

**Relational geographies of human trafficking: inequality, manoeuvring and
im/mobility across space and time**

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Abstract

This paper demonstrates why and how a fuller geographical perspective extends contemporary scholarship on human trafficking within and beyond the discipline. We employ a relational approach and draw on in-depth qualitative research with trafficked persons and a range of stakeholders in Slovakia and the United Kingdom (UK), to depict how the processes underpinning human trafficking are non-linear, operate instantaneously at multiple intersecting scales and temporalities, and through diverse mobilities. The analysis problematises the discrete and homogeneous notion of space coupled with a linear conceptualisation of time and, more specifically, the normative portrayals of recruitment, transit, and exploitation as distinct and sequential phases of human trafficking. Instead, the individuated experiences of trafficked persons are examined in relational geographies of *inequality, manoeuvring* and *mobilities*. Such a conceptual shift ensures that efforts to understand and combat human trafficking address its effects *as well as* the wider social relations and structural conditions that facilitate exploitation. We conclude the paper by outlining how a relational-geographic perspective has the potential to foster new forms of dialogue and inquiry within and beyond the discipline.

Key words: Human Trafficking; Exploitation; Inequality; Relational geographies; Mobilities; Eastern Europe

Introduction

Human trafficking is inherently spatial, comprising of cross-cutting processes of exploitation within and across local, regional, national, and international borders. Yet, academic, policy, and media understandings of human trafficking tend to rely upon a discrete and homogeneous conceptualisation of space coupled with a linear conceptualisation of time (Smith 2017). Our aim in this paper is to contribute to critical debates over structural inequalities that underpin human trafficking (Anderson and Ruhs 2010; Andrijasevic 2010; Piper et al. 2015; Lewis et al. 2015) by offering a geographical conceptualisation of human trafficking that explicitly recognises the relational nature of space and time. Using in-depth qualitative research with trafficked persons and a range of stakeholders in Slovakia and the United Kingdom (UK), we examine why viewing processes such as recruitment, transit, and exploitation as distinct and sequential phases of the human trafficking process is reductive. In turn, we reframe human trafficking as a relational composition that spans multiple spaces and temporalities.

The paper is structured as follows. First, we outline relational perspectives on human trafficking within critical inter-disciplinary scholarship and suggest that this could be enriched by engaging explicitly with relational conceptions of space (and time). Second, we introduce the writings of Massey, Bergson and Deleuze and present the theoretical framework for our empirical analysis. This is followed by an outline of the methodological and ethical considerations. The empirical section explores three processes widely accepted as central to human trafficking: recruitment, transportation and exploitation (Gozdzik and Collett 2005; Laczko and Gramegna 2003; Laczko 2005; Tyldum and Brunovskis 2005; Zimmerman et al. 2011). Our analysis makes an original contribution to debates over human trafficking by moving attention away from the normative portrayal of recruitment, transit, and exploitation as distinct and sequential phases of human trafficking, and towards relational

geographies of *inequality*, *manoeuvring* and *im/mobility*. Unfolding from the empirical analysis, our conclusions reaffirm relational geographies of human trafficking as a wider set of social, economic, institutional and material relations that underpin and facilitate exploitation across different temporalities and spatialities.

Adding ‘space’ to the relational critique of human trafficking

Critical human trafficking scholarship has problematised the portrayal of trafficked persons as powerless victims caught in unfortunate circumstances. A key critique is that such assessments interpret instances of trafficking as “‘exceptions’ rather than ‘products’” (Andrijasevic and Mai 2016, 1) of wider inequalities and overlook – or even purposefully downplay – the role of *structural factors* such as economic policies, migration regulations, racial, gender and sexual oppression. This literature calls for a recognition of connections between structural inequalities, policy measures and individual pathways (Piper et al. 2015), as sets of relations producing human trafficking.

Intersectionality, which denotes how categories of social difference such as race, gender and class coalesce and interact with structural conditions to shape life chances and experiences, is one lens through which relational analyses of human trafficking provide insights into the significance of structural inequalities in facilitating exploitation. Much of this work examines exploitation in relation to the implications of migration status and labour rights (Goldring and Landolt 2012; Strauss and McGrath 2017), illustrating that intersectional relations underpinning human trafficking cut across both *institutional* and *personal* aspects of positionality (Richardson et al. 2016). In the geographical literature, the work of Yea provides probably the richest empirical oeuvre of intersectional relations constituting human trafficking processes. Yea’s analyses highlight the significance of multiple, changing and

often ambiguous (Yea 2012) social positions framed by gender (Yea 2015a), racialisation (Yea 2015b), age (Yea, 2013), personal relationships (Yea 2004) and geopolitics (Yea 2016; also Choi 2014).

Along with social difference, the literature on human trafficking has foregrounded *temporal* relations (Bastia and McGrath 2011). Hynes (2010) provides a powerful argument for conceptualising human trafficking as a *process* rather than an *event*, suggesting that such a relationally-temporal approach across the full experience of human trafficking helps uncover its contextual factors and does not reduce human trafficking into isolated incidents. A relationally-temporal perspective can be seen in geographic scholarship, for instance, in analyses of the hyper-precarity of migrants' lives by Lewis et al. (2015), as they suggest that components of insecurity span *both* pre-and post-movement experiences. This links together debt, family obligations, poverty or low education access from the former, and exacerbation of these factors along with new ones, such as legal status, lack of local knowledge and language skills in the latter. Yea (2017) considers relational approaches to time at a different scale by identifying and examining micro-strategies of disciplining and resistance in the workplace through which unfree labour is reproduced and contested. These authors emphasise that attention needs to shift from "snapshot analysis focusing on conditions of extreme exploitation" (Bastia and McGrath 2011, 11), and adopt broadened temporal viewpoints that encompass relations "over time rather than [view processes of exploitation as] static events" (Waite and Lewis 2017, 973).

Research on human trafficking has however given less consideration to the relational qualities of *space*. Prevalent conceptions of human trafficking deploy space as a *fixed*, *absolute* and *discrete* category. This approach is strongly informed by the framing of human trafficking as the series of sequential processes of recruitment, transit and exploitation

(Smith, 2017), which is very influential in both academic (Aronowitz 2009; Gajic-Veljanovski and Stewart 2007; Gozdziaik and Collett 2005; Hernandez and Rudolph 2015; Laczko 2005; Laczko and Gramegna 2003; Lehti and Aromaa 2006; Leman and Janssens 2008; Tyldum and Brunovskis 2005; Zimmerman et al. 2011), and policy (ILO 2009; IOM 2004; UNODC 2011; Transparency International 2011; WHO 2012) debates. While such a multi-staged model arguably offers the lucidity required within much of the legal and policy milieu of anti-trafficking (Zimmerman et al. 2011; Gallagher and Surtees 2012), it isolates the sets of relations that constitute human trafficking within discrete spatio-temporal segments. This in turn frames analyses of human trafficking experience as inquiries into a person's vulnerability to individual acts of recruitment, transportation and exploitation, and obfuscates the significance of factors related to human trafficking through more subtle and distant spatial relations.

There is a body of literature addressing the spatial connotations of human trafficking. These works range from links between anti-trafficking and state-sanctioned activities concerning border management and territorial governance (Andrijasevic 2010; Molland 2010), "control of mobility" (O'Connell Davidson 2016, 58) and the biopolitical "regulation of specific populations" and "other national geopolitical agendas" (FitzGerald 2016, 185); to criminological emphasis on the spatial organisation of trafficking networks (Campana 2016), and post-colonial analyses of spatialities of power in the production of knowledge about human trafficking (Kamler 2013; Laurie et al. 2015a; Yea 2013). Yet, despite such a spatial resonance, there is a lack of an explicit conceptualisation of how *geographies underpin* human trafficking.

At one point this could be attributed to the pronounced dearth of human trafficking studies by geographers (Laurie et al. 2015b; Smith 2017), but disciplinary interest is growing, with

studies on border practices and management (Choi 2014; FitzGerald 2016; Laurie et al. 2015b), children's agency (Beazley 2015; Boyden and Howard 2013; Blazek and Esson 2018), perceptions of human trafficking, anti-trafficking policies and institutional praxis (Mendel and Sharapov 2016; Yea 2013; 2015a; 2015b), trafficking practices and experiences (Choi 2014; Esson 2015b; Laurie et al. 2015a; 2015b; Yea 2016), socio-legal aspects (Strauss 2017) and confluences between human trafficking and precarious labour (Lewis et al. 2015; McGrath 2013; Strauss and McGrath 2017) and sex work (van Blerk 2016). However, arguably, what is missing is a sustained effort to *conceptualise* human trafficking as a *geographical phenomenon* and develop a relationally-spatial perspective.

This paper will demonstrate that adding an *explicitly relational* perspective of space to the critical inter-disciplinary scholarship will help further articulate the agency of trafficked persons without marking this as that of a passive victim responding to the acts of traffickers. We do not propose thinking relationally about spatialities of human trafficking only as an academic exercise. Relational approaches to space, as formulated by Massey (2005) and others, are an explicitly political project concerned with dynamic notions of identity as they are forged in multi-scalar power dynamics between individuals, collectives and institutions (Allen 2004; Massey 2004). As reviewed above, relational approaches to social ontology and temporality of human trafficking are politically significant in tracing out structural inequalities underpinning and facilitating human trafficking, and here we explore the potential of relational approaches to space to achieve the same. The next section engages with work by Massey, Bergson and Deleuze to set out our theoretical framework for the subsequent empirical analysis.

Space, time and human trafficking

Doreen Massey's (2005) *For Space* provides a seminal account of relational geography, one that rejects space as a homogeneous container in which the social world evolves. The book's opening propositions pronounce the relational nature of space in three ways. First, space is "the product of interrelations" (Massey 2005, 8) rather than their host. Crucially, Massey understands relations performatively, as "embedded practices" facilitating the "relational constructedness of things" (2005, 9). Second, Massey highlights space as "the sphere [...] of coexisting heterogeneity" (2005, 8) due to the plurality of such relations, which can range from chemical interactions to organism's memories and desires, from constellations of global economy to everyday commuting. It is therefore the *simultaneous multiplicity* of relations that constitutes space. Finally, with the dynamic character of relations, space has to be seen as "always under construction" (ibid.). Space is made through the practices that have already taken place and it will be modified by those that are only due to materialise. Emphasising the coexistence of diverse relations, Massey calls space the "simultaneity of stories-so-far" (ibid.).

Considering concerns raised above about homogeneous conceptualisations of space underpinning much of the human trafficking scholarship, *For Space* provides a framework for developing a relational analysis of space in the context of human trafficking. Yet, given Massey's intention to reanimate understandings of space, her book is arguably less concerned about relational conceptions of time (as she notes that such views were taken as given in modern social theory). However, in her earlier writings, Massey argues for "the inseparability of time and space, their joint constitution" (Massey 1992, 84) and concludes that "[t]ime and space must be thought together [...] for they are inextricably intermixed" (Massey 1999, 274). To more fully understand geographies of human trafficking as a spatial and temporal process requires us attending to the interlinkage of space and time and developing a relational perspective of both space and time. To add to the latter, we now turn to Henri Bergson and

Gilles Deleuze, a philosophical couplet whose “immobilisation” of space is criticised by Massey (2005, 20-24), but whose ideas of time as relational multiplicity complement rather than contradict Massey’s own project.

Bergson (2004) and Deleuze (1988, 1994) problematised the idea of a linear and homogeneous time that is transcendental to happenings, which provides a parallel to Massey’s critique of non-relational all-containing space as being-outside-things. Linear conceptions present time as a line where each moment can be identified as a singular point, following or followed by other moments. Key in illustrating the relational nature of time is the relation between the past and the present. As Smith’s (2013) account of Deleuzian work explains:

“Although we tend to think that the present ‘is’ and the past ‘is not’ or ‘is no longer’, the opposite is in fact the case. No matter how small it may be, it is the passing instant that ‘is not’ (since whenever we try to grasp it, it has passed on and been replaced by the succeeding instant), whereas the past itself is preserved (it ‘is’ the case that I wrote this review).”

The above quote highlights how the past *is*, while the present only *becomes* and immediately *passes* into the *existing* pasts (Deleuze 1988). All moments emerge but will have passed before we recognise them. In becoming, the present paradoxically “constitute[s] time while passing in the time constituted” (Deleuze 1994, 104). This conception of time entails two key characteristics that approximate Bergson and Deleuze to Massey. The first is the notion of multiplicity. The present cannot be seen as a singular point anymore because time is not a one-dimensional line. Instead, “the present is constituted of many durations that overlap” (Williams 2011, 52). A number of heterogeneous elements thrive together and constitute a multiplicity of relations that give rise to the moments of becoming that we perceive as the

present. The multiplicity and heterogeneity of relations that constitutes Massey's space is echoed here in the conception of time, as the being (of the past) which makes the becoming (of the present) achievable. Second, the becoming of the present is an act, a practice embedded in a multiplicity of relations: "the past is essentially *that which acts no longer*", whereas the present is "*that which is acting*" (Bergson 2004, 74). The enduring existence is actively shaped and differentiated in the process of actualisation (Deleuze 1994), echoing Massey's emphasis of space being "always under construction".

What does this mean for understanding human trafficking relationally? We are not seeking to identify sequential processes in the course of human trafficking and explore their location in particular segments of space. Rather, our focus is on the relations that constitute various moments and juxtapositions of a trafficked person's life, to explore how they stretch across the spatiality of such moments and how they produce a set of events that came to be understood as human trafficking. We are focussing on the series of breaks with "extant conditions" (Anderson and Harrison 2010, 20) in trafficked people's lives that are of such significance that law, media and society have recognised them as human trafficking – sometimes in different ways and with different responses and intentions (Andrijasevic and Mai 2016; Lobasz 2009). Our empirical approach follows the individual accounts, narrated by trafficked persons, support workers, police and other agents of (anti-)trafficking, but our analytical focus is on the relations that constitute events in these (sometimes disparate) stories. In the section that follows we explain how we operationalised these positions via our methodology.

Study context and methodology

Since the expansion of the European Union (EU) in 2004, human trafficking from Eastern Europe to the UK has emerged as a prominent form of insecure migration in Europe.

Statistics on human trafficking have limited comparative value due to differences in approaches to investigation and prosecution (UNODC 2009); nevertheless, the UK is widely placed among the top European receiving countries for human trafficking (Eurostat 2015).

An analysis of these trends indicates that in 2015, Eastern Europeans¹ represented 24% of all human trafficking referrals² in the UK (NCA 2016). However, these statistics capture the referred, not investigated or prosecuted cases of human trafficking, where the proportion of Eastern European countries is deemed to be even higher (Strauss 2017).

In 2016, Eastern Europeans represented 35% of referrals for labour exploitation and 12% for sexual exploitation (NCA 2016). Labour and sexual exploitation are, in fact, part of a broader assortment of human trafficking purposes between Eastern Europe and the UK, which include forced sham marriages, domestic servitude, benefit fraud, identity theft and forced begging. Our research focuses specifically on human trafficking from Slovakia to the UK. In 2016, when our fieldwork took place, Slovakia was among the top five source countries for the UK in terms of labour exploitation and in the top ten source countries for human trafficking overall (NCA 2016).

The paper is based on a thematic analysis (Guest et al. 2012) of 24 interviews with a range of actors, including people that had been trafficked to the UK and returned to Slovakia (9), support organisations in Slovakia (2) and the UK (9), community workers in Slovakia (3) and

¹ By Eastern Europeans, we understand citizens of Bulgaria, Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia, i.e. post-socialist member states of the European Union. The legal and institutional migration regime between these countries and the UK is different from other Eastern European countries (e.g. Ukraine, Moldova), causing different patterns of human trafficking, while the numbers of identified trafficked persons from these countries to the UK are also higher.

² Since 2009, the UK operates The National Referral Mechanism (NRM) as a victim identification and support framework through which suspected cases of human trafficking are reported and considered (see Strauss 2017 for a more nuanced geographical analysis).

criminal justice agencies (1). At the core of the analysis are in-depth accounts from people that had been trafficked. The participants were recruited from among 45 persons who entered the Slovakian national support programme for trafficked persons³ between 2012 and 2015 after being trafficked to the UK. Highlighting the significance of the UK as a destination country for trafficking from Eastern Europe, 63% of all programme participants were trafficked to the UK, with the rest distributed between other Western and Central European countries. The research participants included men and women from all regions of Slovakia and different urban and rural settings, their age ranged from late teens to early 50s, and the purpose of their trafficking included domestic servitude, forced labour, forced marriage, sexual exploitation, identity theft and benefit fraud; in several cases these purposes were combined.

Interviews ranged between 40 minutes and two hours and started with a prompt to the participants to recount their experience of human trafficking. The initial narrative was followed by questions about specific themes: life before the trafficking experience (personal, work and family situation), initial contact with the traffickers and the decision to move, travel to the UK, experience, whereabouts and contacts in the UK, escape from the trafficking situation, and post-trafficking history including involvement of various institutions and possibly ongoing contact with the traffickers⁴. All authors were present for portions of the fieldwork, but the interviews in Slovakia were undertaken in Slovak by the first author, who subsequently taped and transcribed them. Analysis was initially done by the first author in Slovak and then developed by all three authors collectively using translations of the data.

³ National Programme of the Combat against Human Trafficking (NPCHT) is coordinated by the Slovak government and is independent from the UK NRM system. Not all persons entering NPCHT entered NRM, as some were referred to NPCHT by UK-based support organisations, police or Slovak Embassy.

⁴ Even though these themes follow the very linear approach this article critiques, they rarely emerged in the interviews in this order.

Research on human trafficking requires a careful, reflexive and iterative methodology attentive to both ethics and epistemology, respectful of established protocols on work with trafficked people while remaining alert to the subtleties of individual contexts (Duong 2015). Like in the majority of studies on human trafficking (Tyldum 2010), our contact with participants was facilitated by a Partner Organisation (the PO) with a long history of post-trafficking support provision in Slovakia. We now address how this collaboration impacted on three elements of our research: access, ethics, and knowledge production.

In post-trafficking situations, trafficked persons are often isolated with little interest to partake in research due to stigmatisation, shame, fear, trauma or a sense it will exacerbate their social exclusion (Tyldum and Brunovskis 2005). Examples of advocacy and campaigning driven and staffed by those who had themselves been trafficked are rare (see Laurie et al. 2015a, 2015b), so accessing a trafficked person, especially once they leave the emergency shelter or other first point of contact facility, is difficult. In our research, case workers from the PO approached former participants of the support programme and outlined the nature of our study and their expected involvement. The already limited sample of 45 was further reduced, as the whereabouts of several participants was unknown, while some of those approached refused to participate, even withdrawing shortly before the interview was due to take place. Although the PO (or we) offered no incentives, interviews took place at a time and location agreeable to the participants and any costs, such as transport to the meeting venue, were reimbursed.

All interviews were undertaken in Slovak by the first author, and a case worker from the PO acted as a chaperone in some instances. This was for three reasons. First, the presence of a person that the trafficked participant trusted was important in some instances (Andrijasevic 2010). Second, most interviews took place in participants' own communities. These were

often isolated and socially marginalised rural settlements, so the mutual knowledge of the PO and not just the participant but also their community was important to ensure mutual understanding and safety. Finally, attending the interviews was a chance for the PO to meet the people who had left the support programme and assess their current situation. With the interview expenses (travel) funded from the research budget, we saw this as a reciprocal contribution by the researchers to the PO.

We attended to standard ethical rules of social research, including voluntary participation, the right to opt-in, confidentiality and anonymity. The PO shared no personal data about the participants with us, except for their first name and approximate age. However, each participant's circumstances differed and an individual approach was needed, for which the knowledge and suggestions from PO workers were crucial. As most participants were experiencing financial hardships, with some living in conditions tantamount to absolute poverty with limited access to food, shelter, and basic amenities, the PO suggested bringing parcels of food as a thank-you gift. The parcels were not advertised beforehand to avoid the feeling of debt to the researchers. Other than that, we stated our intention to use the research findings to inform the practices of institutions in the UK but highlighted that we could provide no guarantees and that as university researchers, we were not part of, or have a leverage over, any agency involved in the investigation and prosecution of trafficking or in the provision of post-trafficking support. It became clear during the interviews that the motivation of participants to share their accounts ranged from an interest in helping others in similarly circumstances by improving institutional praxis, to the desire to give back to the PO workers without much care about the study itself.

Finally, most interviews were subsequently discussed with a PO case worker (with the participants' consent). In two cases, there was divergence between the research participants'

stories and the knowledge gathered by the police, the PO and other agencies. The abusive experience with the traffickers was re-presented as a story of peaceful and respectful cohabitation. This is significant as it illustrates how people subjected to severe abuse and violence may change their public or personal account of what happened as a way of coping with trauma (McNally 2005), particularly if they have no access to psychological counselling services (Westwood et al. 2016). We therefore need to emphasise that our analysis in this paper is not interpretative and, while we strongly advocate that trafficked persons' own accounts have to be at the core of human trafficking analysis, we also recognise the well-documented limits of voice and language to deal with complex and difficult experiences (Bondi 2014). Our analysis therefore triangulates information brought together via multiple sources and accounts.

Relational geographies of human trafficking: space, time and inequality

Participants in Slovakia were first invited to share their experiences without any prompts. Understandably, most narratives first focused on the trafficking experience itself, but some quickly shifted towards different contexts:

...We had to earn money for the travel; they didn't give us any cash. We had to dig out trees, with roots. There we worked at the Pakistanis and they wanted a clean job. And then we returned, and that's it. I'm afraid to go to the world, I need to think, whether to go or not to go, and when I start working, everything's in my head, what I went through in England... I follow my goals but [the employers] can still scam me... and that's all. I've suffered hunger, work... I want to work. I don't give a damn about benefits, pardon me, take all benefits away from gypsies, give them work, that's what I think. Let's [the

Roma] live like people, with wage, secure income, so I can take a loan, buy this or that, be self-sufficient. Nobody will tell me “that gypsy doesn’t work, he gets benefits”. I believe some whites don’t buy more than three packs of flour to survive, because they have to pay rent and they work every day, I know it. Why can’t we? Let them figure out work for us... give us a piece of land where we can grow vegetable. We all would be employed, but how to do it? That’s all. (Mr P)

Mr P took the story from his past experience (of human trafficking) to his present life (of poverty and marginalisation as a Roma person) within a few minutes. He later returned to describing his experience in England in detail, but his account illustrates that while trafficking is a traumatic experience, its memories become somewhat entangled with other present and past challenges experienced by those who are trafficked and whose marginalisation is often multifaceted. Moving from his exploitation in the UK towards his fear of the unknown and desperation over social injustice, Mr P, a middle-aged man from a poor Roma settlement in a peripheral Slovak region, recounts his experience not as an individual story of exploitation by traffickers, but as a life-long anguish over lack of work and the backlash against the perceived culture of benefits in some Roma communities (Csepeli and Simon 2004). His trafficking was just one episode – and presently overshadowed by recent death threats from another rogue employer – in a much longer story of hopelessness and perceived failure to provide for his family. Echoing the argument that “living with precarious status is ‘sticky’” (Goldring and Landolt 2012, 30), Mr P’s story illustrates how manifold marginalisations rooted in intersections of (in this case) neoliberal economy and racial discrimination produce multiple instances of exploitation across the life-course.

Narratives shifted frequently in other interviews also, very often towards the life before trafficking and then back to the present. Many participants sought to explain their motivation to leave Slovakia for the first time, and move to another country where they had few contacts and no knowledge about the language or culture.

[Traffickers] approached me to go to England, earn better money and get benefits for my three children. I lived with my father and wanted to fix the house, because it's very old, you saw it. (Ms K)

I wanted to get married, to have better life, you know, for children. (Ms S)

Both Ms K and Ms S were single mothers and they revealed how economic hardship, lack of prospects, but especially caring about family members were the key reasons for moving to the UK, illuminating their later trafficking experience in the UK 'not as an isolated [...] situation' (Waite et al. 2015, 488) but rather in relation to their 'long-term transnational social relationships' (ibid.) and aspirations for a better future for themselves and their families (Waite and Lewis 2017). Family provision was in fact the theme commonly echoed in the accounts irrespective of gender, a point that resonates with other studies on human trafficking in a global context (Boyden and Howard 2013; Esson 2015a; Petrunov 2014). Mr P, introduced before, declared how the most painful moment for him was not the abuse experienced in the UK, but rather having to return home with empty hands:

When I arrived in Bratislava [the Slovak capital], then went to [a district town], I wanted to kiss the soil. Slovakia. Happy I was home, free, alive. But what for? My wife expected me to come with money. Family, kids, and I didn't even bring cookies for the children, nothing, and all for nothing. I almost cried a river over that. (Mr P)

While connected in different ways, family life and economic adversity were present in all interviews as key factors. One participant, for instance, explained how his debt to the local public transport company led him to the UK. Mr A's story starts with a banal moment when a young, (self-described as) carefree man was caught without a valid ticket on a bus and ignored the penalty notice, expecting it to go away. With limited sources of support, his debt grew and his situation escalated, so he answered the offer of work and accommodation from someone who contacted his mother.

[Public transport company], penalties, I wanted to get rid of the debt, earn money. I'd return to Slovakia and pay it. [Trafficker] said we'd earn 5,000 EUR⁵ per year, he said, come for one year, only one. (Mr A)

Mr A was uncertain about leaving, so he approached his sister to join him. He believed this would make them both safer— and indeed, not being alone was important during their escape — yet it also presented an additional opportunity for the traffickers to exploit his sister. While detailed about the severe physical and emotional violence both siblings endured in the UK, Mr A's narrative shifted repeatedly to the themes of *present* hardships. His debt remains unresolved, but longing for his family was the reason why he turned down an offer from a UK-based support organisation to help him stay in the UK.

You know what, [my main worry now] is the debt... And work, there is no work in Slovakia, it's such a time that I can get sacked and I don't know why, they will sack you and won't tell why. (Mr A)

By paying close attention to the shifts of time in the trafficking narratives, we can see a collapse of the linear structure in which the trafficking episode is preceded by an

⁵ While this sum would be well below the minimum wage in the UK, it was above the minimum wage in Slovakia.

exploitation-free life, and is followed by the phase of post-trafficking reconstruction, free of exploitative relations. The abuse and exploitation encountered during human trafficking are certainly significant life-events, but it is telling that participants highlighted the link between the (pre-trafficking) past and the present. These temporal links are embedded within wider relations of socio-economic hardship, lack of prospects and close family-ties as the central drivers for people's everyday actions across a number of spatialities. These relations expedited the decisions to test unknown waters and take the risk of leaving Slovakia for the UK, but they also frame the current situation, more often than not, as being marked by ongoing despair. While the space and time of post-trafficking can be seen as a source of hope, reconstruction and reintegration if considered as discrete and separated from trafficking abuse (Bearup 2016), our findings suggest that this delineation was not possible for our participants when they escaped their abusers. This is not because memories of being trafficked and abused take on less or more importance over time, but because recalling the abuse amplifies the longer-term sense of hopelessness and pre-existing experiences of marginalisation, particularly when situated within the intimate social context of family. Marginalisation now becomes stretched across numerous spatialities enveloping trafficked persons' experiences.

This framing of human trafficking problematises the distinction between discrete time-spaces of "recruitment", "transport", "exploitation" and "return". The accounts we presented so far, instead, suggest that *both* the spaces of "recruitment" and "return" should be instead seen relationally as constitutive of *spaces of inequality and exclusion* (highlighting the socio-economic relations that instigate someone's decision to take the risk in moving to another country) and in many cases as *spaces of translocal caring agency* (emphasising the relationship dynamics with other family members that influence trafficked people's actions). "Exploitation" is likewise not restricted to the sites of trafficking – socio-economic marginalisation and inequality are life-long defining features of our participants' lives,

intersecting with their economic background, place of residence, gender and racial identity. This consequently requires shifting attention from individual moments and interactions in human trafficking towards social mechanisms that facilitate it, and from individual “vulnerability” to being trafficked towards environmental and socio-economic contexts. As Anderson (2007, 19) asserts:

‘[I]f the problem is to do with exploitation and abuse and the aim is to end this then solutions must move beyond identifying victims and imprisoning traffickers. In this case we are concerned with differences in power. How is it that one person can exercise and abuse power over another person? This is to do with social mechanisms and relations, it is not simply handed/refused to people’

We explore these power relations in the following section, as our attention shifts to the notion of recruitment in human trafficking.

Relational geographies of human trafficking: multiple spatialities of manoeuvring

Numerous accounts from our research suggest that the context of inequality and exclusion is recognised by the traffickers themselves, as there are strong indications that they specifically target and abuse the vulnerability (ILO 2009) of people in need of economic security and who have family members to take care of (Petrunov 2014). This is clear where family members are used as leverage over the trafficked persons (Blazek and Esson 2018), but also during recruitment. Mr D was approached by strangers at a train station, and one of their initial questions was about his family situation:

They queried whether I could go straightaway, so I said yes... and then they asked how many children I had. (Mr D)

Scholarship on human trafficking considers recruitment as the “initial victimisation” (Shelley 2007, 126), “initial period in the trafficking process” (Zimmerman et al. 2011, 328) or the earliest “phase” of the human trafficking process (Campana 2016). The techniques of recruitment can fluctuate between deception (when the trafficked person is promised something but later gets exposed to exploitation) and coercion (when the person is emotionally or physically threatened from the beginning). Echoing arguments from studies of other types of abusive relations (Pain 2014), our findings point to mutability between deception and coercion (Shelley 2007) which is employed instrumentally by the abusers as a way of controlling the abused person. This can be illustrated in the story of Mr A, the man quoted in the previous section, who went to the UK with his sister following an offer conveyed via his mother:

So we came to this family in England, Slovaks, all was good, maybe for a month or two. No arguments, we went along well, we all cooked together, they showed us the city, where we could sort out papers, get insurance to freely move in England, they tried to sort our work. But they didn't manage, we started to argue, we asked why we were there if we couldn't find a job and worked illegally at best. Then it all changed, 180 degrees turn. They threatened us, threw us out of the house at any time, didn't give us food. We couldn't handle it, we were three in one room, rarely could take shower, we had to work in the house and then on constructions... Then they brought the proposition to find a husband, a foreigner, for my sister. (Mr A)

Engaging with and reflecting on the spatialities and temporalities involved in an account like Mr A's reveals that the boundary between the moments of recruitment, transfer and exploitation is *less clear-cut*, and the process of recruitment is *iterative*, multi-placed and without a distinct conclusion. Rather than a one-off process of recruitment that initiates the mechanisms of human trafficking, evolving and ongoing *manoeuvring* against trafficked persons' agency takes place. We choose the word manoeuvring to highlight the importance of embodied dealings between traffickers and trafficked persons but also the sharply uneven power relations that frame such interactions. For Mr A and his sister, the process of realising the severity of their situation was gradual and characterised by progressing intercessions about promises, provisions and demands from the traffickers (cf. Sabon 2016) who benefitted from knowledge about the UK and access to housing, money and contacts. When the deceptive promise of a better life could not hold any further, and the emerging lack of compliance from the brother and sister became pronounced, the traffickers resorted to more violent and forcible acts to assert their authority and enact their agenda. While their domestic servitude could be read as the beginning of the actual stage of exploitation, it can also be argued that it signals a different mode of traffickers' manoeuvring, and that the exploitation – ascertained through the enactment of unequal power relations between Mr A and the traffickers – in fact started the moment when Mr A received the deceptive offer.

Reformulating recruitment as a practice of manoeuvring therefore illuminates wider mechanisms for exploitation linked to social relations actualised through the human trafficking process, and enables analyses to identify their presence within trafficked persons' stories as they take place across different spaces. We wish to highlight two such relations.

First, traffickers' manoeuvring of trafficked persons can continue well after direct exploitation is no longer taking place. The following quotation came at the beginning of the interview with Ms L, a young Roma woman who was recruited by a person from her region

and sold to the UK for the purposes of a sham marriage with a non-UK citizen, and where she likely also experienced sexual violence:

So I went to [a nearby town] and we forgave each other. I said, “I forgive you”, alright. Cops asked, “do you forgive him”? I said I do. And he forgave me. (Ms L)

This mutual “forgiveness” exposes deeply troubling positionality between Ms L and her (main) trafficker. Ms L was pressured to “forgive” the man (to retract her testimonies to the police) in order to obtain “forgiveness” from him – for testifying to the police and triggering the criminal investigation, an offence deemed serious in her community and voiced as such through threats the man put on Ms L and her family. Ms L initially also reported sexual violence to the police and supporting organisations in the UK but after returning to Slovakia she retracted this and refrained from mentioning it during our interview. We presumed this might have been a form of psychological coping but also the outcome of pressure from her surroundings.

Ms L’s position in this exploitative process is situated at the intersections of her age, gender and family and community relations (see van Blerk 2016). Her family put the uttermost importance on Ms L getting married after reaching adulthood, while her community nourished the lack of trust in the police and state institutions and protected the privileged position of the (older, male) trafficker. After returning to Slovakia and to her family, Ms L was further placed within contested webs of stigma, sense of belonging and selfhood (see Laurie et al. 2015b). Her story highlights how the processes of deception and coercion are not restricted to the initial stage of trafficking and traffickers’ manoeuvring stretched across space and time even after the forms of exploitation recognised by criminal investigation ends. Echoing Yea’s (2016) point, we do not suggest that Ms L is a passive victim lacking of

agency – indeed, among other feats she demonstrated an enormous inventiveness in getting familiar with Skype technology in England without her traffickers’ knowledge and contacting her mother. Rather, complex intersectional relations become enacted in the process of the traffickers and family manoeuvring Ms L towards marriage in England and towards refraining from cooperation with the police. The spatiality of this ongoing manoeuvring – necessary to be viewed as more than just a recruitment transaction between two parties – gives better insights into the economic, gender, race and age-related inequalities encapsulating Ms L’s livelihood.

Second, because the exposure to manoeuvring forms such a crucial aspect of a trafficked person’s experience, other instances of being manoeuvred and how they are handled by relevant institutions becomes central in counter-trafficking interventions. Many trafficked Slovaks, especially those from Roma communities, carry a lack of trust in formal institutions, translating their experience from Slovakia to the UK (Grill, 2017). This is taken advantage of by traffickers and becomes further amplified in the foreign country where trafficked persons also become marginalised migrants. In general, migrants’ lack of trust in formal institutions tends to intersect with distorted perceptions of the host country and culture, often purposefully fuelled by the criminals (Blazek 2014). Yet, a lack of knowledge and trust are not the only issues here, as the trafficked persons might relate the *embodied experience* of engagement with the police or supporting agencies to their experience with traffickers. The following quote comes from Ms R, a Slovakian support worker:

Sometimes we feel like traffickers. We promise them something, move them to another place and then cannot meet the promise. (Ms R)

This quote highlights the precarious situation of many anti-trafficking organisations suffering from insecure funding and fragmentation of responsibilities. However, it also illustrates an

overlooked point, namely, how trafficked persons' relations with supporting agencies often resemble their experiences with traffickers, underlined by promises and explanations, control of mobility, changing arrangements and disappointments. As Laurie et al. (2015b) point out, some actors within the 'rescue industry' (Augustín 2007) exercise considerable control over the mobility and other resources of trafficked persons, resulting in a loss of trust in such institutions. Accordingly, while the police and support organisations envision themselves acting in the trafficked persons' best interests, our interviews revealed how some institutions urge trafficked people towards particular decisions, such as returning to Slovakia where more support can be given to them than in the UK due to their status as 'trafficking victims' and eligibility to enrol into the national support programme in Slovakia:

I asked him, begged him, "Mr X, please go to Slovakia!". There is nothing I can do for you here. (Ms E – from a support organisation in the UK)

Such a stance in the institutions' manoeuvring of trafficked people fails to consider migrants' preferences and reasons behind them, presuming they would be "better off at home" (Esson, 2015a) and acting from the position of authority. Ms E in this case referred to a man who chose to live on the streets in England, hide from his traffickers and occasionally work in warehouses, instead of returning to Slovakia with institutional support. Operating from the position of trust while exercising their power over highly marginalised and isolated individuals, the form of contact between support agencies and trafficked persons might in some case resemble that of traffickers and trafficked people

Trafficked people are subject to numerous regimes and forms of manoeuvring as part of their ordeal, including the post-trafficking experience. Whether in the contact with traffickers (from the initial contact to post-trafficking investigation) or with the State and support institutions, they are disadvantaged and exposed to efforts to influence their movements and

actions. In this section, we pointed to the importance of analysing such embodied interpersonal instances across different spaces and times and suggest that replacing the notion of recruitment by that of recurrent manoeuvring offers the capacity to better tease out power relations that frame trafficked persons' marginalisation through their mobile journeys.

Relational geographies of human trafficking: compound im/mobilities

The quotation from Ms R in the previous section highlights the role of im/mobility in the trafficking experience. Although mobility has been recognised as a central feature of human trafficking (and state politics of combating human trafficking, through the control of mobility, [O'Connell Davidson 2016]), it remains less attended conceptually in comparison with (transnational) migration (Shelley 2010), and there has been little linking of mobility to the concepts of space and time in research on human trafficking (Mountz 2003; Laurie et al. 2015b; Yea 2015). As an example, we now present a fuller story of Mr P, trafficked from Slovakia for the purpose of forced labour. Whereas official data on trafficking would classify his experiences in terms of its migration element (Slovakia as a source country, the UK as the destination), we suggest that at its core is highly-convoluted interplay of bodies, rhythms, sites, material objects and their collective encounters entrenched in multi-scalar power relations.

Mr P lived in a small village in Eastern Slovakia. One day, a car arrived in the village and the men in the car began handing out alcohol and cigarettes, causing commotion and gaining the attention of the community. After several people assembled the men explained that they would like to share some information about employment opportunities in UK based bakeries. The jobs were for men capable of physical work, and the pay (£3 per hour) would be well above the equivalent wage in Slovakia and paid every week. Six men from the village agreed

to go and, shortly after, all were taken by car to Košice, the regional centre of Eastern Slovakia. They were given bus tickets to London, and the traffickers accompanied them.

The bus route from Košice to London takes over 36 hours and passes through several European countries. When the bus was approaching Prague (after about eleven hours), the Czech capital, Mr P became suspicious and suggested to other men that they leave and find a job in Prague where they would be able to communicate in Slovak and then return home. He could not wake up any of the others, and, with hindsight, he realised they had probably been drugged by a “soda” provided by the traffickers. Tired, thirsty, confused and alone, Mr P eventually asked for some “soda” for himself. He fell asleep and did not wake up until shortly before the bus entered England. Instructed by the traffickers, the men replied “working” when border officers asked them about the purpose of their trip. When the bus arrived in London, there were cars waiting for the group and the men were split into pairs and taken away separately to various locations in North England.

On the surface, this account appears to simply confirm the argument that ‘human trafficking operates within the context of people’s desire for work, and many trafficking victims depart their countries on a voluntary basis but may be unprepared for the risks they experience during and after the relocation process’ (Petrunov 2014, 163). The spatiality of Mr P’s journey, if viewed in the official statistics, provides an account of mobility that would merely emphasise two points, namely, the country of departure and destination. Yet his journey was not a linear transfer between two countries, and it also tells about more than the desire to work. A number of mobility elements in the story facilitated his movement: the sedentary nature of life in a small Slovak village; the urgency and mobilisation of male labour force by the traffickers before the men had a proper chance to think through the offer; the enclosed experience of the bus journey where Mr P became unsettled and considered leaving the bus,

but the rest of his companions had been even further immobilised by drugs; the passage through French-UK borders where the movement was interrupted by border officers' light-touch intervention; and finally the importance of splitting the group of fit, strong men into smaller groups to ease their control for the rest of the journey. Paraphrasing van Blerk (2016), Mr P's story reveals multiple connections across space and time that exhibit power relations through which Mr P's multi-layered marginalisation was shaped.

Cresswell (2010, 18) defines mobility as a 'fragile entanglement of physical movement, representations and practices'. Our findings suggest that mobility and immobility, and mobilisation and immobilisation as relational processes, are key aspects of trafficking experiences and that links between movement and representation are instrumental in the facilitation of human trafficking praxis, although in diverse and often instrumental "constellations" that break through from the past into the present (Cresswell, 2010). Despite the importance of transfer, the significance of mobility in human trafficking therefore goes well beyond the issue of border crossing (Andrijasevic 2010; Laczko and Gramegna 2003; Lobasz, 2009), whether on the outward journey or during the return (Laurie et al. 2015b). Attending to movement and the lack thereof is crucial for understanding also the everyday experience before and after human trafficking, and during the exploitation. Human trafficking unfolds through situated and strategic utilisations of both *immobilisation* and *forced* movement:

Then they moved us out, didn't want us anymore, and moved us [from City A to City B] ... They were rude, moved us from shop to shop, sometimes I didn't even get home. (Mr H)

Mr H explains the key element of his and his partner's everyday experience, a mixture of immobilisation (traffickers prevented them from moving freely and escaping) and excessive

mobilisation according to the traffickers' needs. His story shows that im/mobilisation is an exercise of power relations that facilitate exploitation, relations that envelop socio-spatial/temporal practices constituting marginalisation (van Blerk 2016). Trafficked persons might need to be moved often and swiftly by the traffickers – when a new opportunity for labour exploitation emerges or when there is a threat of police raid. Likewise, these power relations and the production and distribution of meanings might ensure immobilisation without physical measures restricting the trafficked person's movement:

I was trapped, because they had my children and because I would end up on the street otherwise. The children had terrible scratches and bruises, [the trafficker's] children were beating mine. I could not ask for help because the authorities would take my children away. Because of the children I could do nothing... Nothing, nothing, nothing, even if I could speak English... You know what the institutions in England are like – it's enough if the child has a bruise or scratch'. (Ms K)

Ms K was forced into prostitution and experienced severe sexual, physical and emotional violence. While she was held hostage in a confined space initially, she admitted she later had opportunities to leave the site where she was held, but she was afraid to do so because of the consequences for her children. She perceived the UK child protection system (CPS) based on reports in the Slovak media, where CPS was presented as removing children from families if there is even the slightest suspicion of abuse occurring. Her traffickers thus controlled her stay not just by physically abusing her, but by beating her children and fuelling her concern that CPS would take them away.

As with the issues of marginalisation and exposure to manoeuvring, the significance of im/mobility goes beyond discrete phases of transfer or exploitation. According to

interviewees from support and police agencies, most trafficked people come from backgrounds with limited travel experience beyond their village. This contextual information is used by traffickers during encounters between themselves and those they once exploited. By demonstrating their mobility – the ability to move freely between the UK and the participant’s neighbourhood even though they were under criminal investigation at the time – they declared power and privilege (cf. Laurie et al. 2015b) in relation to the participant who remained in her village due to lack of means:

[Trafficker] just came here, bought a house here up the street, stayed for three days and went back [to the UK]. (Ms S)

Ms S emphasised her trafficker’s spatial mobility as she was explaining how she had no knowledge of the UK or English language when the trafficker first approached her. This juxtaposition in her story illustrates that human traffickers have an acute awareness of the politics of mobility, i.e. that mobility is not just about getting people from one place to another, but also that representations of movement can give it shared meaning (Cresswell 2010). Thus, the way that mobility is experienced and embodied through practices can have effects that lend themselves to *giving one-person power over another person*. These three aspects of mobility - physical movement, representations of movement and the embodied experience of movement - are not easily disentangled and are bound up with one another. This point, and the previous one about how traffickers manipulate aspects of mobility for nefarious ends is further illustrated in the examples below, in which participants described traffickers’ practices such as disorientating the trafficked person during the journey and when they arrive in the UK:

There are usually two drivers, taking turns, driving roads that they [trafficked person] cannot remember. (Mr O, an outreach worker who had worked with a number of trafficked persons from his community)

I could go to England, jump in a car, and show which house we stayed in. But I would be pointing at every other house because they all look the same, so what's that good for? (Mr P)

In the first example, the drivers intentionally drive through a variety of roads without a break to tire and confuse the trafficked person so they would not remember the route taken (cf. Petrunov 2014). In the second example, the trafficked man thought he would be able to describe the location where he was held, before finding out that the Victorian terrace house design is perhaps the most typical architectural feature of English cities. The support agencies we interviewed mentioned that being kept in visually homogeneous urban neighbourhoods was a common practice, simultaneously ensuring that the trafficked persons would not be noted by neighbours, and that they would not be able to identify the location afterwards. As the final quotation in this section illustrates, the feeling of “being lost” – physically and emotionally – can be on its own highly efficient in preventing trafficked persons from seeking refuge or escape.

We arrived, like thrown into the world. First time seeing England, we didn't know what street it was, they took us by car everywhere. I couldn't understand the journey, it's not like in Slovakia, and they were driving us 50 km to work every day. We couldn't just run away, walking from [a city in North England] to London, that's what, 400 km? We wanted to go to the embassy, [the traffickers] might even let us, because they knew we wouldn't arrive. (Mr P)

Conclusions

Adopting a conceptual position that explicitly argues *for space and time* as the product of plural and open-ended interrelations enabled us to extend existing literature on mechanisms that facilitate exploitation, by reframing the sequential phases associated with normative understandings of human trafficking (“recruitment”, “transportation”, “exploitation” and “return”) as simultaneously interpersonal and structural, embedded in geographies of inequality, manoeuvring and compound (im)mobilities. This conceptual repositioning has implications for efforts to understand and combat trafficking in human beings, as it disrupts linear projections of exploitation that result in strategies to assist trafficked persons in legally and institutionally (Strauss 2017) delineated spaces of exploitation and post-trafficking reconstruction (Laurie et al. 2015a). Yet, social relations and structural conditions *within* and *beyond* these moments, especially familial ties and predatory capitalism, are key facilitators of exploitation. Likewise, trafficked persons are not passive victims of all-powerful traffickers in these processes. Their agency – as committed carers or potential labourers with embodied capabilities – is critical in the constellations that facilitate human trafficking, and it is why they are approached by traffickers in the first place.

By way of conclusion, we suggest three implications that our research might have for further studies of human trafficking. First, we suggest that attending to relational conceptions of space in studying human trafficking might usefully foster *intra-disciplinary* debates on human trafficking and further bridge accounts from social and economic (Lewis et al. 2015; McGrath 2013; Waite and Lewis 2017), political and development (Laurie et al. 2015b; Strauss 2017; Yea 2015a, 2015b) and population (Anderson and Ruhs 2010; Bearup 2016; Smith 2017; Tyldum 2010) geography. While we do not suggest these are developed in isolation, relational space can be a platform to foreground their intersections.

Second, a relational approach to space can reposition and expand the current geographical research on human trafficking by drawing attention to spatialities, relations and experiences not immediately associated with the criminal act of human trafficking itself. With references to relevant literature, our study demonstrates the importance of issues such as material-semiotic circumstances of mobility (Petrunov 2014; van Blerk 2016), intersectional identities in the contexts of family and community (Richardson et al. 2016) or patterns of interactions between trafficked persons and supporting agencies (Laurie et al. 2015b). Attending to spaces of human trafficking as products of relations can further extend this scholarship.

Finally, given the timing of our research just before the UK vote on the departure from the EU in June 2016, our findings can feed into the emerging scholarship on migrant insecurities and marginalisation after Brexit (Currie 2016; Lulle et al. 2018), particularly in relation to Roma communities (Grill 2017). Human trafficking processes (and anti-trafficking efforts) examined in this paper were framed by specific legal and institutional circumstances, some of which will be likely dismantled in the aftermath of Brexit, and it is crucial to consider how and why this will impact on the prospects of especially the most marginalised migrants.

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