling transnational mobility with Norwegian social security was not easy. This view echoes research on transnational social protection finding that social protection arrangements can constrain transnational mobility (Levitt et al. 2017).

Although not stated by the bureaucrats, transnational mobility can be at odds with states' social security provision, particularly since transnationals' needs and concerns can be 'multi-scalar and territorially dispersed' (Boccagni, Righard, and Bolzman 2015). Besides life course-related needs, present in both mobile and immobile welfare recipients' lives, transnationals can have specifically transnational needs (Boccagni 2017). They may react to state limitations by drawing on formal and informal sources in a transnational 'social protection assemblage' (Bilecen and Barglowski 2015; Faist 2013).

On the subject of individuals' priorities as they reconcile social security and transnational mobility, the bureaucrats identified two intersecting goals for transnationals: (1) maintaining their Norwegian social security provisions and (2) being transnationally mobile in the ways they want to be (for example, staying abroad for the maximum amount of time possible). This viewpoint corresponds with past studies on migration and formal social protection, finding that social needs shape individuals' goals and mobility patterns. In a study on retirement migration and social security in the EU, Coldron and Ackers (2009) observe how many pensioners exploit social security regulations through active 'transnational negotiation', thereby reconciling transnational mobility and social security provision as advantageously as possible. In a similar vein, Gehring (2017) finds that Dutch retirement migrants in Spain negotiate the most advantageous 'welfare deal' by having 'a flexible migratory pattern'.

Research on transnational social protection, including both formal and informal arrangements, points to other transnational dimensions (Faist 2013). In a study on aging, Klok et al. (2017) find that transnationals' behaviour can be affected by different countries' social, economic and cultural traits. Their sense of belonging and identity may also affect how they navigate social protection, including national social security. This illustrates the argument that transnationals can be influenced by a wide spectrum of concerns and needs both 'here'

and 'there'. Rather than being guided solely by social security regulations, a wider assemblage of transnational dimensions can affect why and how they reconcile mobility and social security. While the bureaucrats in my research did not hold the view that transnationals use their mobility mainly to exploit the system (Coldron and Ackers 2009; Gehring 2017), they also displayed no distinct 'transnational-oriented sensitivity' (Righard and Boccagni 2015) for what factors shaped transnationals' agency and behaviour. By and large, they perceived regulations to be decisive in shaping transnationals' agency and behaviour as they reconciled mobility with social security.

Bureaucrats' perceptions of transnationals' agency

Most bureaucrats found that people held onto the desire to enjoy social security and transnational mobility in multiple ways. Several made reference to the impossibility of generalising what role social security regulations play in transnationals' lives. However, when articulating what they perceived to be affecting transnationals' agency vis-à-vis the social security system, the bureaucrats tended to emphasise two particular factors: the level of transnationals' regulatory awareness and their compliance with the relevant regulations. These factors were not explicitly labelled as being the most influential, but awareness and compliance were repeatedly invoked to account for transnationals' agency. The pattern was pronounced when the bureaucrats described transnationals' opportunities and strategies to reconcile social security and mobility.

Awareness

While some research has pointed to a low level of knowledge about welfare rights among intra-European migrants (Ackers 1998; Guild 2004), only a few bureaucrats found the transnationals they dealt with to be inadequately informed. Overall, regulatory awareness was an issue that generated vibrant discussion. Some bureaucrats identified a generally high level of knowledge among transnationals, although the majority indicated that all levels of regulatory awareness were represented. Many who had extensive experience with welfare administration noted the rise in recent years in general awareness among transnationals.

How the bureaucrats experienced transnationals' behaviour influenced how they perceived their agency. When, for instance, transnationals travelled back and forth between Norway and other countries while acting in accordance with social security regulations, the bureaucrats perceived them as having high regulatory awareness. Enquiring in advance about how to handle social security benefits when travelling or moving was also taken as a sign of high awareness since the query indicated being regulations-conscious before leaving or entering the country. Other times, the bureaucrats believed transnationals did not have adequate knowledge about regulations. If someone asked questions about what to do after having crossed international borders, the bureaucrats assumed a lower level of awareness on the premise that the question should have been asked earlier.

Compliance

Whether or not people comply with regulations was of major concern in the welfare administration. Bureaucrats charged with checks elaborated on the issue, but compliance

also proved topical in units where checking was not an explicit work task. All administrative levels noted that transnationals did not always do what they were expected to do. At times, bureaucrats perceived transnationals as having high regulatory awareness but still choosing not to adhere to the regulations.

Some street-level bureaucrats reported relying on their intuition to determine whether people were planning to comply or not. Similar to findings from research on decision-making processes in immigration bureaucracy, the bureaucrats' 'gut feeling' could guide how they navigated through a case when facts were 'hard to find' (Eggebo 2013, 307). Malin, a front-line unit leader, stated that 'quite a few [transnationals] travel back and forth while abusing the system', but 'it's not necessarily always like that'. Planned abuse was reportedly not spelled out, and bureaucrats would check to see what a suspected abuser ended up doing depending on the level of suspicion. Other times, the bureaucrats said they believed some people failed to comply simply because they were unaware of the regulations. This could become apparent when, for instance, someone's welfare rights were rescinded after staying abroad for years without having registered the individual's whereabouts to the Norwegian authorities.

Axes of awareness and compliance

Transnationals' awareness of and compliance with regulations were spoken of in terms of what can be illustrated as two axes, going from very low to very high. Transnationals' perceived agency is illustrated in Figure 1, showing how bureaucrats envisioned numerous ways for individuals to behave as they reconciled transnational mobility and social security, although their agency seemingly depended on levels of regulatory awareness and compliance.

Bureaucrats' experiences of transnationals' behaviour

In their research on migratory retirees reconciling mobility and social security rights, Coldron and Ackers (2009) identified three types of 'behaviour: the 'exercise of rights', the 'manipulation of rights' and the 'abuse of rights'. This categorisation is relevant for the present study,

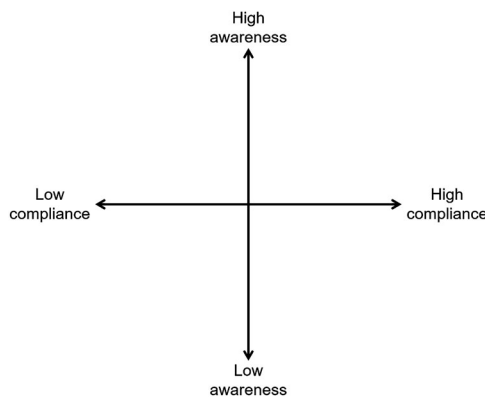


Figure 1. Factors that shape agency of transnational social security recipients, according to bureaucrats' perceptions.

which revealed a preponderance of certain behaviours in the bureaucrats' accounts of how transnationals acted. While they did not outline typologies of behaviour, the interviews produced similar stories. As Lipsky (2010) highlights, bureaucrats tend to process people into clients and assign them to categories. Casework processes rely on information from prior experiences, and this creates the expectation that people will fall into an established classification. This was apparent among the bureaucrats, who typically cited six types of behaviour that transnationals displayed in connection to the social security system: planned use or abuse, informed use or abuse, and unaware use or abuse. Repetition of these categories across the interviews reflected the bureaucrats' observations of prevailing behaviour among transnationals. Some bureaucrats used the words 'planned', 'informed' and 'unaware', while others used different words to explain the same traits. My analysis uses these words as analytical categories to illustrate how the bureaucrats categorised behaviour.

Coldron and Ackers' categories say something about whether the retirees comply with regulations, but they do not indicate the extent of the retiree migrants' awareness. Rather, they assume that the retirees know what regulations they need to respect while navigating the system. A similar supposition has been made in studies on transnationally mobile people's use of social security, where aspects concerning legal compliance and strategies are discussed while the accuracy of individuals' knowledge of regulations is taken for granted (see e.g. Bilecen, Çatır, and Orhon 2015; Gehring 2013). This contrasts with the bureaucrats' experience, which suggests that transnationals' behaviour reflects not only different levels of regulatory compliance, but also awareness. Figure 2 plots the bureaucrats' categories of transnationals' behaviour on the graph of awareness and compliance.

Planned behaviour

In accounts of carrying out planned use or abuse, bureaucrats described transnationals as having very high regulatory awareness. In their experience, these individuals deliberately planned the location and timing of their cross-border mobility to ensure they held onto their social security benefits. The bureaucrats assumed that these transnationals were also highly aware of whether they were complying with the regulations or not. As noted

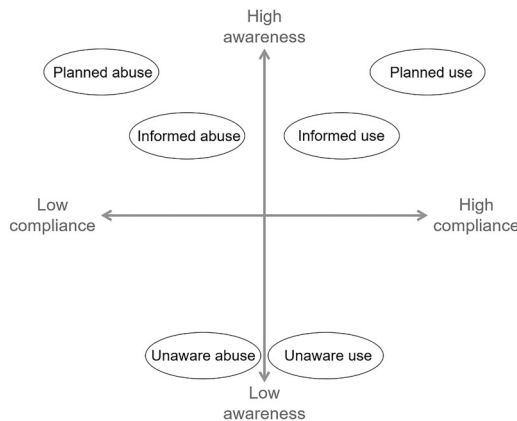


Figure 2. Prevailing types of behaviour among transnational social security recipients, according to bureaucrats' perceptions.

by Anna, a disability pensions casework unit leader, many transnationals actively sought information themselves and seemed to have read up on all the relevant legislation; their behaviour was strategically planned in advance of any cross-border movement to be certain that all social security rights were maintained while they were transnationally mobile. The two most often cited types of planned behaviour fell at the extreme ends of the scale: full compliance and full non-compliance.

Bureaucrats relayed how people planned their mobility to get the most out of the system while fully complying with regulations. Kim, a counsellor, said that retirees considering spending time abroad tended to ask for detailed information regarding membership requirements. According to his colleague Malin, who shared his view:

There's quite a few who travel back and forth. They are very keen to maintain their membership, so they stay abroad for five months and 29 days. They're counting the days to maintain their mandatory membership. There's a lot of commuting back and forth among them ...

Planned use of the system was linked to transnationals whose entire income was derived from social security benefits. This may be enabled permanently through retirement or disability pension or temporarily through unemployment benefits. Requirements for membership, unemployment benefits and pension include clear-cut temporal dimensions for place of residency (Andresen 2015a). Bureaucrats found that many transnationals heeded these regulations, seeking to maximise the time they could spend abroad before returning to Norway for a while to ensure they maintained their insurance scheme membership and benefits. Pensioners were cognizant of staying abroad for no more than the maximum time one can spend abroad annually while maintaining one's membership. Transnationals receiving unemployment benefits were also reported to practise planned behaviour, often staying abroad for exactly three months, which is the maximum export time permitted; any longer results in losing the right to the benefit.

Some actions also indicated planned abuse. Bureaucrats found that some transnationals deliberately carried out welfare fraud, often over extended periods. Anna spoke of individuals living abroad for longer periods without reporting it and others who lived in non-agreement countries though reported living in agreement countries or Norway.

We don't notice these cases. Officially they're 'in Norway'. We only discover this abuse occasionally. I think it concerns quite many. Certain rights require you to stay in Norway, [such as the right to] health care. It is an advantage to 'live' in Norway if you're sick. You have free medical care, the opportunity to go to the hospital and the doctor. [...] It's quite lucrative.

A few of the bureaucrats systematically worked to uncover this sort of abuse, and they emphasised that it was challenging. At times, they would suspect abuse due to something out of the ordinary, such as poor communication or odd queries, but then determine there was no abuse. Other times they would be surprised to learn someone had abused the system for years, for instance, by living on Norwegian disability benefits while working abroad.

Informed behaviour

Some transnationals might request general information in advance of their mobility, though not ask for information on specific issues or read up on any legislation themselves.

People who carried out informed use and abuse were perceived as having sound awareness of relevant regulations. The extent to which they complied with regulations was not described as being on either end of the compliance scale. To act with a very high or very low level of compliance was seen to require a very high level of awareness. Transnationals who carried out informed use or abuse, however, were described as doing it in a straightforward manner. It was either use or abuse. The bureaucrats had the impression that these transnationals did not necessarily reflect on what they did.

In the bureaucrats' experience, transnationally mobile families or highly skilled transnational workers tended to practise informed use. Among the latter group, it was reportedly often the case that individuals were nevertheless unaware of the regulations. One explanation offered by Camilla, who worked with membership requirements, was that 'their employers take care of everything'. It is interesting to link this to research on transnational social protection showing how individuals' behaviours are affected by transnational needs and concerns; it does not, however, discuss the extent of their regulatory awareness and reflection, for instance, when drawing on different arrangements in a social protection assemblage (see e.g. Bilecen and Bargłowski 2015; Faist 2013).

On the other end of the compliance scale, informed abuse was perceived as being restricted to one-off instances. For example, some transnationals could neglect to provide the welfare administration with information on their whereabouts or activities. Daniel, who had experienced this while working with several different benefits, reported that such abuse could be carried out without too much effort. He pointed out that it did not require intensive planning.

We see an increasing number of cases where it's likely that the person has been abroad without informing us. I'm thinking, if you want to fool the system, it's quite easy. It's no problem to travel abroad, and just make sure that the welfare administration gets the answers they need. Perhaps do a few return trips. It's quite straightforward.

What is presented as planned versus informed abuse depends on the bureaucrats' assessment of gravity. Transnationals who were spoken of as 'criminals' were reported to plan their abuse, while those who were uninformed simply did not do the right thing. The difference between the two was the severity of the abuse and the amount of strategic planning inferred. This implies that the bureaucrats exercised some moral judgement of the transnationals' behaviour. While some cases of abuse were emphatically classified as welfare fraud, others were rationalised and considered understandable in the context of a case. This sensitivity for an 'in-betweenness' in regulatory compliance – made evident by the bureaucrats' moral evaluations – recalls the concept of semi-legality in migration research. The discourse on semi-legality has reasoned that migrants can be – or can act in a manner that is – semi-legal (Kubal 2013). In this study, the bureaucrats observed and deliberated over semi-legal behaviour among transnational social security recipients.

Unaware behaviour

The two final types of behaviour frequently cited were explained as being carried out by transnationals with a very low level of regulatory awareness. In the bureaucrats' experience, the transnationals who carried out unaware abuse or use of the social security system were also unaware they abused or used the system. At times, people were unaware that they had used the system, first realising it after they had lost their rights

or membership in the Norwegian social insurance scheme. People could also be unaware that they abused the system when travelling and staying in non-agreement countries, for example, if they received child or other benefits while abroad. In some bureaucrats' views, the low level of awareness of use and abuse reflected low socioeconomic backgrounds. Martin, who had experienced several such cases in his work with social assistance, expressed how this could have negative consequences for the individuals involved.

We actually have people, mature adults, who return to Norway. Some of them may be sick, they can be, well, older people. When they're evaluated for disability or retirement pensions they get very low amounts. It depends on their membership in the insurance scheme. This affects the particular group of people who does not think about these things. In my experience, it says something about the resources these people have – to be able to plan for the future, and make the necessary decisions.

Other bureaucrats, especially front-line workers, pointed to vulnerable groups who failed to make use of the system because of their inability to obtain information. This could be the result of language barriers or doubt in public institutions. An example with major consequences was people who unwittingly moved abroad just a few days before they had lived or worked Norway's requisite number of days to obtain the right to export special benefits or receive full pensions. Providing examples of unaware behaviour, the bureaucrats tended to speak about two groups of transnationals: asylum seekers and refugees; and stereotypical 'naïve' or 'drunk Norwegians in Thailand'. This was the only category of behaviour with an apparent traceability along lines of ethnicity. Examples of informed and planned types of behaviour reflected no consistency in how or when bureaucrats considered the transnationals as Norwegians, non-Norwegians, migrants or non-migrants.

Lack of awareness proved problematic for the welfare administration, notably when it came to unaware abuse. This was of major significance for bureaucrats who were tasked with case checks. Whether transnationals who were seemingly unaware of their abuse should be penalised was a point of contention. It is a requirement for welfare recipients and administrators, both, to verify that recipients are informed of relevant regulations. Because of this, some bureaucrats struggled to decide whose fault the ignorance was. This appeared particularly difficult in cases when bureaucrats had compassion or sympathy for transnationals failing to do what was expected.

Implications for transnational social security delivery

Widespread perceptions of a transnational group were likely to affect how bureaucrats experienced its individual members. The bureaucrats working in the Norwegian welfare administration had strong views about the agency and behaviour of people who reconciled transnational mobility with national social security. Despite the bureaucrats' diverse expertise and differing administrative work levels, similar perspectives prevailed. The perspectives appeared to form part of an institutionalised work knowledge concerning taken-for-granted matters about the transnational clients. This is not a surprising finding.

Crucial tasks in bureaucratic work, particularly that of street-level bureaucrats, include assessing and accommodating diverse groups of people and their needs. The findings in this article illustrate what institutional research has already suggested: that bureaucrats turn to categorisation as a coping mechanism for everyday work challenges.

Categorisation, such as those created through identifying types of behaviour, can help manage a large and diverse group of clients (Lipsky 2010; Rugkåsa, Eide, and Ylvisaker 2017). Refining informal institutionalised knowledge, such as through categorisation, can yield a normative guide for appropriate conduct, and common interpretations can reduce bureaucrats' feelings of uncertainty when facing complex decision-making, such as in transnational cases (Christensen et al. 2009; Liodden 2016). Furthermore, common expectations about transnationals' agency and types of behaviour shaped work practices, including the exercise of discretion and decision-making.

Precisely how bureaucrats' work is affected by their perceptions depends on what type of work they do as individuals. Administrative levels determine the extent of implications (Egeberg 2012), and in the present study, street-level bureaucrats appeared most influenced by institutionalised perceptions regarding agency and behaviour. These bureaucrats worked with the transnationals on a daily basis and had discretionary powers in the encounters. Street-level bureaucrats have a potentially extensive impact on clients' lives (Lipsky 2010). The emergence of set practices and decision-making protocols can thus affect outcomes in many cases of transnational social security delivery.

As for the front-line staff, perceptions influence the amount and type of information and guidance they provide transnationals. These bureaucrats explained that the relevance of the clients' questions differed, and that the level of information they provided varied from time to time. Conveying how often people posed irrelevant questions, Benjamin shared his own personal retort: 'Should I give you the information you're asking for or the information you actually need?' Benjamin acknowledged a flaw in his attitude, however, admitting, 'When it comes to providing information, we bureaucrats are also inconsistent.' In other words, front-line staff might assess transnationals' needs differently and consequently give different advice. Some caseworkers also identified discrepancies between the information they and the front-line staff conveyed. Sometimes, the front-line staff reportedly provided irrelevant or wrong information to clients, which might lead to misjudging transnationals' behaviour or awareness level; this could prove detrimental in instances when a lack of information resulted in someone not claiming rightful benefits.

In casework processes, bureaucrats hold executive power. Depending on which unit they work in, they can adjust the requirements transnationals must meet. They can modify when and what information must be provided and fact-check it; if suspicious about a specific case, the bureaucrats said they could access records of home addresses, bank activities abroad and the IP addresses (and thus countries) from which electronic applications are submitted. They could also demand additional information, for instance, documents to prove that children did not attend kindergarten abroad. Or they could enlist the welfare administration doctor to verify medical declarations from other countries. Such control measures were applied when uncertainty about a transnational's compliance arose.

The bureaucrats said they tended to check some cases more than others, basing their decisions on experience and assumptions about how people behave. Differences in moral judgment among caseworkers also likely had an effect on when and how they applied control measures, for instance, when observing semi-legal behaviour among transnationals. This mirrors the dilemma of bureaucrats working in immigration control, doing 'the dirty work of selecting the good immigrants from the bad ones' (Fassin 2011, 218). These officers' decision-making is similar to that of welfare bureaucrats in

the sense that they not only mechanically follow orders, but also serve as moral agents, whose emotions and intuitions influence the production of state boundaries (Graham 2002).

Institutionalised perspectives could also influence how unit heads and subject experts communicated needs and recommendations to leaders and passed along information to subordinates. As the interviews revealed, perspectives on transnationals' assumed concerns and behaviour informed suggestions for changes – for example, concerning work guidelines or information appearing on the welfare administration's website. As such, both their own and their colleagues' perceptions and experiences could impact which changes they suggested and which changes were made.

Individual perceptions of agency and behaviour were less important in the work of administrative leaders and directorate staff. However, these bureaucrats took part in decision-making regarding an institutional change. In their accounts, if they received suggestions for change from below – for example, expanding information provision to some groups or improving communication across borders – they would try to initiate processes to solve the situation. These solutions could lead to reorganisation or policy change. In turn, this could influence the outcomes of numerous cases and ultimately alter the framework of bureaucrats' encounters with transnationals.

According to the law, bureaucrats in Norwegian public service-providing organisations must place emphasis on 'the desires and needs' of individual clients (JBD 2006). While the bureaucrats in this study acknowledged transnationals' life course-related needs, such as unemployment and ageing, they did not consider their 'transnationally specific needs' (Boccagni 2017). Across all levels, bureaucrats spoke about transnationals' agency and behaviour as though the transnationals operated in a vacuum. They cited regulatory awareness and compliance, but did not mention other factors that could potentially be decisive in how transnationals navigate the social security system. The social worlds of people engaging in transnational activities or mobility 'span more than one place' (Vertovec 2001, 573). Their agency and 'social protection assemblage' may be affected by attachments and relationships across borders, as well as structural factors in other countries (Carling 2008; Drinkwater and Garapich 2015; Faist 2013; Vertovec 2001). Such facets of mobile lives were not articulated when bureaucrats spoke about why and how individuals reconciled transnational mobility and national social security.

Also absent from their accounts was an acknowledgment that people can rely on other forms of formal or informal social protection. Whereas transnational social protection can be provided by several actors, such as states, markets, the third sector and social ties (Faist 2017; Levitt et al. 2017), different arrangements may indeed influence peoples' agency, mobility and use of national social security. Apart from international and bilateral social security agreements, which they dealt with in their everyday work, the bureaucrats did not seem to consider how other actors, including other states, could affect transnationals' needs or shape their agency and behaviour. This might be explained by the fact that the bureaucrats were interviewed in their roles foremost as public welfare service delivery officials. Besides, Norwegian social security is widely deemed favourable, especially when compared to other systems, and it is likely that many bureaucrats assumed that people would prefer to be covered by the Norwegian social insurance scheme if they can be.

Expansion of social protection to include transnational components is normatively desirable (Boccagni 2017). Still, whether this is, or should be, part of social security providers' mandate merits further discussion (Righard and Boccagni 2015). While acutely necessary, an in-depth discussion is beyond the scope of this article. Nevertheless, the bureaucrats' apparent obliviousness to transnational needs and other sources of social protection raises questions about whether they focused on their clients' individual needs and concerns, as they are instructed to by Norwegian law. Moreover, the bureaucrats' accounts suggest that increased awareness of transnational needs and concerns could have swayed their taken-for-granted assumptions about the transnationals' agency and behaviour. In turn, this could have altered bureaucrats' work practices, thus affecting how they assess social security queries and claims, in which cases they show suspicion or sympathy, and how they use their discretion in decision-making processes.

Conclusions

Transnationally mobile social security recipients differ vastly, but they are similar in that they engage in cross-border mobility and maintain ties in several countries. This may enable them to seek social protection from different realms of provision (Levitt et al. 2017), though it also complicates their access to and use of the social security system. The majority of welfare state bureaucrats in this study did not reflect on how the transnational aspect of people's lives might play a role in their use of the social security system. Transnationals' misuse of the system was explained as the result of unawareness or abuse. Processes of transnational social security delivery can be complex, and require plenty of discretion. It is thus crucial that bureaucrats be attentive to the individual contexts in these cases. A transnational-oriented sensitivity (Righard and Boccagni 2015), including greater insight into reasons for and processes of transnational mobility, can enable bureaucrats to move beyond a state-centred approach. Increased sensitivity towards and familiarity with the transnational-specific aspects of individuals' lives may alter institutional understandings of transnational behaviour, and broaden bureaucrats' knowledge when emphasising these clients' needs and concerns.

Three major conclusions emerge from this study. First, the bureaucrats perceived two factors as monumentally shaping transnationals' agency as they reconcile national social security entitlement with transnational mobility: level of regulatory awareness and level of compliance. Within the scope of the transnationals' agency, the bureaucrats highlighted unlimited possibilities for behaviour and noted that generalisations could not be drawn for an entire group of transnationals. Nevertheless, the recurrence of these two factors in their accounts reveals an institutionalised understanding of what might influence transnationals' decision-making surrounding social security entitlement and transnational mobility.

Second, despite broad agreement that generalisations could not be drawn, bureaucrats' accounts of how transnationals navigated the system consistently referenced planned abuse or use, informed abuse or use, and unaware abuse or use. Recurring types of behaviour cited in the bureaucratic discourse does not necessarily mean these forms prevail among transnational social security recipients. It does, however, illustrate the bureaucrats' predilection for categorisation. Following the literature on bureaucracy, this might be a response to the transnational group's diverse mobility patterns, which makes simplification and categorisation necessary work tools.

Finally, the bureaucratic perspectives on transnationals' agency and behaviour have implications for transnational social security delivery. This is particularly the case for street-level bureaucrats. The widespread view of what factors influenced transnationals' agency as well as the commonly cited categories of behaviour constitute an important aspect of bureaucrats' discretionary power. As commonly held in institutional research, institutional perspectives and previous experience influence categorisation and work practices, and likely affect bureaucrats' use of discretion (Liodden 2016; Lipsky 2010). As acknowledged by the interviewed bureaucrats, individual and prevailing approaches affect which information and advice they provide to transnationals, how they process a case, and the extent of checks in casework. Perspectives also affect institutional work guidelines, organisational changes and the development of policy. Consequently, this affects how transnationally mobile social security recipients are encountered by the welfare state as well as their access to social security.

Welfare state and national social security premises are being challenged by new patterns of mobility, and the number of studies assessing these challenges is growing. Research on bureaucrats' assessments of transnational mobility and eligibility for benefits is a crucial contribution to this issue and its surrounding discourse. It is valuable to study how transnationals deal with the welfare state from the viewpoint of the transnationals themselves – but this is only one side of the encounter. If the aim is to explore the relationship between transnational mobility and the welfare state, examining experiences within welfare state institutions can be fruitful.

Transnational mobility blurs the lines between who should or should not be protected by the state, and welfare state bureaucrats are faced with new dilemmas when delivering social security benefits to transnationals. Institutional perspectives and the categorisation of how transnationals use the social security system impact bureaucrats' daily work practices and alter the structures of transnational welfare delivery. These perspectives influence how transnationals are encountered, and thus how transnational mobility is – or is not – accommodated by the welfare state.

Notes

1. On-going research projects on transnational mobility and national social security include Mobile Welfare in a Transnational Europe: An Analysis of Portability Regimes of Social Security Rights (TRANSWEL) led by Anna Amelina; Transnational Lives in the Welfare State (TRANSWEL) led by Jørgen Carling; Migrants' Welfare State Attitudes (MIFARE) led by Marcel Lubbers; Transnational Migration, Citizenship and the Circulation of Rights and Responsibilities (TRANSMIC) led by Hildegard Schneider; Migration for Welfare (WELLMIG) led by Marie Louise Seeberg; and European Welfare Systems in Times of Mobility (MobileWelfare) led by Helga de Valk.
2. The official Norwegian names of these units, respectively, are NAV Internasjonalt, Arbeids- og velferdsdirektoratet; NAV Kontroll; NAV Kontaktsenter Utland; Grensetjenesten; NAV Pensjon; NAV Forvaltning; and NAV-kontor. All interviews were conducted in Norwegian.
3. The interview excerpts are translations by the author.

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