"Wherever I can work, I've got to go"

Negotiating mobilities in the context of volatility in the Canadian construction industry

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Abstract: This article considers how construction workers based in the Canadian province of Newfoundland and Labrador (NL) negotiate the need to be mobile for work at different scales and with what effects. It tackles the seldom considered question of how travel becomes normalized as a facet of work in construction, an employment sector characterized by volatility. Specifically, we explore the experiences of workers and their families negotiating the shift from having extensive employment options in different places during a time of high labour demand, to limited and constrained options that may require significant changes (for instance, relocation, more time apart from family, or lower pay) in a period of economic contraction. How workers respond to these conditions contributes to conceptualizations of agency and mobility in construction workplace cultures. The article draws on 73 semi-structured interviews with workers, employers and industry and community stakeholders conducted between 2014 and 2018, and data from project employment reports and field observations. The article reveals how long commutes and extended periods away from home are understood to be inevitable aspects of construction work that shape the field of expectations of workers and their families, and what this dominant discourse means on the ground in lived experience.

Introduction

We met Susan at a coffee shop on the Burin Peninsula on a sunny morning in June. She is in her fifties and, with a grade 9 education, had worked retail and home care jobs most of her life. Struggling to make ends meet and seeing many people she knew going away and making ‘big money’, she decided to pursue her Adult Basic Education (ABE) with a plan to enroll in trades training. Once her daughter was a bit older she would be free to travel away for lucrative work as she had seen so many in her community do. She initially had trouble finding work in her new field, but ultimately took a job in Alberta on a 13-8 fly-in-fly-out (FIFO) rotation, commuting from her hometown to the St. John’s airport, which is approximately a three-and-a-half hour drive, to fly west. She went from earning around $12/hour in her previous jobs to $29/hour in Alberta. This enabled her to buy her first home and provided financial security. Since that first stint away, at various moments she has chosen jobs closer to home or stopped working to care for and be near family

1 Rotations or rosters vary widely from several days in a row followed by days off, to weeks of work every day with no break. In this article rotations are notated as n-n, referring to days on-days off. The rotations refer to days rather than weeks, unless otherwise noted.
members, and because of her own health issues. When we met her she had been out of work for more than 5 months, after having held seven jobs in seven years in both her home province and Alberta. She was considering returning to homecare work or relocating to Alberta if she couldn’t find work soon. Like for so many others, mobility was part of Susan’s plan. She knew that she would have to work away and change jobs often when she embarked on a new career path. She hadn’t anticipated that she would reach a point where there was no work, despite her willingness to travel.

This article considers how construction industry workers like Susan, based in the Canadian province of Newfoundland and Labrador (NL), negotiate the need to be mobile for work at different scales and with what effects. In NL steady outmigration in the 1980s and 90s declined from the late 90s in part through the availability of well-paid construction jobs tied to resource development in the province, and jobs in western Canada that allowed people to continue to live in NL and work on rotational schedules, commuting long distances on a regular basis. By 2019 large construction projects that employed thousands of workers in NL had mostly entered operations phases requiring fewer workers. Meanwhile, beginning in late 2014, falling and fluctuating oil and commodity prices affected the availability of trades jobs tied to the resource industries in Alberta and elsewhere in western Canada. By 2018 when we interviewed Susan, she and others were facing constrained options which included drawing unemployment benefits, relocation, or seeking non-construction employment.

Construction is project-based and workers must travel to the location of site-based work that is finite in time and located in space. Employment depends upon shifting market conditions, patterns of capital investment, and demand for particular types of work and workers, including skilled trades and others. Long periods of economic growth, reflected in high labour demand and rising wages, are possible. But these benefits accrue unevenly (Foster and Barnetson, 2017), with distinct social and geographical patterns. While there is a growing body of literature examining impacts of work-related mobilities in construction (Mills, 2017; Yeoh et al., 2017; Barber, 2018; Gama Gato and Salazar, 2018), there remains a lack of understanding of how people living and working in different contexts deal with

changes in the availability of work, in relation to the intrinsic mobility requirement of the industry. What difference does it make to travel long distances for work, to relocate for work, or pursue other alternatives? To what extent do decisions between these options fall within the domain in which workers exercise agency? How are these decisions bound up with gender relations at home and at work? How are they often constrained by economic conditions and institutional factors? Addressing these questions is important theoretically and empirically.

Theoretically, a focus on how workers negotiate shifting employment availability in relation to mobility raises questions of agency – individual and collective acts that may exert control over and may have the potential to transform work and aspects of life related to work – given sometimes challenging conditions (e.g. long periods of non-work, difficult work, or work located far from home). Alongside Fard and Dorow’s (2020) contribution to this special issue, this article contributes to literature in this vein (Coe and Jordhus-Lier, 2011; Berntsen, 2016), and to the now well-established body of research that examines the impacts of Fly-In/Fly-Out (FIFO) work in terms of development effects (Storey, 2010; Markey, Ryser and Halseth, 2015; Vodden and Hall, 2016) and emerging work on ‘FIFO families’ (Mayes, 2019). But here, as will be explained, agency is not resistance, but rather working with what is possible. Specifically, the article provides qualitative evidence of processes through which mobility for work in construction becomes normalized, and how the volatility that characterizes the industry shapes worker experiences of these processes. The particular form of volatility in construction is accompanied with requirements for workers to be flexible, a feature of neoliberalisation. Our study thus offers an interpretation of worker agency in relation the structures it interacts with, grounded in the context of NL, and attentive to the gendered dimensions of mobile construction work.

The article continues in five parts. First, a literature review frames the idea of workers negotiating the need to be mobile for work in relation to literature on construction work and workplaces, with a focus on mobility and worker agency, and the particular kinds of volatility and precarity construction work and workplaces are prone to. Second, an overview of the qualitative methodology is provided. Next, the NL context is introduced through a discussion of construction work in the regional economy and the historical evolution of mobility within it. Fourth, research data is presented and analysed under three themes: (1) economic returns for mobile work; (2) the often fragile work/life balance of mobile workers; (3) the normalization of long-distance commuting. The article concludes by summarizing and highlighting the significance of key findings about the normalization of long-distance commuting for construction industry workers in relation to the everyday experiences workers and the agency they exercise.

**Literature Review**

Construction includes a variety of activities and occupations across a number of sub-sectors, including industrial, residential, commercial/institutional, and civil. Occupations range from highly and less skilled labour-intensive trades and other manual jobs, to design and management and from to house-keeping to administrative positions. Many jobs are located on-site, the focus of this article, but others are off-site, for instance in stationary offices. Construction employment is stratified, with pay and terms of employment varying widely, and with marginalized workers, including ‘non-citizens’ (Buckley and Reid-Musson, 2018), concentrated in more precarious positions with lower pay, higher risk and shorter term jobs, especially in large cities. Across the different forms of diversity that characterize the industry a number of common features have been noted in the literature. Since construction is project-based, most construction activities cannot be relocated to places with lower production costs (Erlich and Grabelsky, 2005; Buckley, 2014; Mills, 2017), as has been the
international migrants have increasingly been adopted as a flexible labour force, what Meardi, Martin and Riera (2012) call a ‘buffer’, often willing to work for lower pay, less likely to organize, and more willing to perform dangerous and difficult work. Well-documented in Europe (Datta et al., 2007; Berntsen, 2016), the United States (Morales and Saucedo, 2015), and large cities in the Middle East and South-East Asia (Buckley, 2012; Yeoh et al., 2017), this has also been the case in Canada under the Temporary Foreign Worker (TFW) programme (Foster and Barnetson, 2017). Moreover, international migrants also may be undocumented or fall out of status, both of which make them more susceptible to exploitation by employers. Morales and Saucedo (2015) refer to the disposability of Latinx workers in residential construction in the US. More generally, the movement of workers from site to site historically acted as a barrier to workplace welfarism (Hayes, 2002).

In Canada, intra-national labour mobility (migration and commuting) from areas of high to low unemployment has reflected dynamics similar in some respects to those of international migrants, but with important distinctions. Intra-national migrants and mobile workers are not susceptible to exploitation and risks associated with lacking citizenship rights and privileges, although they may experience a sense of dislocation and struggle to adapt. Their mobilities, representing the negotiation of costs and benefits, including, for instance, a trade-off between a higher income and extended absences from family, have been understudied (Gama Gato and Salazar, 2018). Work addressing this gap is emerging. For instance, Mayes (2019), building on Roseman, Barber and Neis (2015), points to the ways that FIFO work in Australia’s mining industry implicates and disrupts ‘social rhythms’ of

Prefabricated modules are an exception and represent an area of present and future growth that makes off-site construction possible in some circumstances (Veen, Teicher and Holland, 2017).
family and reproduction, and here we add, with construction, an interest in work that is transient and inconsistent.

Another dominant thread in the literature concerns the reasons for and implications of the continued male and masculine dominance of construction employment (Paap, 2006). Many roles in construction, including trades and manual labour, have been associated with stereotypically masculine characteristics, including independence, strength, reason and risk-taking. Although the number of women entering traditionally male-dominated fields in construction is growing, there lacks the critical mass and dedicated effort required for significant change to workplace cultures. Gherardi and Nicolini (2002), using a sociology of knowledge approach, suggest that construction workers come to understand and know their work and workplaces through processes of social learning. A ‘community of practice’ includes not only formal training and HR policies but also teaches them how to do their work, with implications for workplace safety. Measures to reduce barriers to women’s employment in construction have included training and hiring initiatives, but numbers have not increased substantially, a fact blamed on the inertia of existing workplace dynamics making them difficult to change, and the lack of site-focused initiatives. Ibáñez (2017), drawing on research in Spain, suggests that initiatives to employ women in construction grow during times of labour shortage but fade during periods of labour surplus. Further, different kinds of companies offer different career trajectories with more or less support for women.

Many construction jobs are precarious, but in slightly different ways than in other employment sectors. Wages in construction vary, but with work through Building and Construction Trade Unions (BCTUs), which supply workers for many larger construction sites projects across Canada, they can be high. However, Mills (2017) points out that well-paid union jobs are declining along with diminishing rates of union density, and that access to them is often circumscribed by racial and other forms of privilege. Meanwhile, even
wherever the work, I’ve got to go’: Negotiating mobilities in the context of volatility in the Canadian construction industry.” Labour & Industry: A Journal of the Social and Economic Relations of Work. https://doi.org/10.1080/10301763.2020.1839189 relatively better-paid union jobs, from which racialized workers and women are often excluded, may be understood as precarious. While low-wage and temporary work in other sectors exposes employees to uncertainty concerning income (among other features), a predominant factor in the precarity of construction work is its shifting location, mobility demands, and its inherently project-based and contingent nature. But because this feature of construction is known and understood, it is widely accepted. This may be part of the masculine workplace culture of construction, where workers appreciate elements of freedom in their work (Hayes, 2002), including often working under minimal supervision, working outdoors, and change and variability. The flipside of movement that may become ingrained in workplace cultures is volatility, the fact that construction labour market conditions can change very quickly in accordance with broader economic conditions changing income flows and security, employment-related costs and logistical and other challenges for workers and their households. While movement from site to site is a feature of the industry, it is not widely understood how workers negotiate job and worksite transience and the associated need to leave their job and find a new one in a new location.

Agency is a human capacity to exert some influence over the social relations within which one is enmeshed (Sewell, 1992, cited in Berntsen, 2016). The extent to which structure versus agency shapes social life has been a long-enduring debate in social sciences. Recently these categories have come to be seen as relational and complex (Coe and Jordhus-Lier, 2011). Agency has been an important focus of labour studies, mainly in relation to worker organizing and union movements (Herod, 1998). Mobility can make it challenging to exercise collective agency in the form of organizing. But other relationships between mobility and agency are possible, especially when it is understood to take different forms (Berntsen, 2016). Cindi Katz’ (2004) disambiguation of agency of as resilience, reworking or resistance is helpful in this regard. Resilience, the seemingly insignificant daily acts of ‘getting by’ and

coping, are important in the repertoire of international migrant workers, but also those who are mobile for work within their own country. Berntsen’s (2016) work on agency and labour power suggests that job transience can be empowering for workers. In Berntsen’s study workers who are not unionized still exercise agency by making choices and strategizing within the framework of existing structures. Specifically, leaving home to work away can be understood in many cases as a form of agency (for Berntsen, ‘reworking’) because it enables migrant workers to improve their situation materially. Within the context of working away from home, migrant or mobile workers may move between jobs in search of better pay and conditions. This echoes Smith’s idea that ‘for an increasing share of workers who find employment in flexible work arrangements, mobility power forms an additional and important source of leverage’ (Smith, 2006 cited in Berntsen, 2016). While this may be the case for some workers, it does not encompass the potential opportunities and challenges for workers of changes in location - geographical mobility within and associated with employment (Cresswell, Dorow and Roseman, 2016). In the remainder of this article, we examine the ways that workers view the combined demands of contingency (job changes) and geographical mobility as a source of opportunity that they can realize through their own agency; and, on the flipside, we highlight the ways meeting these demands becomes normalized, which may present challenges especially in times of falling labour demand.

Methods

Empirically, this article draws on data from a subset of 73 in-depth semi-structured interviews with workers, employers and industry and community stakeholders in Newfoundland and Labrador conducted between 2014 and 2018. Thirty-two of these interviews were conducted with trades workers, including six women and twenty-six men. Interviewees range in age from their mid-twenties to early seventies. Three interviewees (all men) have Read Seal national accreditation, nine interviewees have journeyperson status in
include six electricians, six plumbers/pipeliners, four welders, six carpenters, four labourers, three scaffolders, four heavy equipment operators, three ironworkers, and one each of millwright, metal fabricator, blacksmith, mechanic, and painter-plasterer. These interviews thus represent a diversity of experiences in terms of gender, age, seniority in training and in their respective unions, and different trades. Workers were recruited through snowball sampling and a union liaison. While the article does not include quotes from all of the interviews, the cases discussed, mainly from interviews in 2015 and 2016, are representative of common experiences. The article also draws on data from stakeholder interviews, including with community leaders and elected officials, that were part of the larger dataset. These interviews, with participants invited through purposive sampling, revealed community impacts, regional economic changes, and discourses that describe and shape meanings of work-related mobility. Participants are cited with a pseudonym and the year the interview took place (Interview with _____, followed by 2015, 2016, or 2018). The category of interviewee (worker or community official or other) and their job title or sector (where providing this does not risk compromising anonymity), is also noted in the text. Three small group interviews with up to three workers took place at a worksite. The group setting allowed participants to reflect on shared experiences and note differences, deepening responses to some questions.

Interviews were inductively analyzed using the qualitative data analysis software, NVivo, for themes such as commuting patterns and rhythms, drawbacks and challenges related to commuting, and experiences and reflections relating to source and host communities, apprenticeship and training, career and work in the construction industry, family, and finances. We also draw on field observations, including landscapes of labour and housing improvements, conducted during construction site visits and trips to rural
communities, centering primarily on an area called the Burin Peninsula with a population of just under 30,000 people. Finally, project employment reports were analyzed to examine changing patterns of employment at major industrial construction sites in Newfoundland and Labrador such as Hebron, Hibernia, and Muskrat Falls, which have benefits agreements with the province’s trades unions.

The Newfoundland and Labrador Context

In Newfoundland and Labrador mobility has long been a feature of work in construction and other sectors. Historically, fishing was central to the NL economy. Fishing by Europeans around NL was originally migratory and seasonal. Throughout the 17th and 18th centuries, however, Europeans began to establish settlements on the Island of Newfoundland (Ryan, 1983). Fishing work necessarily entailed continued mobility for fishers, as well as construction work associated with settlement and the fishery. Many settlers built their own houses or contributed to the construction of other buildings, flakes and stages, and wharves. By the 1800s, shipbuilding for the fishery was also firmly established in NL, while construction of infrastructure such as the Newfoundland railway provided temporary employment similar to later major projects (Ryan, 1983; Korneski, 2016). Many in NL also travelled for construction work throughout the late 1800s and 1900s, working in shipyards and on the construction of railroads, hydro, mining, and pulp and paper operations in the North, and in steel and mining industries across Canada and the United States (Crawley, 1988). Within the province, major projects for infrastructure development and resource extraction were a significant component of industrialization in the mid-1900s, with projects in the 1960s and 1970s that include the Churchill Falls generating station, the Come by Chance Oil Refinery, and the expansion of iron mines in Wabush and Labrador City (McBride, 2003). Construction work entailed mobility to consecutive project sites, instability in terms of length and location of employment, and often unemployment throughout the
winter months, contributing to the formation of trade unions beginning in the late 1800s (McBride, 2003, pp. 99–101).

Construction labour has also been fostered by the NL provincial government in part through retraining programs that incentivized workers - primarily young men - to pursue trades apprenticeships, including after WWII (McBride, 2003, pp. 46–48) and more recently following the collapse of groundfish stocks (Power, 2017). While the long history of trades work in the province can be understood to be part of both the modernization of employment and a feature of traditional occupational pluralism through which families in outports and rural communities survived given a dearth of local employment opportunities (Neary, 1973), the sector changed in the 1990s. Unemployment skyrocketed following the groundfish moratoria, but paralleled a renewed focus on large-scale industrial construction projects beginning with the Hibernia oil platform (1990-1997), followed by projects that included the topsides for the SeaRose Floating Production Storage and Offloading (FPSO) (2004-2005), the Hebron oil platform built (2012-2017), and the Muskrat Falls hydroelectric project (2012-2018). Figure 1 shows the wave of construction employment for Newfoundland and Labrador-based projects in the 2010s based on company published benefits reports (data is not available for the SeaRose FPSO).
As shown in Fig. 1, recent construction employment peaked in 2015 with the coinciding Hebron and Muskrat Falls projects, but employment numbers have since fallen drastically. From the early 2000s to 2014 large numbers of workers from Newfoundland and Labrador and other provinces in Atlantic Canada also worked jobs tied to resource development in western and northern Canada. The exact number of construction industry workers commuting from NL to other provinces for work has been difficult to measure. Drawing on data from the Canadian Employer-Employee Dynamics Database (CEEDD), Lionais, Murray and Donatelli (Morokvasic, 2004) provide some evidence of the extent of the phenomenon. Approximately 6.7% of the employed labour force in NL was involved in interprovincial commuting across all sectors in 2008. This figure does not include those who commute to work long-distance within the province, nor does it capture people who temporarily relocate out of province. In some communities in 2016, anecdotally, 30% or
Interprovincial employment expanded in the late 2000s, declined between 2008 and 2010, and then leveled off (Hewitt, Haan and Neis, 2018). This is due in part to the rise of construction employment opportunities tied to major projects in NL (Fig. 1).

So, while mobility has long been a feature of work in NL and beyond, the demand for labour in the context of rising commodity prices has contributed to new forms of commute work in Canada, Australia as elsewhere (Storey, 2016). In particular, mobility arrangements featuring paid travel, higher wages, overtime pay, rotational schedules, an extended work day, accommodation near the worksite, and transportation to and from the worksite often provided by the employer (Storey, 2016, p. 585). Research has identified the Burin Peninsula in Newfoundland as one particular target source location for such labour based on a surplus of qualified labour (Storey, 2010, 2016; Hewitt, Haan and Neis, 2018). This may be a new form of the traditional single industry town constituting ‘dependency at a distance’ (Storey and Hall, 2018). While volatile, trades work in NL has represented a form of high-wage employment and, together with the development of local offshore oil industry, has contributed to a change in status for NL from a ‘have not’ to a ‘have’ province (Marland, 2010; Barber, 2016). At the same time, research on trades apprenticeship shows how new workers struggle to find positions and learn to adopt a pragmatic approach to training and employment, including a willingness to be mobile (Power, 2017). That is, mobility and economic opportunity are intertwined with and part of the inherent nature of pursuing a career in the construction trades at all stages.

**Theme I: Chasing ‘Big Money’**

The present analysis draws attention to both the fact that mobility can entail higher wages than are possible in NL, and the fact that construction jobs related to resource development are contingent and temporary. These two facets operate in tandem and become
part of the field expectations of workers, around which they plan and make decisions. ‘And then it come to a point in my life where everybody was going away and they were making big money, and I was back here struggling’ (Susan, 2018). This was said by Susan, whose story appeared in the opening vignette. Susan’s experience shows that remuneration can be a significant factor in attracting NL residents to enter work in the skilled trades and then to take up employment away from their home communities. In Susan’s and many other cases there are local job options that may entail ‘struggling’ to make ends meet, as Susan puts it.

In Canada minimum wages vary across the country and are set by provincial governments. In NL the minimum wage remained stagnant at $4.75/hour from 1991 to 1995. Subsequent increases brought it to $11.65/hour by 2020 but it is still among the lowest in Canada (Retail Council of Canada, 2020). Much employment in rural NL outside of the public service and the resource and extraction sectors is minimum wage, often seasonal, service sector work. The Burin Peninsula fish plants were unionized and, prior to the 1990s, could provide year-round work at higher wages than those offered by other employers in the area. But fish plant employment became increasingly seasonal and unstable after the groundfish moratoria and largely evaporated in the first decade of the 2000s (Glen, 2016). Employment opportunities and wages in the residential construction sector also tend to be limited and fluctuate with the expansion and contraction of the regional economy. By way of contrast, employment in the construction of the Hibernia offshore oil platform, with a site-specific collective agreement, offered wages approximately 4 to 5 times the 1990s minimum wage, high enough to lure some residents of the province who had left to work in other provinces back home for work.

The comments made by Raymond, who works as a civil servant on the Burin Peninsula, illustrate these contrasts. A local construction contract might pay $20/hour while $45/hour is possible on big industrial projects, both in Newfoundland and Labrador and in
Alberta, in addition to overtime pay (Raymond, 2015). A living out allowance (LOA), designed to allow workers who live outside of daily commuting distance to pay for secondary accommodations while they work, is considered additional income. The contingent and temporary nature of the work means that these wages are often only guaranteed for short periods, thus creating uncertainty in the lives of workers. This uncertainty becomes intertwined with debt management and planning for the future and feeds into the way workers use mobility as a way to generate additional financial stability.

‘Big money’ is interwoven with the decisions and practices, embedded in the context of particular social relations involving family, community, state and institutions (Coe and Jordhus-Lier, 2011), that make it possible. For some, mobility becomes an adaptation strategy that allows workers to continue to earn the wages that they earned at some local jobs that disappeared as a result of downsizing and offshoring triggered by economic restructuring and changes in production networks. This was the case for shipbuilding, an industry with a long history on the Burin Peninsula that offered steady, well-paid unionized work for many years before becoming sporadic as contracts shifted to yards in South Korea and other economies with lower costs. Anthony experienced this change. After working in the shipyard for decades he began to travel away for work in his 60s to fill the increasingly long periods when he found himself with no work. For him it wasn’t so much about chasing ‘big money’, but rather a tactic to ensure a stable income and retirement savings for him and his partner, Jenny (Interview with Anthony, 2015). A community leader and educator named Sarah referenced ambition: ‘if you’re determined and you want it, you go.’ But not only ambition is required, a lack of or ability to manage other commitments and a willingness to work extensive overtime hours are also important: ‘if you got no obstacles going where the work is and you don’t mind that travel, it’s unbelievable’ (Interview with Sarah, 2016). ‘Obstacles’ may be things like a role in household reproductive and care work that can be filled by a spouse or other
work, sometimes equating it with a sense of duty, and saying less about the situation at home.

A welder’s account of his experience filling out forms to secure government support during a period of high unemployment highlights the extent to which the ‘big money’ is earned through long hours of hard work that may appear ‘impossible’:

I walked into the room and sat down, filled out the paper and brought it up to the lady. And she went through it and she said, “how many hours, regular hours, do you work a week?” I said: “forty hours.” And she said: “how many overtime hours do you work?” I said “fifty.” She said “that’s impossible.” “I worked 90 hours a week”, I said. It’s not impossible… Newfoundlanders go away to work… You go out there to work and that’s what you do. (Interview with Michael, 2015)

‘Big money’ can also be ‘fast’. Several interview participants spoke the attraction of condensed periods of work with significant overtime pay, including to young people. A municipal official stated: ‘It’s fast money, right. If you go and do a trade in 10 months and walk out to a site and get paid $35 an hour… you’re a 21 or 22-year-old kid and you’re taking home, I don’t know, $2400, $2600 every 10 days, that’s not bad’ (Interview with Shawn, 2015). According to Peter, a union business manager, the availability of well-paid jobs during a boom period drew young people away from pursuing longer post-secondary education programmes towards short trades courses followed by an early entry to the labour market (Interview with Peter, 2015). Power (2017) has argued that discourses about rural sustainability are bound up with young people’s decision-making around whether to migrate away from areas with few employment opportunities or enter careers in the skilled trades that may offer sporadic work close to home but also require mobility. She draws attention to the neoliberal rationality that constructs young people as purely economic actors. Supporting her argument, rising unemployment as a result of falling oil and commodity prices beginning in 2014 was felt acutely by less experienced workers, particularly apprentices (CBC News, 2015). Young people, fresh out of secondary school, and middle aged and older workers like...
Susan and Anthony, are drawn to enter trades work for different reasons, including peer influence, the desire for greater economic stability or lifestyle aspirations, and necessity. For each a different calculus is at play, but all involve deciding between higher pay for contingent work that requires mobility, or local work that may be part-time, seasonal, minimum or low-wage in a limited job market.

**Theme II: Home and family**

As also seen in Susan’s story, the sphere of reproduction plays an important part in workers’ decisions about work. While many workers accept the need for mobility in construction work, many also watch for and strategize to find ways to work closer to home. This possibility is shaped by availability and duration of jobs, financial considerations such as hourly wages, debt, access to company-supported travel, housing and meals or LOAs, and gender. While the construction boom in Newfoundland and Alberta offered many workers options in terms of work location and commute options and supports, periods with less employment availability both before and since have featured longer or indeterminate periods away from home and family, and reduced access to compensation for mobility-related costs. These indeterminacies and costs entail negotiations and challenges in terms of the mobility (and thus employment options) of spouses, care responsibilities, and preferred locations and types of work.

Dan (2015), for example, has journyperson status in two trades and, in addition to working on the Burin peninsula of Newfoundland, has worked in Ontario, Alberta, Western Canada and Northern Canada. In the past, he moved his primary residence to both Ontario and Alberta, eventually moving back to Newfoundland and buying a house in the Burin-Marystown area. His mobility was at times tied to the immobility and care-work of partner. Dan explained how he drove to Western Canada to work for an indeterminate length of time, living with his cousin; it stressed his relationship with his girlfriend who didn’t want to travel

with him and was often left without a car. Even after his first child was born he was working in Western Canada, first with no rotation and then on an 8 weeks on/2 weeks off FIFO rotation. He reflected on the fact that his two children, ‘grew up with me being gone… they’d be wondering where is Dad to? And my mother would say, well he’s out working, making a living’ (Interview with Dan, 2015). This statement is indicative of traditional gendered role of the masculine absent breadwinner. In his absence, Dan’s mother, his children’s grandmother, contributed to childcare and shaping the understanding of his role among family members. Dan eventually shifted to working in Labrador because it was closer to home and allowed him to spend more time with his family, later working on a 14-7 rotation that became standard at many sites across Canada, but he turned down opportunities to work even closer to home in the Burin area because he did not like the workplace politics. This tradeoff – choosing a job that requires more travel and time away but a preferable workplace environment – reveals the extent to which mobility is accepted as a normal, even when it entails time away from family.

In the case of Dan and many other workers, their mobility for work can generate enhanced stability for those left at home by allowing them to live in their home communities with access to family and friends (Walsh, 2012). It can also, however, constrain the work and other types of mobility of their partners in ways that are distinctly gendered (Neis et al., 2018). Wives and other women associated with trades-men are largely and primarily responsible for various forms of care-work, with some also working holding part-time or full-time jobs. Three journeyed construction workers aged late 20s to 60s, currently working on the Isthmus of the Avalon Peninsula, a 75-minute drive from home, discussed their varying approaches to child and care work and how these relate to their 10-4 rotation (Alfred, Ben and Jack 2016). They live close enough to work that they are all able to return home every night, adding a long commute to the beginning and end of their 10-hour day:
Here, time with the kids, for Alfred, includes pursuits traditionally understood as masculine (Brandth and Haugen, 2005). The fact that Alfred’s children enjoy the same pastimes as him makes their time together easy. When asked about their contributions to housework that was solely the responsibility of their women partners in their absence, each of the men carefully positioned themselves in relation to a domain which their working life is distanced.

Interviewer: And what about house work? Do any of you do any kind of house work when you’re at home?

Ben: Oh, I help out.

Jack: She cooks, I usually do the dishes, right?

Alfred: Well I usually get home, I’ll have me supper, I’ll do the dishes, throw in a couple loads of laundry…

Jack: The only thing I don’t clean is bathrooms… I’ll do everything else.

Ben explains, ‘I help out,’ and Jack does the dishes but emphasizes the work he does not do, such as cooking and bathrooms. Alfred’s arrival home from a period of working away involves a routine that includes eating a meal prepared for him before his arrival. Ben implied that his wife makes his lunch every day, saying that his wife will know he is ready to retire when, ‘I’ll tell you that evening not to make a lunch.’

For women trades workers, their ability to work away and choices of where to work depend on access to childcare or, as in the case of Susan, children being old enough to be left on their own or with family at home. There are no specific examples from our participants of women leaving their children with men partners, although one woman trades worker stated
that there are often women staying in camps whose husbands are taking care of their children (Interview with Ellie, 2018).

An example of these tensions is seen in Shelly’s experiences. She is a scaffolder from the Burin Peninsula who went to work in construction in Alberta with her boyfriend. She was a third-year apprentice when we met her, with enough hours for journeyperson status, but had not written the exam because she did not want the additional responsibility this would entail. She had two children from a prior marriage, but her ex-husband was ‘unreliable’ and so she hired a live-in caregiver in order to be able to work in Alberta on a 9-5 rotation. For more than two years Shelly worked different jobs in Alberta, taking each winter off to spend time with her children. She then took a full year off, which was ‘great for the kids. They loved it’ (Interview with Shelly, 2016). When the opportunity arose, Shelly accepted a position a few hours’ drive from home to be closer to her kids. While workers from NL can be drawn to work away in places such as Alberta for ‘big money’, this draw thus often operates in tension with the desire or need to work closer to home. These tensions are gendered. Dan’s absence from home was tolerated or accepted to the extent that an option that would allow him to be at home more often wasn’t pursued. Shelly managed to work in Alberta thanks to wages that allowed her to pay for live-in childcare and abundant job options that left her feeling secure enough to take regular breaks from work and ultimately chose to work within driving distance of home.

Even work within the province, however, can still entail long commutes with much driving on roads that offer their own kind of precarity with moose and ice, in the winter. While increasing numbers of women have entered the trades in recent years, as seen with Shelley, particular rotations also present challenges in terms of length of time away from family and commuting, highlighting the multiple responsibilities workers and family members have to negotiate related to work, travel and household conditions, when they have
a choice. Men like Ben, Alfred and Jack miss their families when they are working away and are irregular participants in the household reproduction that continues whether or not they are physically present. In spite of known challenges, the vast majority of industrial construction work requires extensive mobility, if not for one project, then for the next. The current decrease in employment options accentuates these tensions and gendered divisions as workers increasingly need to leave for longer or indeterminate periods of time.

**Theme III: Following work… it's normal**

Participants discussed choosing their careers knowing that they would work in different places, and would not always have much choice in the matter: ‘It is what it is whether it’s here in Newfoundland or out in Alberta, or Ontario or anywhere. If you want to be in the trades, you just have to accept having to travel’ (Interview with Ben, 2016). The ways this reality is evoked in the data reveal contradictions and complexity. Configurations of mobility and temporality, marked by distance, travel, scheduling, hours worked and remuneration, are subject to changes shaped by various factors, including tendering and capital investments – sometimes by the state, collective agreements, policy and labour standards, all of which have implications for workers. These factors, which can be understood to contribute to the creation of a gendered ‘mobility regime’ (Barber, 2018; Dorow and Mandizadza, 2018), are mediated by broader transformations including technological developments, competition and labour market developments which include indications of a trend towards less site-based work (Veen, Teicher and Holland, 2017). The understanding of long hours and travel as a feature of construction work is so powerful that jobs that do not have these requirements are not considered by some participants. This perspective is rooted in historical conditions that required and thus normalized mobility for work like fishing and railway construction, but it is transforming alongside developments in the industry.
Residential construction offers the most sustained localized form of construction employment, although it remains precarious with a winter contraction, lower wages, and shorter project lengths. Alfred, Ben and Jack, interviewed together, all balked at the idea of working in residential construction, in particular, in St. John’s, which is within daily commuting distance for all three of them (Alfred, Ben and Jack 2016, see also Barber 2018, 24):

    Ben: If there was nothing else to do I’d work in St. John’s. If there was nothing else in the world to do. It’s true.
    Alfred: I will not go to work in St. John’s.
    Jack: Not residential. No.

For these workers, the specific jobs they have worked that require mobility – positions in construction tied to resource development – are understood to have higher status. The challenges of mobility and long hours are a badge of honour to the extent that work in residential construction (work that they are qualified to do) is viewed as a demotion. These and other workers largely take it as normal and expected that industrial construction workers have to continually move inter-provincially to ‘chase the big jobs.’

A similar expectation and normalization of mobility was seen among women with no care responsibilities. Ellie, a woman journeyperson electrician explains, ‘I don’t have children to feed. It’s only me. I’m not hungry. So I’m just like, whatever, work when there’s work around. Now, like I said, I’ll probably go out to [a big project in the province] for a couple of months, make some mad cash’ (Interview with Ellie, 2018). She started working in commercial construction in the St. John’s area where she lives, then switched to FIFO on a 21-7 rotation to Alberta. At the time of the interview, she was working sporadically on major projects roughly a one-hour drive from her home. Ellie’s partner is semi-retired and they travel to Europe for several months at a time on holiday. Similarly, Jen is twenty-five with no
children and while she has worked primarily in the St. John’s area, she explains that if a good opportunity arose ‘I’m not held back by anything, so I’m definitely willing to go if the position came up.’ The experience of ‘chasing work’ of these women is markedly different than the experience of both women workers with children and the women partners of men construction workers. The former are more likely than their men counterparts to take breaks between jobs to spend time at home. Moreover, in their shared adherence to values and practices of ‘chasing work’ for ‘big money,’ their experiences and personal mobility patterns similarly normalize the organization of construction work based on projects, rotations, and travel. Such practices afford these women financial and geographic freedom and possibility, yet their participation and mobility in relation construction work is shaped by a limited field of possibilities (Foucault 1982). As such, including more women in construction will not necessarily or inherently change the (gendered) structural and organizational forms of construction work.

Participants also connected current mobility practices with the history of mobile work in NL. Tom, a municipal employee, presented this narrative about workers from the Burin Peninsula travelling on rotation to Alberta: “So as the Sea Rose left the harbour here [in 2005], people were sort of getting on planes and going west” (Interview with Tom, 2016). Another key informant from the Burin Peninsula, a town official named Charlie, similarly talked about his father being away in the past, emphasizing a historical continuity of absent men and the figure of the masculine mobile breadwinner:

When I was growing up, my father would be gone nine, 10 months of the year […] And probably only home for the winter months, Christmas, January, February, that kind of thing. So it’s not unusual for residents, like it’s the way of life for our community for the men to be gone for long periods of time, right. Then like in the 50s, 60s and 70s, most of our men would’ve worked… in the railway, construction and repair. […] (Interview with Charlie, 2016)

Several other participants with different positions and roles relayed stories of their fathers being away for work. Beyond these personal historical experiences of mobility, these
narratives produce a sense that mobile work is natural for workers – particularly for men. As Leonard, a contractor from St. John’s explained, ‘for many Newfoundlanders it’s been a way of life for a long time… it’s almost like a part of our culture here’ (Interview with Leonard, 2016). Michael similarly suggested above that ‘Newfoundlanders go away to work.’ These statements suggest that mobility is intertwined with place identity. The complexity and variability of mobile work – its gendered differences and impacts, its evolving characteristics including the emergence of FIFO arrangements, the precarity that accompanies it, and the personal and household challenges it entails – become subsumed within its construction as an outcome the exercise of individual agency in this place, but also a decision that is natural.

**Conclusion**

This article has unpacked the ways that workers negotiate the mobility requirement tied to work in the construction industry. The article has treated a context in Canada in which skilled trades work in the heavy industrial sub-sector expanded since the late 1990s, offering work in remote areas of the country requiring extensive mobility. This has also been a time in which new configurations of work and mobility have emerged reflecting evolving forms of workplace organization and human resources management. Specifically, FIFO arrangements, which allow workers the possibility to continue to live far from their place of employment, have become commonplace. This significant development opened the possibility for NL workers to not simply migrate west, as many had done in past generations, but to develop a rhythm of leaving and returning. This form of mobility became a strategy for many individuals and households. It was perhaps not ideal, but it allowed incomes and stability at home that was not possible with the range of options in the past. ‘Settling within mobility’ (Morokvasic, 2004) in this way has become a way to improve quality of life. Mobility, in many cases, is thus a choice that engenders material gains. It is not monolithic but constitutes

a suite of arrangements that workers move into and out of and that, crucially, implicate their families, households and communities.

Many of the jobs and employees profiled in this research are relatively privileged – the representation of racialized and Indigenous groups and immigrants in our sample, a partial reflection of the construction labour force in on the island of Newfoundland, was nil. In Labrador, in contrast, the involvement of Aboriginal communities in resource development, including the terms and decision-making processes that govern access to industrial benefits such as employment, has been an important and oftentimes fraught issue (Mills and Sweeney, 2013). It may be that members of these groups on the island of Newfoundland are more likely to be working in more precarious circumstances for lower pay, for example in the residential construction industry. The union-based hiring hall model that is common in industrial construction involves higher pay and, potentially, exclusivity. Nevertheless, workers in this sector encounter and negotiate mobility requirements that constitute an overlooked form of precarity – even for workers on unionized sites – with uneven effects.

The article responds to recent calls for increased empirical and theoretical attention to the agency of workers, in particular to Coe and Jordhuis-Lier’s (2011) suggestion to ‘re-embed’ worker agency in relation to the geographically-specific social relations and institutions that form the lifeworlds of workers and their families. This important in the context of ongoing neoliberal restructuring requiring of workers greater flexibility in increasingly precarious conditions of employment. Although Coe and Jordhuis-Lier are more interested in agency as resistance rather than the resilience and coping mainly treated here, their point (Coe and Jordhus-Lier, 2011, p. 18) that contemporary forms of worker agency are not entirely free from structural constraints as they were often presented to be in some past studies is relevant to our findings. The potential to earn more than is possible at jobs in their

home communities draws workers into careers in the trades and into working away. The decision to leave a place where options are limited and wages are low can be understood as a form of worker agency – working within existing structures and social relations to improve one’s situation materially (Berntsen, 2016). While ‘big money’ is an attraction, interviewees emphasized the extent to which working away was simply ‘work,’ and that it was pursued to support loved ones at home. Spouses, children and other family members likewise develop coping strategies that support the worker who goes away. This builds on Berntsen’s argument that not actively resisting difficult or unfair work arrangements but instead moving to a new job is a form of resilience that may help mobile workers but doesn’t change the system. We have shown that this dynamic form of resilience extends to the household sphere of reproduction and is enabled in part by the gendered construction workplace culture. Thus, the agency enacted by construction workers on an individual level in negotiating mobility in relation to financial gain and home and family often supports structures relating to gender and organization of project work, reinforced by the normalization and glorification of mobility as a form of masculine labour.

Jobs closer to home were pursued by some workers to minimize commute times but others prioritized other aspects of the job, including pay or terms of employment. Most considered the possibility of working in the residential industry a demotion, although they used their skills for home improvement and hobby projects while at home. The unfavourable view of residential work reflects construction-industry hierarchies (these jobs have lower pay and lower status and, particularly in larger cities, are filled by members of marginalized groups including undocumented migrants), as well as the specific form of ‘mobility power’ (Alberti, 2014) exercised by workers entering long-distance commuting. The mobility requirement and long hours of the workers interviewed in the present study are accepted as a trade off in relation for a temporary work arrangement that allows workers to spend off-time

at home. Here, as in Morokvasic’s (2004) study on migrants from post-communist eastern Europe, mobility isn’t necessarily for survival, but may be a way to meet middle class status requirements in a way that most local jobs – including in residential construction – could not.

In most cases mobility appears to be a tactic around which some allowances for contingencies are planned. Accepting the need to travel as part of the work, as well as periods of non-work as part of the work, are constructed as norms that intertwine with other aspects of the work and workplace. Notably the women construction workers we interviewed also adopted these norms in order to meet their career objectives. Only when no work is available for long periods in spite of the willingness to travel does this formula break down.

In attending to an overlooked form of precarity for a relatively elite group of construction workers commuting at a national scale, the article reveals the experiences of a group with a higher degree of protections and privileges than the temporary foreign workers and new immigrant arrivals, women and other racialized groups that constitute the most flexible ‘buffer’ in the industry. When some or many native-born, mainly white, men (and some women) are, in periods of economic downturn, unable to find work anywhere they are willing to travel, the fragility of the industry for its workers is exposed. It is no accident that those who filled labour shortages in Alberta in boom times came from deindustrializing communities in the rural peripheries of Newfoundland and Labrador. Though these workers have earned high hourly wages they were also disposable and, though they may be reluctant to acknowledge it, were vulnerable to a system supported by state and capital that depends on willingness of workers to be flexible.


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