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To cite this article: Gertrude Saxinger (2021) Rootedness along the way: meaningful sociality in petroleum and mining mobile worker camps, *Mobilities*, 16:2, 194-211, DOI: [10.1080/17450101.2021.1885844](https://doi.org/10.1080/17450101.2021.1885844)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17450101.2021.1885844>



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Published online: 23 Feb 2021.



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Rootedness along the way: meaningful sociality in petroleum and mining mobile worker camps

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ABSTRACT

Rotational shift work, long-distance commuting (LDC) and fly-in/fly-out (FIFO) have become increasingly prevalent forms of labour force provision in the resource extraction sector worldwide over the last few decades. This entails the workforce being on the move, with cycles of long shifts on site and extended periods back home. This article draws on ethnographic field work carried out in Arctic Russia and Subarctic Canada among petroleum and mining workers. It focusses on sociality processes in workers' camps. I employ the notion of 'meaningful sociality' among camp inhabitants, which comes about when workers experience 'rootedness along the way'. Both notions are basic elements of a long-term and satisfactory mobile and multilocal lifestyle. This article shows how the quality of rootedness, job satisfaction and wellbeing in such a labour setting are highly dependent on intersectional conditions of equality at interpersonal and politico-economic scales. Corporations are called upon to actively facilitate the necessary material and affective camp conditions to enable meaningful sociality and provide an equity-based atmosphere for people to become rooted along their way.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 18 December 2019
Accepted 10 November 2020

KEYWORDS

Meaningful sociality; rootedness along the way; intersectionality; extractive industries; worker camps; fly-in fly-out (FIFO); long-distance commuting (LDC); mobility; labour; Siberia; Yukon

Introduction

Working in the mining or petroleum industry in the Arctic usually means being located in a remote area. When there are no nearby settlements to provide a sufficient workforce, or where a daily commute is not possible, extraction sites are operated by mobile workers who stay in camps on site for an extended period and commute back and forth to their homes on a rotational basis. Decades ago, the mono-industrial resource town model – such as a Fordist or a Soviet company town – prevailed in many regions of the world and provided labour for the extractive industries (Storey 2001; Markey, Storey, and Heisler 2011; Saxinger 2015; Saxinger et al. 2016b). Today, company towns are too costly to maintain and do not meet the labour demands of a highly dynamic mineral extraction sector that goes through regular boom and bust cycles influenced by the flows of global capital. Therefore, a more flexible mode of labour force provision has become necessary. Thus, in the last few decades, so-called long-distance commuting (LDC), fly-in/fly-out (FIFO) or rotational shift work¹ has become the dominant model, especially in newly established extraction sites (Storey 2010; Saxinger 2016a, 2016b; Eilmsteiner-Saxinger 2011).

Workers at all professional levels usually commute over vast distances on a two- or three-weekly or monthly basis between the home and the workplace, but longer or shorter rosters may apply, according to operational needs. FIFO/LDC is a form of labour force provision that enables corporations to recruit from a global pool of skilled workers and from a diverse range of professions. These

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workers may be assigned to any workplace, regardless of the location of their home. FIFO/LDC workers are, therefore, a highly flexible 'human resource'. It can be mutually advantageous, since skilled people have the opportunity to apply for vacancies in a worldwide labour market if they are willing to commute on a rotational basis (Saxinger 2016a, 2016b).

While on duty, workers live in mobile or stationary camps near to the operation sites. Mobile camps usually consist of trailers specifically designed for mobile worksites for the construction of pipelines or other infrastructure. Stationary camps are usually built from flexible modules and designed for longer-term use, but are also considered temporary. A major characteristic of such pop-up camps is that the company has the authority to regulate and manage camp life and schedules. Workers sign up to specific camp rules in their contract. After a 12-hours shift, workers are usually confined to the camp during their leisure time. Surveillance, alcohol and drug prohibition, and restriction of movement inside and outside the camp can, however, impact on the privacy and personal freedom of the inhabitants.

The lives of these mobile workers consist of the spatial triad of home, journey,² and work place/camp. These multiple locales are entangled and their successful integration, along with the separation of home and camp/being on duty, are preconditions of the workers' social, physical and psychological wellbeing (Korneeva and Simonova 2017; Saxinger 2016a, 2016b, Cater 2017). Multilocality (Weichhart 2015) denotes a person's relatedness to two or more equally meaningful places in life where people go back and forth, for instance second home ownership, or rotating children between the mother and father in divorced households (Saxinger 2016b). Along with mobility, multilocality is one of the main characteristics and preconditions of contemporary labour in most of the extractive industries – not only in the remote Arctic. Multilocality and mobility are the basis of social mobility and successful professional and personal development in the extractive sector, which usually pays high salaries. Those who want a career in this sector have to commit to long-distance commuting in most cases (Saxinger et al. 2016a). Therefore, the accumulation of capital (Jayaram 2016) – monetary, social and cultural (Bourdieu 1984) – on the part of the workers is closely tied to being mobile and multilocal, which requires living in camps on a rotational basis.

The successful accumulation of (all) capital through mobility and multilocality in this sector varies between different groups of workers, since mining and petroleum extraction embody several intersectional inequalities. The diversity of the workforce also influences camp life, as it is the basis for the structural conditions for individual and collective wellbeing. This diversity is reflected in different ethnic groups, in the gender dynamics (the predominantly masculine character of the extractive sector workforce, with a female minority), and in the range of professions and varying degrees of pay and prestige. As I explain in this article, the wellbeing of the workforce requires what I term 'meaningful sociality' – the ability of workers to make sense of the world that surrounds them and to have a positive and mutually enriching experience of being together – among the staff collective, in this case the camp inhabitants.

Based on the framework of FIFO/LDC outlined above, this article raises the question of how to create meaningful sociality in workers' camps. In doing this, it looks in particular at the rootedness of workers in the course of their mobile and multilocal lives, which I term 'rootedness along the way'. These aspects of workers' wellbeing are influenced by the inequalities that they experience during their circular movement between home, journey and workplace, and their transient stays in workers' camps, given the differences in gender, ethnic identity and professional standing.

The three ethnographic accounts presented in this article are clustered in such a way as to contextualize the key arguments that are brought together in the conclusion; these relate to diversity, living conditions, and social atmosphere in the camps. The analysis reveals that meaningful sociality on the move is dependent on intersectional factors that form the basis for the level and quality of being rooted along the way in the course of a mobile life. Thus, inherent within the concepts of mobility and multilocality are the notions of stillness and rootedness, which have hitherto been underexplored in the mobility and multilocality literature.

Labour and mobility studies intertwined

FIFO/LDC workers move to where the jobs are on a temporary basis. They take on a multilocal lifestyle in order to enjoy ‘place utility’ (Standortofferte) (Weichhart 2015), that is living at different places and enjoying their positive benefits simultaneously. The increasing remoteness of contemporary resource operations requires a labour force which is mobile and multilocal (Gorman-Murray and Bissell 2018; Saxinger 2017, 2015; Saxinger, Nuykina, and Elisabeth 2016; Spies 2006; Kaczmarek and Sibbel 2008).

I use the concept ‘rootedness along the way’ to denote the importance of workers’ place-attachment and senses of place (cf. Agnew 1987; Cresswell 2005; Feld and Basso 1996; Tuan 1977) – in the flow of their circular movement between home, journey and workplace. The multilocal lifestyle (Saxinger 2016a, 2015; Saxinger and Gartler 2017) is interwoven with periods of immobility and stillness (Adey 2006, 2014) or ‘mooring’ (Urry 2003). What happens during these periods of stillness determines a person’s level of rootedness, which in turn has a strong influence on their wellbeing.

The term ‘wellbeing’ relates to the conditions for continually creating and improving physical and social environments which enable people to support each other in performing all the functions of life and in developing themselves to their maximum potential (Lane 1989, cf. Kusel and Fortmann 1991; Riabova 1998; Smith and Reid 2018; White 2017). It is essential for wellbeing to be maintained on the work site, in camp and on travels, in order to enable holistic wellbeing that extends into the sphere of home. Wellbeing is thus constituted by a successfully integrated spatial triad of home-journey-work place/camp. This also affects workers’ early drop-out or continued long-term long-distance commuting and job satisfaction (Saxinger 2017, 2016a, cf. Barclay et al. 2016). The level and depth of rootedness – be it in camp or at home, or even while being emplaced in a particular means of transport during extended travels (Saxinger 2016a, 2015) – and its positive or negative connotations – are highly dependent on sociality processes.

Sociality is a much-debated concept in anthropology (Amit 2015; Long and Moore 2013, 2012; Toren 2013) and can be defined as the essence of human interaction and the shared context of practical activity (Ingold 2000). For Enfield and Levinson (2006), sociality is the intense, mentally mediated and highly structured way in which humans interact with one another. Long and Moore (2012: 41) describe the ‘dynamic relational matrix’ within which human subjects are constantly interacting and through which they make meaning of the world in which they live. They also emphasize the differences and inequalities which constitute this matrix. My notion of ‘meaningful sociality’ highlights the fact that the level of rootedness along the way depends on the *quality* of basic social relations, interactions and their structural processes. Here, intersectional conditions of inequality are crucial to the experience of rootedness along the way (see below). Meaningful sociality refers to the ability of workers to make sense of the world that surrounds them and to have a positive and mutually enriching experience of being together.³ As such, it constitutes the basis of workers’ wellbeing and job satisfaction. If meaningfulness is lacking, then togetherness can become a difficult burden for the individual and the collective.

In this context, the concepts of mobility and labour are intertwined and need closer critical examination (Cresswell, Dorow, and Roseman 2016). In terms of labour studies, work-related mobility triggered by operational necessities demands looking at a ‘corporate mobility regime’ (Kesselring 2015; Kesselring and Vogl 2010), built on a social relationship between the corporation and its workers. The corporate mobility regime is a useful concept for understanding the mechanisms of mining and petroleum camps, since it sets out the norms and standards defined by the company. These govern the mobility practices and the workers’ emplacement across the home-journey-work place/camp nexus. It is evident that the realm of corporate power and influence extends to the mobile workers wherever they are. This refers to being in camp (where e.g. accommodation is provided according to professional status, freedom of movement is restricted or alcohol consumption prohibited), at home (where e.g. the effects of working conditions, such as exhausting length of

shift roster and duties or psychological pressure etc. have effects on the quality how a worker is mentally able to engage actively in the home sphere such as joyful care for children, maintaining a robust relationship with the spouse and other aspects of private life) or on the journey between (when the company may pay for a flight or only for the less comfortable and much longer train-ride⁴). Furthermore, living temporarily in camps necessitates strict adherence to company regulations to ensure workplace health and safety (Saxinger 2017; Spies 2006). This refers, for instance, to strict anti-drug policies or to the restriction of movement within or beyond the camp complex. Thus, compliance with rules limits the movements of individuals and personal freedom.

The 'new mobilities paradigm' (Sheller and Urry 2006) and the concept of 'regimes of mobility' (Glick Schiller and Salazar 2013) explicitly demonstrate the inherent nature of power and inequality and the intersectional nature of movement. For instance, the case of tar sands extraction in Alberta, Canada, clearly shows the racialized nature of mobile employment and inequality structures in a complex system of hugely varied jobs in resource operations (Dorow and O'Shaughnessy 2013; Alook, Hill, and Hussey 2017). In this article, I focus primarily on ethnic identity, gender and professional rank in my consideration of intersectionality within the camp environment. I follow Moore (1994) in her conceptualization of 'difference between and difference within', in order to grasp the overlaps and diversity within categories of difference. The aspect of power and inequality and the associated wellbeing and job satisfaction of workers are fundamental to the experience of togetherness in camps, as I demonstrate below.

Methodology: mobile and multi-sited

This article is based on my long-term ethnographic research on FIFO/LDC in the Russian Arctic and Canadian Subarctic. I explicitly do not aim for a systematic comparison (Gingrich and Fox 2002). The purpose of combining the two examples is to shed light on the phenomenon's extensive cross-regional prevalence and to provide diversified insights into the same system of labour force provision. In general, the theoretical body I primarily refer to in my work stems from anthropology and geography while it is open to other interdisciplinary approaches.

Between 2007 and 2011, I conducted extensive multi-sited field work in FIFO/LDC hub towns and workers' camps in the north-western Siberian Arctic – in the Yamalo-Nenets Autonomous District and the Khanty-Mansi Autonomous District – as well as in workers' home regions in the Russian south, in the republics of Bashkortostan, Chuvashia and Tatarstan. Employing a mobile method, I travelled 25,000 kilometers with workers on commuter trains between Moscow and the so-called 'Russian gas capital' of Novy Urengoy in the Yamalo-Nenets Autonomous District. Occasionally I took the airplane on this route to better understand the ways that people are emplaced in different means of transport while travelling repeatedly over thousands of kilometers.

Between 2014 and 2019, I conducted regular field work in the Yukon Territory in Canada, staying in different villages and towns and working with the indigenous and non-indigenous workforce. In Russia and Canada, I obtained permits from petroleum and mining corporations for several visits to camps and production sites, each lasting between one or four days in order to get an impression of the structural conditions, routines, amenities, and architectural set-up of camps and their social life. Shorter visits to Australian mining regions and the tar sand city of Fort McMurray in Alberta, Canada, in 2012 provided me with a broader context of the issues.

During this period, I conducted over one hundred narrative interviews, including extensive conversations in Canada and a similar number in Russia, a few in Australia and in Fort McMurray. My interlocutors and study participants have been female and male employees of different age, ethnic identity, professional rank and length of employment; divorced or happy/unhappy spouses and children of workers; residents of hub towns who shared their experiences of living with an increasing influx of mobile workers and the impacts on regional development; elderly people in FIFO/LDC sending regions who are – in the case of Russia – benefitting from the high income of their mobile working children; company representatives and those from state bodies in the field of labour

regulation or indigenous self-governments in Canada who are negotiating over the relationship between the community and mining companies. The analysis of observation and conversations has been guided by principles of grounded theory in its constructivist direction (Charmaz 2014; Charmaz and Mitchell 2001; Corbin and Strauss 2015).

To complement my ethnographic material, I also conducted two quantitative surveys, with $n = >100$ participants each, targeting 1) employees of a Russian state company, and 2) students of a Russian technical university. These surveys were conducted in collaboration with the Russian State University of Tyumen in Siberia and the Ufa State Petroleum University of Technology in the Republic of Bashkortostan. The quantitative data helped to contextualize my ethnographic insights, while also contributing to the statistical body of data of my research partners in Russia.

Diversity in camps

A corporation's concern for the holistic wellbeing of workers is not only essential for workers' individual physical, psychological and social welfare – it is, for most large companies, a moral principle in the context of their corporate social responsibility policies (Ananenkov et al. 2005). It is also necessary in order to retain a high level of work ethics as well as working capacity, a fundamental factor of corporate success and workplace health and safety. Furthermore, good camp conditions can reduce workforce turnover and drop-out rates.

The workers' morale decreases with every week on shift if the living conditions and the social atmosphere in camp and in the work place are poor. You need to understand that we live here in a very small space and any disturbance can create tensions which impact directly on labour safety, concentration in the workplace and the overall wellbeing of the crew.

This quote above from a foreman in a mid-sized camp of around 250 inhabitants in Yukon shows the importance of creating meaningful sociality in camp. Sociality in this context refers to the togetherness of individuals, as well as the space to be alone and physically and emotionally distant from colleagues, with whom one otherwise has substantial interaction in the workplace and during recreation (Saxinger and Gartler 2017). Although the mining and petroleum industries are traditionally male-dominated sectors, women are employed in management, administration and in particular camp services, such as cooking and cleaning (for a discussion of social care in mobile work arrangements see Amrith and Sahraoui 2018). In recent years, women are increasingly being hired as machine operators, drivers, and skilled workers, ranging from welders to electricians. In the Soviet Union, female employment in this sector has been particularly high due to Soviet policies of equal gender opportunities in labour contexts (Eilmsteiner-Saxinger 2004). This aspect is still relevant today, since corporate attitudes towards female employment are positive and Russian women qualified for these sectors are willing to take up a life on the move (Saxinger et al. 2016a). However, neoliberal development in Russian industries over the last three decades has brought some discrimination towards younger women in their early reproductive age, as in other capitalist settings, although the Russian extractive industries show a more positive picture to that of the West regarding female employment. Nevertheless, women are still in a minority and the majority of them are in service fields which have lower pay than the men's jobs.

Sexual harassment is also a big issue in a masculine environment, but it also has its nuances. A female camp cook in Alberta explained to me:

I have worked in a great variety of camp types over my long work life, huge ones in the Alberta oil sands and in small exploration camps, and I remember the times when women were really just a few on site. We have been hardly protected from strange looks or harassment. Nowadays, the companies have anti-harassment rules. The guys acting strangely are kicked out immediately. Everybody knows that this is a no go nowadays.

Needless to say, not every attempt at harassment is upfront; it can be subtle. Women react in different ways in the professional context, especially young women at the lower end of the social ladder who are not always able to follow the advice of older women. One such older camp worker

told a younger colleague: 'Be upfront. Tell the guy to shut up. Tell the incident to your boss and your colleagues. Shame the person.' My research has shown that in smaller camps, mutual social control and awareness of sexual harassment among men, including the boss, make women feel more comfortable. Stories from big camps – with a few thousand inhabitants – where life is more anonymous, and which may be 'wet camps' (where alcohol is allowed), show that life may be more difficult for women in these larger camps, although the situation is reported to be much better than only a few decades ago. Respondents stated that a safe environment for women must be created consciously, with company and camp management introducing appropriate structures for complaint and anti-harassment measures.

In the Arctic, in particular in the Canadian and Alaskan Arctic regions, as well as the Australian context of my research, there has been an increase in indigenous employment in resource extraction.⁵ During negotiations around so-called Impact and Benefit Agreements (Prno and Bradshaw 2010; O'Faircheallaigh 2016) and other mechanisms of interaction between local indigenous communities and nearby operating corporations, local employment is negotiated and affirmative actions for indigenous workers are often set in place. This also requires giving special attention to the cultural needs of the indigenous workforce. Corporate social responsibility policies can include the provision of traditional food in camp canteens, anti-discrimination and anti-racism policies, cultural awareness activities for non-indigenous workers, the celebration of special events, or the provision of an ombudsperson for indigenous employees. However, such activities and the level of provision differ vastly from camp to camp. A degree of pressure from the local indigenous community with whom such agreements are negotiated is necessary to ensure a safe and culturally appropriate work environment. In a Yukon mining camp, a human resources (HR) person explained to me the complexity of these endeavors:

We celebrate Canada Day and why should we not celebrate Aboriginal Day? But providing bush food is difficult. We do not have that at the moment. We need a special area in the kitchen to process caribou or moose due to health and safety regulations. We simply do not have the space and there is no critical number of aboriginal workers who would demand this.

An ombudsperson in the same camp told me:

The company has installed this position just recently since we are in full production and more indigenous colleagues are on site. They come to me, yes, they use this opportunity. And if only it is to hang out with me and to chat, not to feel alone up here.

Most of the aboriginal employees combine working in the mines as rotational shift workers with living off the land and pursuing subsistence hunting and fishing activities. In some cases, living off the land requires leave from work during the high season of fishing or hunting. I observed satisfaction among my indigenous interlocutors who had shifts of two weeks on and two weeks off – as is primarily the case in the Yukon mines. The two-week off-shift allows them to be in the fishing camp or live in the hunting cabin for an extended period of time. These workers say that they are far more content with rotational shift work compared to a nine-to-five job. Firstly, the salaries are higher, which enables them to buy fuel and hunting gear, such as a skidoo and a boat, and secondly, hunting requires extended time in the bush. A frequent problem is when the company is not willing to provide extended time off during the peak hunting season. For many indigenous workers I came across, living off the land and filling the freezer with bush meat are more important than steady employment in the mine. In the worst cases, workers quit their jobs during the hunting season in the fall in order to spend extended time on the land, subsequently discovering that during non-peak mining times it is difficult to be re-hired or to find a job elsewhere.

Often the official affirmative actions for the improvement of working and living conditions in the mining sector – as I observed in the Yukon – are in their infant stages, and not all companies seek advice from indigenous experts or knowledge holders on how to improve support for the needs of their indigenous workforce. As with sexual harassment, there are now strict policies in place for racial

harassment, which may lead to the perpetrator being laid off. Nevertheless, the workplace reflects the level of racist attitudes of society in general towards indigenous people, and racism can be either subtle or overt (cf. Ang 2018; Bonilla-Silva 2010). Many indigenous interlocutors told me that they are well respected and that they did not experience racism (Saxinger and Gartler 2017). Nevertheless, my observations among white workers show mixed, including pejorative, attitudes. The structural conditions of casual racism – e.g. avoidance of indigenous colleagues or negative talking behind their backs, referring to them as unreliable or non-educated – and racial discrimination are not only based on the colonial legacy, but also on the fact that the majority of indigenous workers have only entry level jobs, while indigenous foremen or heads of units are an exception. This leads to lower incomes for indigenous workers and often less prestigious jobs.

Diversity and inequality structures are also based on the professional standing of camp inhabitants. There are differences between the hierarchical ranks, professions and their respective salary levels, but also in terms of whether one is employed in the lead company or in one of the subcontracting companies. In the context of camp life, this becomes evident when crews of different employers or professional ranks sit in the mess in more or less isolated groups for dinner or breakfast. The quality of accommodation provided to workers can also be influenced by professional standing, with markedly worse housing frequently being provided for subcontractors who are carrying out construction work on operation facilities or other infrastructure. In the Yukon cases that I studied, the (mid-sized) mining camps provide equal facilities for all inhabitants. However, the (larger-scale) camps in the Russian petroleum sector provide advanced housing units for management, decent dorms and units for the employees of the operating company, and older and less comfortable facilities for subcontracted labourers. Thus, differences along the lines of professional ranks can impact on the amenities and thereby on the wellbeing of workers.

Living conditions in camps

The types of camp vary greatly in the extractive sector, depending on the mode of operation. In the infrastructure sectors, such as road, pipeline or power line construction or outdoor facility inspection, the camps move constantly according to the assignment. These mobile camps are smaller, with often just a few dozen inhabitants, and consist of mobile trailers with only very basic living standards as shown further below. Stationary camps near production sites are assembled from fixed housing modules with greater levels of permanence. The amenities and living conditions differ greatly between the run-down trailers at the worse end of the mobile camps and the luxury facilities available at the high-end stationary camps. The conditions in a mobile trailer camp that I visited in Russia were alarming. The sub-contracted facility inspection crew heated their small eight-person trailer with just a small wood stove and a precarious-looking electric radiator on which they dried their pants, shoes and jackets overnight. Sanitary facilities consisted of an outhouse and a wood stove sauna with no shower.

Even in the modern, better-equipped trailers the sanitary facilities were also in a separate trailer. Walking to these during snowstorms and minus 45 Celsius can be challenging. A major concern was raised by a crew member in Western Siberia:

Out here in the tundra, we have no connecting roads, and medical care and emergency help are far away. We depend on helicopters and they depend on good weather conditions. We have a satellite phone, but help is far away.

Another group of workers in Western Siberia told me about problems with food and freshwater provisioning: 'If the helicopter or the trucks cannot come during bad weather conditions, we run out of goods and, anyways, our company is not reliable. We are forgotten out here'. Such dire situations are thankfully rather rare. However, reports of rotten food or collective diarrhea infections in the camps of small private companies also abound. Overall, large modern companies in Russia and in the Yukon provide decent facilities in mobile and stationary camps, not least because they are

concerned about their reputation. However, institutional safety controls are more efficient elsewhere than in Russia.

However, my visit to a larger-scale camp of a few thousand rotating inhabitants in the Western Siberian Arctic highlighted the other end of the quality spectrum in Russia – and it is outstanding compared to Canadian camps I came across. A state-owned major gas company provides decent dorms, single and double accommodation units, a swimming pool, spa facilities, high-end gyms and sports courts. A café, bar, restaurant, entertainment center/cinema and a church – with a fly-in/fly-out priest – make this place feel like a fully-fledged city. Green areas and indoor gardens are cared for by sixteen gardeners, while the large library is endowed with high quality literature and magazines. Music teachers are available for those workers who are more into the arts, so that they can wind down after the working day, and the hallways are adorned with photographs taken by staff members during their recreation time. They also have their own TV-station, a company newspaper and a museum portraying the rich history of the large gas field. Sometimes music stars are reportedly flown in for concerts. The workers from the subcontracting companies in the region rent these amenities from the major operating company. Shops sell daily necessities, beer, spirits and wine or souvenirs and toys that the FIFO/LDC workers can buy for their children and families. This and other large-scale camps in the Western Siberian Arctic also provide sophisticated medical care, including facilities for minor and emergency surgery. Such amenities are also made available for use by the nomadic reindeer herders in the region as part of companies' corporate social responsibility activities.

Mid-sized Russian camps with a few hundred inhabitants also have decent recreation facilities, rooms and public areas. Generally, all camps have canteens which provide free meals on a rotational basis for day- and night-shift workers. In Russian camps, some rooms have small kitchenettes or at least facilities to make tea or coffee. A female worker explained the benefits: 'Canteen food is boring and not always healthy. I like to cook soup in the evening and invite a few colleagues over. This gives me a bit of a home feeling.' In the Canadian camps, as in many of the Australian camps I came across, such facilities are not common, due to fire and safety regulations. In over-populated camps during boom times, the so-called hot-bedding system operates in Australia, and is encountered elsewhere in certain cases too. This means that day- and night-shift workers not only share a room, but also the same bed. Protests by labour unions indicate workers' discontent with such conditions.

Surveillance systems are in place in most mid-sized and all large-scale camps I came across. This ranges from CCTV and chip cards for access to rooms and certain areas of the camp, to security staff stationed around the camp. Surveillance is justified for safety reasons. Workplace safety also requires random alcohol or drug testing before a shift starts. While most people are happy with these interventions, a Russian worker complained: 'We are tested and controlled like cosmonauts. Life on shift was much more relaxed a few decades ago.' Employees have to confirm their consent for medical and drug tests and conform to the safety and surveillance regulations when they sign their contract. An HR person in a Yukon camp emphasizes the necessity of such mechanisms:

We have prepared a hiking trail outside the camp for recreation. The workers must sign out and report back in order so that we can send a search and rescue team in case they do not come back on time. You can get easily lost in the bush and bears are around too. And if people do not obey the strict anti-alcohol and drug policy we arrange immediately the plane and they are out. Laid off. We need to be so strict to keep order in the camp and make the stay as pleasant and safe as possible for all workers.

Camp atmosphere

I get up at five, jump into my work pants, have breakfast, go to the safety meeting and get on my hauler. Lunch is a sandwich and again driving back and forth the same road every day. After a 12-hour shift I have a shower, then dinner. Every day the same. There is not much leisure time since I go to bed early.

This is a usual work day for a female heavy vehicle driver working day shifts in a Yukon mine. Like her, others mention that these daily routines are twofold. On the one hand, it is tiring and the monotonous routines get harder to cope with, especially toward the end of a shift. On the other hand, the daily structure is useful for daily life off-shift – i.e. the extended period at home between shifts – when, similarly, every day is the same, but without structure. As one worker in the Yukon said, ‘Being self-disciplined off-shift can help not to break down emotionally when no regular duties are on the agenda’.

While the workers are living in the camp, the corporation lays out the daily schedule and gives only little room for individual choices. The monotonous routines might lead to psychological hardship during a shift round. Winding down after a hard day’s work in the gym – which nearly every camp has (albeit of different standards) – or with other activities, is therefore important to clear the mind and restore the body. Needless to say, not everyone is into sports and this can create discontent in those camps where hardly any other activity is offered. Usually the evening is the time for catching up with family and friends on the phone or the internet, or simply watching TV or playing video games alone in one’s room. As mentioned, larger camps have internet and phone connections nowadays, but not necessarily smaller remote exploration or mobile camps. Using the satellite phone is costly and private calls are usually not paid for by the company.

An oil worker from Western Siberia raises another important aspect:

Where there is money, there are drugs. It is no secret”, says a middle-aged underground miner. “And people here have lots of money. We are screened for cannabis before we get hired. The pee-test is a first challenge and companies are strict.

In both Russia and Canada, the use of drugs, such as cocaine, crack or steroids, is prevalent while workers are away from the camps during off-shifts, with recovery shortly before the next shift starts. Drug consumption is usually strictly prohibited in the camp and on the worksite, and companies are usually allowed to randomly control luggage and workers’ rooms as part of the safety procedures, in addition to random urine testing. For heavy drug users, a long shift on site can be difficult and workers frequently quit or want to quit for that reason. Others use the drug and alcohol free period on site to sober up and care for their bodies: ‘I see the young guys up here in camp. Sober, happy and self-confident. I know they drink and party lots while they are not on site,’ says a medical worker in a Yukon camp. Furthermore, the emotional stress during a long shift period (Korneeva and Simonova 2017) triggers the intake of prescribed drugs, which might lead to addiction.

Psychological counselling and anti-drug awareness on site is therefore important, along with the facilitation of a healthy social and physical environment. Depression and anxiety are common problems in the FIFO/LDC context – even suicide is a reported very sad problem. Nowadays, so-called ‘dry camps’ are the norm, although ‘wet camps’, where alcohol is allowed, can be found in large-scale settings. The overwhelming majority of my interlocutors were content with the anti-alcohol regulations, and women expressed the fact that they felt safer in a sober environment. In some cases, such as the large-scale Russian gas extraction FIFO/LDC camp town mentioned above, drinking is allowed in moderation. The management told me that it would be nearly impossible to inspect large quantities of luggage for bottles of alcohol and so responsible drinking is accepted, be it in common areas or in the bars and restaurants. As with drugs, if there is suspected intoxication in the workplace, workers are tested and disciplinary action may be required. In the Russian FIFO/LDC town, curfew is at 11 pm. Security staff in camouflage patrol the bars and restaurants and remind the guests – as I witnessed – in a really very friendly manner, that the facility closes down and shortly thereafter, the whole town becomes quiet.

The mess is the meeting point at dinner and breakfast time and people enjoy a social life there. Some hang out and play cards or watch TV together. The following is a typical statement in Yukon and Western Siberia: ‘We are like a family here in camp. You live so close to each other. You learn to know the other very well. Often it is too close, but you need to care for each other, but also for yourself.’ The ‘family’, like other families, is not always harmonious. The daily pressure from heavy

workloads, tiring routines, confinement and surveillance bring about psychological stress, especially towards the end of a shift period.⁶ Therefore, it is of utmost importance for camp inhabitants to care for one other. Coarse language and the ‘testosterone culture’ – as one man called it – can create severe tensions: ‘Women in camp are really important. Men tend to talk with more respect and refrain a bit better from yelling.’ He continues: ‘Shit flows downhill. You know if your boss or the foreman is yelling at you, one yells to the next person and so on. The atmosphere in the crew and in camp gets poisoned.’ The necessity of having a ‘respectful attitude’ is mentioned by the workers in order to ‘survive’ a long shift. Gossip is another infectious disease as one male inhabitant of a Yukon camp told me: ‘Don’t talk about politics, keep your opinion to yourself and keep yourself out of gossip. People up here come from all walks of life and rumors are spread easily.’

The making of sociality in the camp is characterized by distance and proximity. Mutual social control – which is particularly important for preventing harassment – among the crews appears to be an extremely relevant element of social life in camp. At the same time, being alone is as important as getting together and caring for each other – it does not necessarily mean loneliness. People try very purposefully to walk their own path, to wind down alone in their rooms, and so on. However, not all camp settings enable people to be alone. Isolation can also be felt in the midst of dozens and hundreds of people, especially by newcomers who are not yet accepted into peer groups. Food is key in providing a good camp atmosphere. ‘Now and then we have pizza or steak night. We cook fresh meals and try to use fresh ingredients, what is not always possible out here’, a Yukon camp cook says and goes on:

We are at the forefront of complaints. People complain about food first and we get into the center of complaint. If they cannot complain about their job, they complain about food. This camp is different, they put money into food. Food drives people crazy.

Due to reasons of cost reduction, many camps supply premade and often unhealthy food which can lead to obesity and health problems, as well as complaints, since dinner or breakfast are important events during a monotonous day.

The interior environment and the design of the camps also have an impact on emotions and psychological wellbeing. This can vary a lot from camp to camp and is a matter of financial investment as well as whether or not workers’ wellbeing is given priority on the management’s agenda. I came across endless narrow, white, bare hallways with one door after another, which as a visitor made me feel depressed. Other camps are nicely decorated by inhabitants themselves. For example, some have home-made flower arrangements, bricolage, fun photos of camp parties, etc., whereas others ban these, citing fire regulations. It became clear that involvement of people in the usually strict social life in camp and in informal activities is a major factor for increased wellbeing. As a female welder in the Yukon stated:

A few of us started a book club. We started with a shelf and developed our little library. We have nothing meaningful to do after work and need distraction, we want to be active and not just consuming what is offered and not just being cared of like of children. Inventing joint activities creates bonds in the crew and also men joined us.

It is important that the company provides opportunities for informal activities as well as formally arranged activities, such as game and sport competitions or the celebration of special events such as Canada Day, Christmas or New Year (the latter is particularly relevant in Russia) or a period without accidents on site. The celebration of Aboriginal Day has been planned in one Yukon camp, but so far, I have not heard about it actually happening.

Conclusion

In this article, I explore how the phenomena of labour mobility and ‘rootedness along the way’ play out in the context of multilocal FIFO/LDC arrangements in the petroleum and mining sectors, drawing on the example of life in Arctic workers’ camps. The camp is taken as one of the three

spheres in the spatial triad of mobile life – home-journey-work place/camp. In this way, I want to highlight the intertwining of labour and mobility, which is at the center of this special issue, and also highlight the fact that within this overall conception of mobility there are periods not only of immobility or stillness, but actual rootedness. Furthermore, I highlight the fact that the resource sectors are formally and informally extremely hierarchical and currently provide only little room for individualism or equity within the worker collective, which is similar to situations in the military or shipping sector (see Makkula, this special issue). Against this backdrop, the focus on intersectional dimensions along the lines of ethnic identity, gender and professional rank has served to highlight the inequality structures of the camp and the sector more widely.

I argue that 'meaningful sociality' in the camp – or the ability of workers to make sense of the world that surrounds them and to have a positive and mutually enriching experience of being together – represents the basis for job satisfaction and long-term FIFO/LDC employment capacity. Thus, meaningful sociality conditions the workers' wellbeing while they are constantly on the move and in transiency. This is strongly based on the experience of 'rootedness along the way', as shown in the example of being encamped. Rootedness revolves around place-making, senses of place and place-attachment, and entangles the material locality with place-based social relations. This rootedness provides space for making sense of human interaction that has been described by the workers sometimes as 'family like', where people care for each other during their time of togetherness and cohabitation. This setting also has its downsides: a limited camp space still must enable distancing and separation in order to maintain individual mental wellbeing and to prevent oneself from social harm.

Camp rules and regulations, ranging from drug prohibition to set meals times and evening curfew, as well as organizational standards, aim at increased on-site safety, but at the same time, they restrict personal freedom and control schedules that are set by operational procedures. If such schedules are perceived by the individual as heavy or unrelenting, they often lead to increasing fatigue and reduced concentration at work and consequently can have an impact on emotional and physical safety. These schedules and the fixed timings for meal-times and recreational activities should be combined with time set aside within the schedule self-organized and informal activities – which are found to be essential for inhabitants. The article shows how the corporate mobility regime reaches across the realms of home and work and also rests on the unequal conditions under which people travel back and forth, by rail or plane. These conditions are expressions of inequality, while also reproducing that inequality at the same time.

Furthermore, this regime entails particular factors of wellbeing and satisfaction about mobility and the job in general. As outlined above, working, travel and camp conditions vary between and within differences along the lines of gender, ethnic identity and professional rank. For example, a female welder earns a higher salary than a female or a male camp cook or janitor, and those in management are often better off in terms of housing and work-time flexibility than lower ranks. For the indigenous workforce, the differences relate to their exposure to potential harassment or subtle discrimination, as with the female workers. At the same time, many indigenous workers require extended leave during peak hunting season which is essential for social and cultural reasons. Since these workers are more likely to be in lower ranks, they often do not benefit from shift flexibility, unlike the more powerful managers. Such types of discrimination are not necessarily a result of the corporate situation alone, rather they are related to broader societal conditions of inequity such as neo-colonial racism or gender-based harassment, among many others.

Furthermore, the contemporary global mineral market with its boom and bust cycles and highly diverse corporate structures (e.g. major or junior companies, state enterprises or private sub-contractors) brings about a highly diverse set of neoliberal camp arrangements, including the practices of not providing healthy food or decent amenities depending on the prevailing corporate logics of cost reduction and pleasing investors. The corporate cost-saving logic is also reflected in the diversity of salaries and in the facilitation of travel conditions. Thus, the structural inequality and power imbalances on the ground are embedded in broader politico-economic configurations.

To summarize, this article tries to show how the quality of rootedness, job satisfaction and wellbeing in a mobile and multilocal labour setting are highly dependent on intersectional dimensions and conditions of inequality in micro and large-scale politico-economic settings. Meaningful sociality is the essence of wellbeing, and meaningfulness can only be created when structural conditions in camps facilitate satisfaction among the inhabitants. Since wellbeing is crucial to being able to pursue a successful and long-term career on the move – which is of benefit for the companies when the turn-over rates are reduced – corporations are called upon to actively facilitate material and emotional camp conditions in a way that allows for the emergence of meaningful sociality, and to provide an equity-based atmosphere for people to become rooted along their way.



Picture 1. © Saxinger: dorms in a Yukon mining camp.



Picture 2. © Saxinger: technician in a Russian gas company.



Picture 3. © Saxinger: precarious situation in a mobile container trailer in Siberia.



Picture 4. © Saxinger: a well-lit, green indoor environment helps people to cope with polar nights in a Siberian gas camp run by a Russian state corporation.



Picture 5. © Saxinger: leisure facilities in a Yukon mining camp.



Picture 6 © Saxinger: 'our work for you, Russia!' on a banner in the Western Siberian gas camp town.



Picture 7. © Saxinger: wall decoration to celebrate Valentine's Day in camp in the Yukon.

Notes

1. Henceforth FIFO/LDC.
2. The spaces of home and journey are not in detail subject of this article. For further elaboration, see Saxinger (2016a, 2016b).
3. The processual and relational concepts of meaningful sociality that I employ for denoting togetherness in camps can be also observed on cargo ships (Makkula this special issue).
4. In Russia, a train ride from Moscow to Novy Urengoy lasts three and a half days one way. Given that the off-shift period is four weeks, the time for recreation is reduced substantially.
5. In the case of Yukon, few Indigenous people have been working since the early 20th century in sectors related to mining such as timber cutting for the steam boats transporting the ore on the Yukon river or have been employed directly in mining companies; in most of the cases in lower ranks (Elders of the First Nation of Nacho Nyäk Dun, Susanna Gartler, Joella Hogan, Gertrude Saxinger 2019).
6. In my research related ethnographic film 'Mining on First Nation Land' (2017), Herman Melancon, a Yukon underground miner states: 'Camp life is no life'. This reflects the great difficulties to cope with living in enclosed camps when individual social struggles prevail. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?reload=9&v=u4UXywmkoQM> [3 October 2020].

Acknowledgments

I would like to express my deep gratitude to all participants in my research in Russia and Canada as well as in Australia: interview partners and interlocutors (some of them who became close friends), representatives of institutions and companies who gave me deep insights and the permits to do research in camps. In particular, I would like to express a big Mahsi Cho (thank you in Northern Tutchone language) to the First Nation of Nacho Nyäk Dun in Mayo, Yukon Territory, for hosting my research project "LACE – Labour Mobility and Community Participation in the Extractive Industries – Yukon" on their Traditional Territory and who supported me fundamentally. This research was funded by (1) Austrian Science Fund (FWF): project "Lives on the Move" [P 22066], project "CoRe – Configurations of Remoteness" [P 27625], (2) Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) in the framework of the collaborative research action "ReSDA – Resources and Sustainable Development in the Arctic": project "LACE", (3) Yukon Government/ Department for Economic Development: project "LACE", (4) Austrian Science Association ÖFG, (5) University of Vienna. I would like to thank the numerous research institutions I could collaborate with in Russia (especially the University of Tyumen/Novy Urengoy Campus) and Canada (especially the Yukon Research Centre at the Yukon University and Lakehead University in Thunder Bay). Not least, I would like to express my gratitude to the anonymous reviewers and Susanna Gartler, Emma Wilson, Val Walker (LACE coordinator), Chris Southcott (LACE co-PI) as well as the editors of this special issue – Andre Novoa, Cristina Bastos, Noel Salazar – for their precise and thoughtful comments.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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