Who are the transnationals? Institutional categories beyond “migrants”

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Abstract
This article analyses the institutional categorization of people who lead transnational lives but are clients of a national welfare system. Based on institutional ethnography, the article explores the standpoint of bureaucrats who work in the Norwegian welfare system and deal with clients receiving Norwegian welfare benefits abroad. The analysis reveals an inclusive albeit ambiguous attitude towards these clients, whose cross-border living is seen as a new norm, carried out by all segments of the population. When describing people who lead transnational lives, the bureaucrats move beyond migrant labels, citing a broad array of formal and informal categories and stereotypes. The blurring conceptualization of who is considered transnational signals institutional incertitudes about how to adapt to increasing cross-border mobility. The study’s findings add substance to the plea for a “de-migrantization” of migration research.

Keywords: categories, stereotypes, transnationalism, migration studies, institutional analysis, bureaucrats

Introduction
People can be transnational in various ways. They can engage in cross-border practices, stay attached to states and societies in multiple countries and/or physically reside in more than one nation-state. Still, identifying as transnational is subjective, and despite its growing attention within migration studies, rarely do we ask who the transnationals are or who they are perceived to be. In this article, I address the latter question by unveiling how Norwegian bureaucrats describe and categorize transnationals. Through an institutional analysis I contribute to the current discourse on categories in migration studies. Doing so, I reveal ongoing changes in the relationship between the state apparatus and the increasingly mobile population. Based on my analysis, I echo pleas for the “de-migrantization” of migration studies (Dahinden 2016). In her 2016 article in this journal, Dahinden questions the use of migration-related categories and automatic inclusions of migration and ethnicity as categories of difference. I build on this and further argue that oversimplified categories impede our understanding of transnationalism.

Everyone residing or working in Norway becomes a member of the National Insurance Scheme. This entitles them to Norwegian social security benefits and state-provided welfare services. The welfare system – known as the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration, or NAV – provides a robust case to explore institutional categorization of transnationals since clients come from all segments of the population, including Norwegian citizens and foreigners. The majority of social security recipients are born, live and receive support within state borders. But a minority who in some way or another lead their lives abroad is growing in both absolute and relative numbers. Once created to support territorially bounded citizens, the Norwegian welfare system nowadays supports an increasingly mobile population.

This study draws on interviews with employees in various administrative units within the international branch of NAV, across geographic locations and possessing different diverse areas of expertise. They work along the system’s vertical stretch, thus constituting street-level
workers, policymakers and directorate staff. When divergences within the group, such as individual traits or areas of expertise, are analytically relevant, I highlight them. But generally, I use “bureaucrats” as shorthand for individuals working with transnational clients. The group I refer to as “transnationals” comprises clients who receive Norwegian welfare support while being mobile or leading lives across borders. This article does not define who transnationals are, but rather seeks to challenge existing perceptions about who they are. Borrowing Basch, Glick Schiller and Szanton Blanc (1994)’s conceptualization, I use the category of transnationals for people who are mobile or lead lives across national borders while being attached to more than one nation-state. While the extent of their transnational ties varies, what is consistent is a sense of simultaneity across borders. The transnationals I refer to are mobile between, or lead lives in, two or more countries while remaining attached to Norway, at a minimum through their claiming of Norwegian social security.

I held two major assumptions when inquiring about the transnational segment of the system’s clients. First, I expected the bureaucrats to struggle with understanding to whom I was referring, naïvely assuming that transnationalism was too abstract a concept to make sense in their everyday bureaucratic work. Second, I expected the bureaucrats to point out different immigrant groups. Both assumptions proved wrong. The bureaucrats showed a comprehensive, inclusive understanding of who the transnationals were, and most deemed their clients’ nationality and migration background irrelevant.

Categories of “migrants” in print and practice

Lines of division and categorization processes have become recurring strains of self-criticism among migration researchers (see e.g. Bakewell 2008; Klekowski von Koppenfels 2014; Levitt 2012; Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002). There are longstanding discourses on how migrants are perceived as an analytical, political or legal construct. Referring to binaries such as us/them, wanted/unwanted and legal/illega, these cornerstone discussions accentuate the importance of wariness when dealing with categories, for instance to avoid homogenized or crude understandings of migrants (see e.g. Andersson 2013). Indeed, it is questionable whether existing “migrant” categories capture the complexity of any given migration. We must continue to examine how migrant labels are used, along which boundaries they are constructed and which power relations they reflect. This pertains both for categories within the migratory population (see e.g. Cranston 2017; Leonard 2010), and for the overall category of “migrants” when viewed as an “other” to the ideas of sedentary and/or “good” citizens (Anderson 2013; Bakewell 2008).

Dahinden’s (2016) plea for the “de-migrantization” of migration studies has been insufficiently heeded. An irony of migration research is that institutionalization of the field has included institutionalization of the nation-state’s approach to migrants as an “othered” subject category. As Dahinden (2016, 2208) argues, scholars risk reinforcing a notion that “migration-related difference is naturally given” even though they aim “to be critical of this paradigm”. She encourages migration research to escape its migration container through “re-orienting the focus of investigation away from ‘migrant populations’ towards ‘overall populations’” (Dahinden 2016, 2208). Similarly, Hui (2016, 76) flags “migrant exceptionalism”, maintaining that scholars have too narrowly addressed the category of migrants and should reflect on the “normalization [of migrants] as an exceptional group”. Also worth questioning is the extent to which “migrants” are an appropriate focus because, as Hui (2016, 75) puts it, “before and after migration events, migrants are people”. A “cookie cutter approach” overgeneralizes the
realities of different groups, including those of migrants (Gupte and Mehta 2007). One reason for the persistence of oversimplified categories may be, as Erdal and Oeppen (2017) observe, that migration scholars apply readymade labels from pre-set discourses, rather than evaluating whether existing discourses adequately describe what they empirically observe and the migrants themselves experience.

Better considered categorization goes hand in hand with avoiding a conflation of research with policy or of analysis with practice (Brubaker 2013). While concepts might drift from policy and public spheres to academia, and vice versa (Van Hear 2012), researchers using dominant categories as a basis for analysis risk limiting their understanding of migration. Anderson argues that “modern states portray themselves […] as a community of value”, in which the “non-citizen” is constructed as an outsider, for instance through value laden and negative terms (Anderson 2013, 3–4). As such, state structures not only regulate mobility, but also produce exclusionary understandings of migrants. Calling to mind criticism of methodological nationalism, this observation underscores the need to critically assess how scholars transfer and reinforce the nation-state’s variables and logic (Brubaker 2013; Dahinden 2016; Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002).

Keeping practical and analytical categories separate, however, rests on a premise that state-derived categories are more skewed than research-based ones. Migration scholars commonly blame politicians, policymakers, bureaucrats, practitioners, apparatuses and infrastructure as they criticize institutional categorization as a top-down approach to “fix dynamic social processes into rigid structures” (Collyer and De Haas 2012). Addressing how research plays into migration as a “normalized difference” in the state, Dahinden (2016) too hypotheses that mobility figures as “an anomaly in the ‘national container’”. Semantic and discursive constructions of migration, including processes of categorization, carry a normative weight since the labelling of migrants can impact how states encounter and treat them (Erdal and Oeppen 2017; Ottonelli and Torresi 2013). While states need categories of practice, labelling might normativize what is, or should be, contested.

Literature on street-level bureaucracy shows that bureaucrats often “process” people into clients and assign them categories (Lipsky 2010). This is a work tool. In demanding labour environments, bureaucrats may use categorization as a coping mechanism, which can prove helpful if categories contain institutional knowledge that enables common, accurate interpretations for complex cases or clients (Christensen et al. 2009; Lipsky 2010). Still, subjectivities, categories and inequalities are created not only by unknowing individuals, but by institutional practices and experiences (Billo and Mountz 2016; Fassin and Kobelinsky 2012; Smith 2005). Analyses of bureaucrats’ experiences with migrants reveal that categorizations are often formed according to migration background or ethnicity (see e.g. Elrick and Schwartzman 2015; Friberg and Elgvin 2014). National systems construct classifications of migrants often in connection to complex systems of differentiation, as seen in scholarship on civic stratification and the “wanted/unwanted” migration discourse (see e.g. Anderson 2013; Morris 2003).

Literature on welfare recipient stereotypes describes differentiations made according to ethnic prejudices and assumptions regarding work ethic and laziness (Baumberg et al. 2012; Golding and Middleton 1982; Hedegaard 2014). It should not, however, be surprising that labelling corresponds with existing lines of division, such as clients’ types of entitlements. For bureaucrats working with specific groups, categorization along migration background or benefit type may seem common sense (Lipsky 2010). Analyses of institutional categorization
often focus on how particular social groups are homogenized. While negative stereotypes prevail, counter-stereotypes also appear, presenting some groups as more deserving or privileged than others (Dencker-Larsen and Lundberg 2016; Hedegaard 2014; Leonard 2010). Stereotyping, a practice of “othering”, can feed into institutional boundaries between the “wanted” and “unwanted” populations (Geddes 2004; Gullestad 2002). Indeed, in management and organizational life, constructed and performed categories can lead to processes of inclusion or exclusion (Leonard 2010). In states’ service provision, institutional categories, stereotypes and boundary-making directly impact assessment of individuals’ rights and extent of service provision (Hedegaard 2014; Lipsky 2010; Liodden 2015).

Research on transnationals

At its outset, the transnational framework was marked by suspicion of how migrants were defined within the nation-state framing (Bailey 2001). The mobility framework was marked by suspicion of how mobile people were defined, highlighting how “migrants” are just one of several categories relevant for studying mobilities (Adey et al. 2014). Alongside mobility-related diversification, scholars are forwarding broader categories, practices and dynamics, such as through the lenses of transnationalism and superdiversity. Yet, the transnational and mobility turns have been compressed within the migrant exceptionalism focus in migration scholarship (Hui 2016). In its early childhood, transnationalism expanded academic perspectives on migrants’ activities (Amelina and Faist 2012). But even though the transnational lens has been employed as an alternative to nation-state framing, the crux of research on transnationalism ties transnational practices to specific migrant categories. A similar flattening has occurred with “superdiversity”; meant originally to express a plentitude of variables in interplay (Vertovec 2007), superdiversity tends now “simply to mean the increasing presence of ‘more ethnic groups’” (Meissner and Vertovec 2015, 543).

The growing research on transnational practices includes transnational mobility and living (Carling and Erdal 2014; Levitt and Nyberg-Sorensen 2004). In Urry’s (2007) categorization, transnational mobility falls within the “physical mobility of a person” in terms of commuting and exile. From a wider social-scientific stance, the act of mobility is not linked to a specific category of people, such as migrants. It is notable, therefore, that in migration and transnationalism studies, transnational mobility and living practices are largely explored as migrant, often immigrant, activities. While transnational activities among migrants have been shown to be less frequent than assumed (Boccagni 2012) and “not all immigrants were transnationals” (Portes, Guarnizo and Landolt 2017), transnational living as a migrant-related practice remains taken for granted.

Transnational practices among other groups of mobile people – in “middling forms of transnationalism” (Conradson and Latham 2005) – are detailed in studies on migratory academics, students, expats and retirees (see e.g. Bilecen and Van Mol 2017; Cranston 2017; Gustafson 2008; Klekowski von Koppenfels 2014). Often, but not always, such practices are framed as a different transnationalism than that of “ordinary” migrants (Castles 2010; Faist 2013; Glick Schiller and Salazar 2013). “Transnationals” share lexical challenges with “lifestyle migrants” and “expats”. The latter terms are “not applied to all people who migrate temporarily”, only those who are “qualitatively different than others” (Benson and O’Reilly 2009; Cranston 2017, 1–2). Where “expat” is infused with a “Western and national baggage” (Fechter and Walsh 2010, 1190), “transnational” is tied to specific types of migrants, e.g.
immigrants from specific origin countries or privileged migrants such as migratory retirees or, indeed, expats.

With a few exceptions within transnational migration studies, such as Carling’s (2008) “non-migrants”, Faist’s (2013) “mobiles” and Dahinden’s (2009) “locally established Swiss”, transnational living, practices and mobility are thus largely tied to the overall category of migrants (Hui 2016). This is exemplified in the continued use of the term “transmigrants” (emphasis mine) to describe highly mobile individuals (Schrooten, Geldof and Withaeckx 2016) and the recently introduced category of “transnationally mobile migrants” (Isaakyan and Triandafyllidou 2017). In sum, despite studies on other sorts of mobile individuals, theoretical explanations and academic definitions of transnationalism remain tied to a specific scholarly understanding of the “migrant”. As Leonard (2010) highlights in terms of the expatriate experience, researchers need to acknowledge the diversity and fluidity of the transnational experience. The power relations at play in our discourse on transnational and mobile people, differentiating between the privileged, desirable, good, or wanted “migrants” and their antipodes, must be recognized (Cranston 2017).

Context and methods

The Norwegian social security system was created with the aim of protecting the entire population from unemployment, sickness, old age and disability. It is based on the principles of universalism and egalitarianism, and a distinct feature of the system is that all welfare benefits and services are state-provided, largely financed by general taxation (Pedersen and Kuhnle 2017). To be entitled to Norwegian social security, individuals must be members of the insurance scheme. Membership is generally contingent on residency and employment. In principle, everyone residing in Norway (with an intended twelve-month or longer stay) or working in Norway (even if residing abroad) becomes NIS members. This implies that people can be transnationally mobile while receiving Norwegian social security and thus that nationality and migration background, in theory, are irrelevant for assessing benefits eligibility.

The Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration units I visited during fieldwork deal with transnational clients receiving family and work-related benefits, such as child support, unemployment, disability and retirement pension. This “international branch” of NAV was established to assist sailors on foreign voyages during World War II, though its responsibilities have expanded along with internationalization and globalization. Over the last decades, the number of social security clients moving back and forth across Norwegian borders has skyrocketed. While statistics on transnational benefit receivers are scarce, NAV’s official figures paint a clear picture of the increase. The earliest data available shows that the number of people receiving pensions abroad more than doubled from 1996 till 2008 (Brochmann 2012). From 2008 onwards the total group of benefit receivers abroad has grown steadily, mounting at 77,500 individuals in 2017. Of these 60 per cent are Norwegians, the majority is aged 60 years and older, and two-thirds live in Sweden, Denmark, Poland, USA, Spain or the United Kingdom (NAV 2017). During interviews, the NAV bureaucrats asserted that the transnational group is increasing both in numbers and diversity, with mixed characteristics, lifestyles and mobility patterns.

My principal data collection took place at the national office for international social security in Oslo. Bureaucrats working there are responsible for benefit recipients travelling or residing abroad. The other units I visited 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, most of these units were in cities in Eastern Norway. In total, I interviewed thirty-nine bureaucrats across local, regional and national levels. I also collected and analysed texts mentioned by the bureaucrats as relevant in their everyday work with transnational clients. The most authoritative, or “higher order” (Smith 2006, 79), of these texts were regulations, institutional strategy plans and the welfare administration website. Others included internal newsletters and administrative unit guidelines. While participant observation was part of the fieldwork and stirred my interest in the topic of categorization, this article only draws on institutional texts and transcriptions of my interviews; I thus stick to the bureaucrats’ own words in their use of categories as part of their institutional discourse. My method follows institutional ethnography developed by Smith (2005). This approach focuses on the experiences of individuals within institutions and the social relations in which they are embedded. Building on feminist epistemology – notably, that all knowledge production is value-laden and a result of historical processes (Lund 2015) – I sought to understand the bureaucrats’ everyday world, and their subjective and institutional takes on transnationals.

An inclusive institutional approach

When a public organization develops norms, culture and values it becomes “institutionalized” (Christensen et al. 2009; Selznick 1957). Institutionalized elements and identities shape and are shaped by the organization’s members. In turn, the institutionalized organization influences how they act. In NAV’s international branch, a range of norms, cultural factors and to some extent values seemed institutionalized. While opinions and perspectives differed from bureaucrat to bureaucrat, the commonalities in their overall attitude towards transnational clients were striking.

In the majority of the interviews, I asked directly: “Could you tell me a bit about the cross-border clients you work with?” Several bureaucrats seemed uncertain how to respond. Some gave me the sense of carefully choosing their words, perhaps to ensure they were inoffensive and politically correct. Others started listing a full range of characteristics. A commonality, however, was their inclusiveness. The vast majority started or ended descriptions with broad-stroked statements, such as: “Well, yes, who are they…? I’d say it’s those who are mobile!”; “It’s actually everyone. Everyone who does something abroad.”; “All sorts of people, anybody.” Asked if there was a difference between transnationals receiving benefits only from Norway and those also receiving benefits from abroad, Adrian, who worked with unemployment benefits, matter-of-factly replied: “Well, it’s the same sort of people: people that need and receive the benefit.” When I probed for their nationality, he skirted the issue, saying, “Where they come from, citizenship and things like that… Well, I might have some statistics on that somewhere.” Most interviewees seemed uninterested, unaware or reluctant to go into details when I asked about clients’ nationality or migration background. Some appeared sceptical or annoyed. As one bureaucrat stated, “Citizenship is irrelevant here. It doesn’t matter. It depends instead on whether you live here or there.”

In the Norwegian public discourse, attention often falls on transnational social security recipients’ nationality and migration status. Annual official cross-border welfare statistics and their subsequent media coverage emphasize the proportion of “foreign” benefit recipients. In line with critical literature on “wanted” and “unwanted” populations (e.g. Anderson 2013), I had consequently assumed that bureaucrats working in this field “othered” transnational clients.
by highlighting their membership in migrant or ethnic minority groups. The bureaucrats I interviewed, however, showed an inclusive attitude towards who the transnationals were; their reluctance to answer questions about nationality therefore surprised me. In addition to underscoring the diversity among transnationals, the bureaucrats often stated that transnational living had become a new norm. Those who most often dealt with the transnationals were inclined to emphasize prevalence, giving statements such as, “It’s just more and more. Not just more cases, but more queries.” Alongside relaying clients’ experiences, several bureaucrats shared personal anecdotes to illustrate the normalization of transnational living. In a group interview, two veteran bureaucrats expressed expectations for its continued rise, and one reflected on her own experiences.

Martha: At some point in the future – and it may not be so far away – there will be as many cases with an international dimension as with a national one. I mean, both my children have studied abroad, and my husband has worked abroad on several different occasions. This is just a part of the world.

Irene: Yes. It’s becoming natural.

Martha: Almost all families have it a bit like that.

Besides being explicitly stated by the bureaucrats, their attitude towards transnational living as a new norm was also conveyed in their figures of speech. Frustrated by their branch’s limited resources, several bureaucrats used an institutional metaphor, comparing the automatization of national casework to an “80 per cent-capacity motorway”, with the remaining international casework being relegated to “a small sidewalk”, “a minor road” or “a forest trail”. A unit director explained how increasing transnational casework would strain existing resources.

The mobile group of people just gets bigger and bigger… While the majority of the national cases are automatically assessed, none of the international can pass through that system. All needs to be assessed manually. As long as you’ve spent some time abroad, you’re a manual case. And more and more people fall within that category.

While normalizing the growing number of transnational clients, the bureaucrats were clearly frustrated by the inadequate infrastructure to ensure the quality of casework. They expressed support of transnational living and social security, but repeatedly stated that the regulative framework did not always fit and organizational responses were “lagging behind”.

Labels, categories and stereotypes

The bureaucrats showed an inclusive attitude towards, and approach to, the transnationals as an entity. But paradoxically, they applied an abundance of labels to different segments within the group. A variety of identity-markers functioned as lines of division. Nationality and migration background were mentioned, but as only two characteristics on a long list of others, such as employment type, age, gender, residence length and location, family status, class and socioeconomic background. This profusion of what I came to recognize as formal categories,
informal categories and stereotypes illustrates how “classifications tend to be much fuzzier than what we might think at first” (Bowker and Star 1999, 62).

The bureaucrats used numerous labels for transnationals. Some were only mentioned a few times, such as “musician cases”.’ Others were cited in such manner and to such extent that they represented institutional categories, divisions of people regarded as sharing particular characteristics. Some frequent categories were factual descriptions, such as “third-country citizens” and “sickness-benefit recipients”, while others were more idiosyncratic, such as “people working on Color Line” (a Norwegian international shipping and cruise company). The quantity of categories caught my attention, and I sensed that their extensive use signalled underlying institutional struggles with how to relate to and even think about the transnationals.

Early in the fieldwork, it struck me that the bureaucrats had a mix-and-match approach to applying formal versus informal categories. Officially recognized as part of the regulative framework, formal categories included well-known labels, such as “EEA [European Economic Area] citizen”, “client”, and “cross-border worker”. The array of informal categories included factual descriptions, such as “sailors” and “airline employees”, plus more unconventional ones, such as “people who live in a country with slow mail delivery”. The informal were not recognized as legal categories, though some had officially recognized uses, being cited as formal categories. The bureaucrats often switched between formal and informal labelling within a single sentence.

Before scrutinizing when and why different categories were used, it is relevant to identify another type of category that surfaced during my fieldwork: stereotypes. Understood as widely held fixed and oversimplified ideas about groups, stereotypes are often used to highlight negative characteristics (Hedegaard 2014). “Naïve Norwegians abroad” was one of the most cited stereotypes, often in reference to people facing complex social security regulations. Negative experiences or assumptions they had were also expressed through categorizations indicating poor socioeconomic backgrounds, such as “those who lack resources [to do what is required]”. Positive stereotypes were also common. One caseworker dealing with EEA unemployment benefits repeatedly referenced “sacrificing fathers” among labour migrants in Norway. Categorization literature prepared me for the bureaucrats’ use of categories and stereotypes, but I did not expect to hear an array of positive ones because the general finding has been that negative images prevail when the subject includes migrants, minority groups or welfare recipients (see e.g. Dencker-Larsen and Lundberg 2016; Geddes 2004; Gullestad 2002). An exception in the literature is the “privileged” migrant categories, such as “expats” and “lifestyle migrants” (see e.g. Benson and O’Reilly 2009; Cranston 2017; Fechter and Walsh 2010). While present in the bureaucrats’ discourse, such labels were not always manifested as “positive”, as was often the case when e.g. “migratory retirees” were stereotyped.

The category of “non-genuine cross-border worker” also piqued my interest during the interviews. It was often mentioned by the bureaucrats in an illustration of regulative complexity. As I tried to grasp whom they considered “non-genuine”, I realized this was a formal category, defined by the NAV (2013) website as follows:

To be considered a “genuine cross-border worker” you must live in one EEA country, work in another, AND return home daily or at least once a week. If you... return home less often than once a week, you are a so-called “non-genuine cross-border worker”.

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Several bureaucrats chuckled when I asked about “non-genuine”, explaining it as a Norwegian addition to EU regulations. A unit leader in unemployment benefits said, “As long as you keep your home address in your home country while working in Norway, you’re a cross-border worker… Which type of benefit you get from Norway when you go home depends on that definition”. After a lengthy explanation of how to differentiate between genuine, non-genuine and other legal distinctions, he rationalized the categorization saying, “We need to pigeonhole these people. To know where they belong, and what they are entitled to.” Some of the bureaucrats were reluctant to respond to my questions concerning who their transnational clients were, and stated the impossibility to generalize. This normative stance that simplifications and naming are unideal deviates from the bureaucrats’ actual use of informal categories. Unconventional labelling also occurred among those expressing disaffection with generalizations.

The bureaucrats’ tendency to categorize was manifested in the institutional texts. From internal newsletters and unit guidelines, to institutional strategy documents and official website information, categories appeared to be in flux. Informal descriptions were rife in unofficial internal documents, but also occurred in the authoritative texts. Several informal categories had a regulative dimension, appearing along lines of division, such as employment type and place, residence length and location and benefit type. Some informal categories thereby had semi-legal implications, but were not synonymous to the formal categories used in the regulations.

While a full list would prove inexhaustible, some informal categories from the texts included “people residing in Norway with a partner residing abroad”, “locally hired embassy personnel”, “researchers staying abroad”, “foreign patients at Oslo University Hospital”, “frontier workers who are partially unemployed”, “people living in Norway with social security rights abroad”, “fishermen” and “missionaries and people who do voluntary work”.

The bureaucrats’ use of formal categories, such as “cross-border workers”, “cross-border commuters” and “EEA citizens” likely derived from the regulative texts. The relation between informal categories in texts and spoken language was less clear-cut. For example, “fishermen” was often used in textual and spoken elaborations of how specific regulations applied to transnationals. While no legal distinctions were associated with fishermen, per se, regulative differences existed concerning workers on vessels and ships depending on which country they were registered in, in which territories they sailed and in which country they lived. “Fishermen”, similar to “sailors” and “flight crew”, offered a catchall term encapsulating legal particularities within an internally variegated group. As part of an institutional circuit, “fishermen” as a category in authoritative texts may have derived from spoken accounts, answering a need to make things easier in the bureaucratic everyday (see e.g. Christensen et al. 2009; Lipsky 2010).

Deductively, I saw parallels between the unconventional categories in texts and bureaucrats’ spoken language. Many categories were so explicit it seemed they were custom-made for specific cases. Concerning transnational fishermen, a case in point was the wordy “EEA citizens working on Norwegian fishing vessels while living abroad”. The intricacy of transnational casework was underscored by everyone I spoke with in NAV. This use of detailed descriptive informal categories with some or no legal anchoring pointed to insufficiently streamlined structures. Streamlining is challenging when dealing with a diverse group of transnational clients and a tangled web of regulations. Nevertheless, the unconventional combinations that created new informal labels highlighted a need for categories that rightly
captured the complexity of transnational cases. As such, many of the informal categories that first seemed inappropriate or awkward later proved constructive and necessary.

In formal categories, nationality designated legal differentiations between “EEA citizens” versus “third-country citizens” and “agreement country citizens” versus “non-agreement country citizens”. In informal categories, nationalities or regional origins mostly designated formal citizenship categories, such as “fishing EEA citizens”, but several included them even when no legal entitlements were at stake, such as “Norwegians abroad”, “Eastern European workers” and “Poles’. Most transnational social security clients in Norway are Norwegian, and Eastern Europeans, specifically Poles, represent one of the country’s largest immigrant groups. It was therefore unsurprising that Norwegians and Eastern Europeans were so categorized. Sweeping statements were sometimes also made regarding “people from the Middle East and Somalia”, “refugees and people from the Middle East”, “labour immigrants”, “Pakistanis” and “Brits”. In none of these did citing nationality or migration background as markers of difference serve a legal purpose. Regardless, these characteristics were far less emphasized than previous research on categorization has found. While a few bureaucrats referred extensively to them, the majority refrained from grouping transnationals according to such criteria except when it came to the most widespread stereotype of all: “naive Norwegians abroad”.

On the whole, bureaucrats across different units did not cite the same stereotypes as each other, though those who had long worked with the same benefits did. Retirement pension experts, for instance, were likelier to stereotype “retirees moving to sunny areas”. As with the informal categories, stereotypes often denoted several characteristics simultaneously, such as age, nationality, benefit type and residence length and location. While several identity-markers could be indexed by one category, some oversimplified or overgeneralized, for example “single men in Thailand” and “couples in Spain”, which dichotomously mocked the wild behaviour of old bachelors and sympathized with the righteousness of sensible sun-seekers. This polarised differentiation of people within a formally similar group signalled how power relations were expressed through the bureaucrats’ descriptions (Cranston 2017). While the retiree couples were “good” transnationals, the bachelors were depicted as their obverse.

When talking about the transnationals, the bureaucrats often turned to essentializing anecdotes to communicate feelings, opinions or dilemmas about a specific group. They applied institutional and personal values when evaluating clients’ rightfulness to be transnationally mobile while receiving national benefits. Moral judgements were conveyed concerning “backpacking disability pensioners” and the aforementioned “sacrificing fathers”. Working abroad to support their family, separated from their loved ones, was viewed by some as a good deed. One bureaucrat said she purposely emphasized these fathers’ deservingness in order to counter negative public opinions about Poles and other foreign workers.

Accommodating clients who were unaware of relevant legislation was a recurring challenge. Bureaucrats emphasized that the transnationals’ awareness levels varied (Talleraas 2019), though some stereotypes suggested total lack of knowledge or interest. “Students” and “naive Norwegians abroad” often referred to the less aware. A bureaucrat named Maria noted how some clients just assumed entitlement.

*Many people have been scarred by going abroad without considering that NAV isn’t readily available to support them if anything should happen… Regarding disability pensions, they’re like “Oh my God! But I’m Norwegian. I lived in Norway the whole time until I moved. And I’ve worked in Norway…”*
Such assumptions led to clients not informing bureaucrats about their cross-border plans nor asking questions regarding rights and obligations. They believed their nationality alone yielded rights. Despite the bureaucrats’ claim that nationality was insignificant, this scenario reveals that it did play a role, albeit in an unexpected way. Rather than highlighting all transnationals’ nationalities in their stereotypes, they largely did so for one group: Norwegians. They drew broad, often negative generalizations about them, explicitly (“naïve Norwegians abroad”) or inexplicitly (“backpacking [Norwegian] disability pensioners”). This seemed justifiable across the institution as a way to ironize “Norwegianness”. This mirrors the common stereotyping of “Brits abroad” as found in the discourse on lifestyle migration and the idea of the “bad British” (Benson 2010; Benson and O’Reilly 2009; Higgins 2018).

In NAV, this habit contrasted starkly with institutional reluctance to exclude or negatively portray other clients from ethnic, foreign or migrant minority groups. While bureaucratic categorization is an accepted work tool, discriminatory language is not (Lipsky 2010). As state representatives, bureaucrats tread carefully to avoid making gaffes or being accused of offensive language – perhaps particularly so when interviewed by a Norwegian researcher, like myself. Bureaucrats’ fear of being politically incorrect might explain why minority groups were less stereotyped than Norwegians. Another influence could be the value of ensuring equality and universal social rights that welfare state bureaucrats espouse (Pedersen and Kuhnle 2017). These factors may have made it more acceptable for the bureaucrats to stereotype or ironize the majority population.

The fact that some transnational stereotypes were more admissible than others signalled an institutional doubleness at play. The norm of being generally inclusive towards transnationals and not problematizing minority groups seemingly contradicted the bureaucratic habit of categorizing transnationals. This signals a reluctance to, but still a manifestation of, boundary making between the “wanted” and “unwanted” in the national community (Anderson 2013). The use of stereotypes, as with informal categories, revealed the bureaucrats’ uneasiness with categorizing their clients. By drawing multivalent lines of division among clients, the bureaucrats ambiguously negotiated the transnationals’ national membership; this was necessary because institutional infrastructure was lacking.

**Conclusions**

I began this study asking who transnationals are perceived to be. While questioning how the welfare state categorizes clients, I witnessed the dilemmas bureaucrats face. Growth and diversification of transnational living patterns among clients challenge the bureaucrats’ work as welfare providers, and the institutional categorization of transnationals reveals underlying tensions in the encounter between the nation-state and increased transnationalism. My findings on institutional categorization also substantiate the claim that many migration scholars impede their research by sticking to by now old-fashioned perceptions of who transnationals are. Before discussing this, three empirical discoveries from my research merit recapping.

First, quashing my assumptions, the bureaucrats shared an institution-wide attitude that cross-border clients were the new norm. Instinctively, the bureaucrats included all segments of the population in the transnational group. Through statements that transnationals could be “anybody”, they conveyed a strong institutional culture of inclusion. Norwegians and foreigners, migrants and non-migrants alike – everyone could lead a transnational life while receiving Norwegian welfare benefits. Despite such institutional openness, the practical
bureaucratic hassle transnational living brought to their daily work was problematized. The lag in institutional adaption to increased cross-border mobility complicated their tasks, and they were ill-equipped to accommodate the diverse transnational group’s dynamic needs.

Second, labels flourished. Intriguingly, labelling contradicted the bureaucrats’ efforts to avoid overgeneralization and oversimplification. Categories featured in the bureaucrats’ spoken language and in institutional texts. Formal categories had legal implications, while informal categories did not always, though they nevertheless served a purpose. The landscape of transnational cases was far more complex than the national, and multiple configurations of regulations could be at stake; the myriad of informal categories thus reasonably compensated for the existing formal categories, which were too few or too general to capture all the transnational subgroups. The proliferation of categories revealed diversity among the transnational group, though the categorization was applied in an ad hoc manner, signifying incertitude about how to label, or even think about, people leading transnational lives.

Third, as with a creative use of unconventional categories, the bureaucrats signalled ambiguity. Initially, stereotypes seemed to mark difference or oversimplifications, but my analysis ultimately revealed that stereotyping occurred when the bureaucrats possessed strong feelings or opinions. Underpinning these messages were dilemmas the bureaucrats faced as well as moral judgements they passed. While nationality was emphatically deemed irrelevant, most negative stereotypes were expressed about Norwegians, presumably giving other groups a pass. This reflected a double standard: difficulty aligning the institutional norms of being inclusive with the individual bureaucrats’ stance on some transnational behaviour, for instance when they disagreed with the social mores of “single men in Thailand”.

Migration is often perceived as a nation-state deviance. Therefore, to reduce prejudice and discrimination, some scholars warn state actors against viewing migration as the number one category of difference. This resonates with the aim of keeping categories of research and practice separate. Even if state- or policy-infused categories are legitimate bureaucratic tools (Lipsky 2010), scholars should not automatically use them as analytical tools (Brubaker 2013; Dahinden 2016). These arguments are interesting to juxtapose with my findings here: NAV bureaucrats did not look at transnational living as an activity carried out by migrants or specific ethnic groups, but rather by the population as a whole. Moreover, they were just as prone to categorize according to what people do, rather than who they are – a virtue worth pursuing when researching mobile people. It is not my intention to argue that categories of practice serve as better units of difference than research-based ones. I do not think they do. Nevertheless, with the aim of “de-migrantizing” migration research, this study turned up two valuable lessons from the bureaucrats. First, their view of transnational living as an activity carried out by migrants and non-migrants alike supports Dahinden’s (2016, 2217) statement that migration scholars should “re-orient the unit of analysis from the migration population to (parts of) the whole population”. It can be fruitful to move beyond specific migrant categories (Benson and O’Reilly 2009; Cranston 2017) or the overall “migrant” category when researching transnational living practices. As mobility patterns diversify, so do transnational ties of both migrants and non-migrants. Second, state apparatuses do not always take migration and ethnicity as predominant markers of difference. Seeking signs that they do, as I initially did, when they in fact do not limits opportunities to explore institutional standpoints, actions and real impacts of state policy. Instead, it can reinforce the very construction we often hope to dismantle: that migrants are anomalies adrift in the national container.
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References


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i “International branch” is my translation of utlandsområdet (the branch of, literally, “the abroad area”), which encompasses NAV Internasjonalt and other institutions and sub-units working with cross-border social security recipients.

ii The units’ official names are NAV Internasjonalt; Arbeids- og velferdsdirektoratet; NAV Kontroll; NAV Kontaksenter Utland; Grensetjenesten; NAV Pensjon; NAV Forvaltning; and NAV-kontor.

iii All interviews were conducted in Norwegian. Excerpts from them and the institutional texts are my translations.

iv “Cross-border clients/people”, “mobile clients/people”, “those who cross borders” and “clients/people with an international dimension” were different formulations I used in my questions. How I posed the questions varied, but in all the interviews I ensured the bureaucrats and I were speaking about the same group by repeating the project information I had shared with them in advance. When I was sure we agreed on the subject of interest, I also used “these people”. When bureaucrats worked with specific benefits, I could ask “who are those who export unemployment benefits” etc. In most cases, however, I used the term “international dimension”.

v This label was only used once by a bureaucrat when describing specific regulative changes relevant for Eastern Europeans who had worked as travelling musicians in the 1970s and 1980s.

vi None of the bureaucrats used the precise formulation “sacrificing fathers”, but their various labels and explanations conveyed images of self-sacrificing men ensuring the wellbeing of children and wives in their countries of origin.

vii “Backpacking disability pensioners” is my translation of uføretrygdde på jordomseiling (literally “disability pensioners sailing around the globe”).