
Relational interdependencies and the intra-EU mobility of African European Citizens

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Abstract

How can we better understand the puzzle of low-skilled migrants who have acquired citizenship in a European Union country, often with generous social security provision, choosing to relocate to the United Kingdom? Drawing on Elias's figurational theory as a lens, we explore how relational interdependencies foster the mobility of low-skilled African European Citizens from European Union states to the United Kingdom. We found that African European Citizens rely on 'piblings networks', loose affiliations of putative relatives, to compensate for deficits in their situated social capital, facilitating relocation. The temporary stability afforded by impermanent bonds and transient associations, in constant flux in migrant communities, does not preclude integration but paradoxically promotes it by enabling an ease of connection and disconnection. Our study elucidates how these relational networks offer African European Citizens opportunities to achieve labour market integration, exercise self-efficacy, and realize desired futures; anchoring individuals in existing communities even when they are perpetually transforming.

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Keywords

African European Citizens, Elias, inclusion, interdependencies, migration, relational networks, self-efficacy

Introduction

Migration is a fundamental, defining issue of the present era, underlining the importance of, and intersections between, place and mobilities (Massey, 2005). The European Union (EU) is unique among political and economic unions since, following the 1992 Maastricht Treaty, any citizen of a member state is *de facto* considered to be an EU citizen. In recent years, the number of EU citizens exercising their right to free movement, as enshrined in the 2004 Citizens' Rights Directive, in force since 2006, has increased markedly (European Commission, 2013). This has been amplified by a substantive East-West flow of migrants in the wake of the EU's eastern expansion in 2004 and 2007, reinforcing the perception that 'member-states have lost the right to control their borders' (McGovern, 2007: 2018). An escalating migration crisis from 2015 has seen the drawbridges go up around Europe, the seemingly unstoppable flows of migrants posing significant logistical challenges to receiving EU member states, magnifying tensions (De Genova, 2018; Mor Barak, 2019).

The literature on intra-EU migration tends to assume that European migrants originate primarily from Eastern Europe (Ryan, 2010; Ryan et al., 2008; Samaluk, 2014). Intra-EU mobility is conceived as 'a white middle-class desire to experience cosmopolitan lifestyles, cultures, and languages' (Ahrens et al., 2016: 96) – an assumption that contravenes the lived experience of many naturalized EU citizens. What is less well known is that a growing number of naturalized EU citizens were born outside its borders (White, 1998). This includes over 15 million individuals of African descent with European nationality, who likewise enjoy free movement (Clark, 2012). Naturalized third country nationals (NTCNs) are 'onward migrants', individuals who leave behind their country of origin to relocate to an EU country where they settle and acquire citizenship, then continue their migration journeys to a second EU country (Collyer and de Haas, 2010; Mas Giralt, 2017; Sarpong et al., 2020; Van Liempt, 2011a). By 2011, an estimated 12.8 million EU citizens were residing in a different member state to that determined by their nationality (Van Liempt, 2011b; Vasileva, 2012). Estimates suggest that by 2013, over 141,000 people, representing 7% of Europeans who came to the United Kingdom (UK) under EU rules, were born outside the EU (Devichand, 2013; Harris, 2017). African European Citizens (AECs), naturalized European citizens whose migration journeys originated in Africa, represent a hidden and under-researched population in the UK deserving of further attention, subsumed under the rubric of 'new European citizens' (Lindley and Van Hear, 2007).

It was not until the 2016 Brexit referendum, when tensions were raised by a perceived threat of encroaching 'Europeanization' (Burnett, 2017; Virdee and McGeever, 2018), that European migrants were treated as 'migrants' in Britain (Jonczyk Sédès et al., 2022; Kamasak et al., 2019; Modood, 2018). East Europeans had previously been deemed

‘regional “free movers” *not* immigrants’ (Favell, 2008: 703, emphasis added). Like the distinction drawn between the ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’ poor in nineteenth-century Britain, the lexicon of diversity management deems some migrants more (or less) desirable than others (Gordon, 2011).

This article examines the lived experiences of low-skilled AECs resident in Bristol, exploring their migration trajectories and mutual interdependencies. Located in the southwest of the UK where large parts of the region are white, the city of Bristol, whose modern economy is built on the creative media, technology, electronics, and aerospace industries, is famous for its culturally diverse outlook and represents an extreme case that highlights difficulties migrants face more widely across the UK and Europe. We focus on relational interdependencies to investigate how AECs deploy geographically extended relational capital. Relational capital concerns the value inherent in a migrant’s network of relationships with similar migrants with whom they share a real or perceived socio-collective identity. Often played out in the form of ‘auntie-uncle networks’, it is drawn upon to facilitate intra-EU mobility and access to opportunities in search of labour market integration and a sense of belonging. Relational capital therefore refers to relationships between individuals, groups, and networks that stem from shared socio-collective identities and in turn induce a sense of belonging. This calls into question common understandings of migration as intrinsically dual nodal, comprising a relocation from country A to country B, presumed to be the destination (Ahrens et al., 2016). It shows that migrants ‘can intentionally follow a stepwise international migration trajectory, working their way up a hierarchy of destination countries and accumulating sufficient migrant capital in the process’ (Paul, 2011: 1842). The following research question guides our study: How can we better understand the puzzle of AECs who have settled and acquired citizenship in an EU country, often with generous social security provision, choosing after some time to ‘up sticks’ and relocate to the UK? Although our study of the migration journeys and lived experiences of AECs naturally focuses on the micro level, we expand our purview and analysis to encompass multiple levels. Our study contributes insights concerning the meaning of place and inclusion, reconfigured as relational through interconnections, and the enactment of citizenship, integral to the exercise of self-efficacy but revealed as more provisional than commonly conceived. We show that transient associations within migrant communities do not preclude integration but paradoxically promote it. In a world of frail securities (Bauman, 2004), impermanent bonds foster inclusion because they help anchor people in existing communities even when these are in perpetual flux, transformation, and renewal.

Our aim in this article is thus to examine the culturally-situated social practices deployed by AECs to facilitate their intra-EU mobility and relocation to the UK: sustained through mutual interdependencies, social interactions, and shared understandings. We approach our study through the retrospective accounts of low-skilled AECs, specifically West-African migrants naturalized in an EU country who have relocated to the UK in search of opportunities. A significant 40% of onward migrants residing in Britain were born in Africa (Ahrens et al., 2016), with West Africans representing one of the growing, distinct groups living in major post-industrial British cities (Sarpong and Maclean, 2015, 2017; Semyonov et al., 2012). In placing AECs as a small discrete unit of research within a larger context, we move a distinct and growing group of migrants whose voices are

rarely heard or represented in research from being hidden to being visible, reconciling their situated actions with their consequences in the form of migration outcomes over time (de Haas, 2008; Hargadon and Wadhwani, 2022).

Our article is structured as follows. We next review the literature on relational interdependencies to explore how AECs mobilize geographically extended relational capital to enable intra-EU mobility, in search of opportunities and a meaningful sense of place (Bauman, 2004; Massey, 2005). We then draw on Elias's figurational theory to explore how taken-for-granted interdependencies within transnational migration networks, in the form of relational capital, are exploited to support the migration journeys and job searches of low-skilled AECs relocating from the EU. The following section is methodological, explaining our research process, sources, and analytical methods. In the penultimate section, we present the findings from our empirical inquiry. We conclude our article with a discussion of our main contributions to the literature on migration, and consider their implications for theorizing in relation to the intra-EU migration trajectories of AECs.

Relational interdependencies and intra-EU mobilities

We begin with the premise that the recent turn to 'working-class cosmopolitanism' in migrant research (Moroşanu, 2018; Nail, 2015; Werbner, 2006) has illuminated the everyday experiences and challenges facing migrants. The upshot of this is the relative emphasis on the 'precariat', the class fracture at the bottom echelons of the social scale with meagre amounts of economic capital, traditionally comprised of low-skilled migrants. As Savage et al. (2015: 352) explain, 'When Britain needs a low-paid working class – people to serve coffee, clean hotel rooms and look after their children – there are "better" working class people from Italy, Poland, Nigeria, or Brazil who can be enlisted instead.' Western governments have sought to close their doors to low-skilled migrants while admitting their more talented, skilled counterparts (Mor Barak, 2019). To encourage low-skilled migration is politically taboo for western governments since it 'stirs age-old fears about outsiders' (McGovern, 2007: 217). This has led to a closing down of the topic in political discourse and a consequent focus on self-initiated expatriates and skilled migrants as normative subjects engaging in international mobility to pursue and craft their careers (Groutsis et al., 2015; Jonczyk Sédès et al., 2022; Sarpong and Maclean, 2021). Nevertheless, the International Labour Organization (ILO) estimates that by 2015, over 150 million low-skilled individuals, often bereft of formal qualifications, were living and working outside their country of birth (ILO, 2015). There is an assumption in contemporary discourse that the precariat who inhabit the margins of the world should stay put; that economics 'is not a good enough reason to want to migrate' (Massey, 2005: 86). We reject the assumption that low-skilled migrants, by virtue of their limited cultural and social capital, are less likely to engage in international mobility in search of opportunities and a better future. On the contrary, they have every incentive to improve their lot, comprising what McGovern (2007: 218) terms 'the closest living embodiment of *homo economicus* – that rational, self-seeking amoral agent who propels economic models of human behaviour'.

However, questions remain, such as how low-skilled migrants compensate for deficits in their situated social capital to facilitate international mobility? Beyond scholars

engaging with networks as metaphors to explain how relational ties serve as bridges (e.g., Ryan, 2021), relatively few studies (e.g., Kothari, 2008; Sarpong et al., 2020) have explored how historically reproduced networks of relations and interdependences contribute to migrant mobility. Studies of how these relations and their networks of obligation play out in the context of intra-EU mobility remain sparse. As such, we respond to calls for more contextualized studies of migrants' mobility (Kōu and Bailey, 2014; Paul, 2013) by extending understanding of migrant intra-EU mobility, and how connections within transnational migration networks influence this, facilitating integration in labour markets and communities.

Migrant networks and mobilities

Migrant networks comprising co-ethnic interpersonal ties have been identified as a core resource that assists individuals in migrating to, finding employment in, and engaging in 'place-making' (Hall, 2018: 978) in destination countries (Kornienko et al., 2018; Repke and Benet-Martínez, 2018; Ryan, 2010, 2016). Providing a useful theoretical foundation for understanding the links between mobility, work, life, and outcomes in the labour market, migrant networks have emerged as a key socio-economic lens to investigate migrants' experience 'in light of agency and structure' (Gold, 2005: 257). This stream of research argues that social networks are crucial to successful migration trajectories. It observes that interpersonal ties trigger a virtuous circle of 'cumulative causation' through which migrants gain access to language learning (Janta et al., 2012), acculturation (Domínguez and Maya-Jariego, 2008), labour market integration (Kalter and Kogan, 2014), and social support in the ethnic community, which together enhance their chances of embedding themselves in the host environment.

From this perspective, migrant social networks are akin to and function as social capital, defined by Bourdieu (1986: 248) as 'the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance or recognition'. In the context of migration mobilities, social capital may be derived from personal contacts and friendships, family and kinship support, and professional and educational networks. Social capital as developed in the work of sociologists like Bourdieu (1986) has been drawn upon by scholars to explore capital deployment in practice, assigning meaning to the settlement, employment, and labour market outcomes of migrants (Portes and Sensenbrenner, 1993; Ryan et al., 2008). Bourdieu's capital theory, which emphasizes the sociability of resources (capitals) seldom recognized in economic theory, has emerged as a dominant lens used in theorizing the effects of networks on migrant trajectories and mobility as they navigate across space and time seeking job opportunities (Al Ariss and Syed, 2011; Erel and Ryan, 2019). Thus, social capital conceptualized as a 'resource available to actors as a function of their location in the structure of their social relations' (Adler and Kwon, 2002: 18), has proven to be a powerful factor in explaining migrants' relative labour market success (Gericke et al., 2018; Kanas and Steinmetz, 2021; Piracha et al., 2016). For example, Al Ariss and Syed (2011) provide insight into how migrants from developing countries overcome barriers to international career mobility by relying on (in)direct links to other actors within their social networks in relocating to France.

Recent research on migrant mobility and careers has directed attention to a relational-cultural approach to accommodate how the type and composition of migrant interpersonal ties and networks influence outcomes in the labour market (Cohen et al., 2011; Erel, 2010). The onward migration of NTCNs within the EU is beginning to spark scholarly interest (Ndukwe, 2017; Ortensi and Barbiano di Belgiojoso, 2018; Ramos, 2018). For example, Mas Giralt (2017) outlines how, experiencing a declining socio-economic status in Spain, Latin American migrants with EU citizenship mobilize their civic and social capital to relocate to the UK in search of employment. Sarpong et al. (2020) likewise deploy a practice-relational framework to uncover the processes informing the relocation of NTCNs to the UK. Relatedly, Wessendorf and Phillimore (2019) examine how the notion of embedding and sociabilities of emplacement in the form of relations with others contribute to migrant integration when settling in the UK, fostering a vital sense of belonging. Nevertheless, Gilmartin and Migge (2015: 285) found that the relatively precarious position of intra-EU migrants in the labour market means the settlement challenges they face in terms of ‘cultural and social pathways’ to integration, are identical to those confronted by their non-EU counterparts. In summary, the literature acknowledges migrant networks and interpersonal ties as a vital source of social capital that extends understanding of intra-EU migrants’ mobility and career outcomes.

At the same time, there is a growing body of work on the experiences of EU citizens in the UK, largely from Eastern Europe, who perform low-skilled work, having attained ‘partial inclusion in the low-end sectors of the economy’ (Tapia and Alberti, 2019: 318), including hospitality and agriculture (Cook et al., 2011; Dawson et al., 2018; Fox, 2013; Fox et al., 2012; McDowell, 2008). Interestingly, the work of Ryan et al. (2008: 686) highlights that Polish migrants may become locked into specific ethnic niches where ‘competition, rivalry and exploitation’ are rife. In other words, these authors found that, counter-intuitively, Polish migrants do not necessarily look after their own.

The migration literature suggests that European migration is not new; some being connected with political struggles, and guest worker programmes that created the ethnic networks that encouraged more recent migrations (Fassmann, 2009; Fox et al., 2012). With rare exceptions (Ahrens et al., 2016; Debnár, 2016; van Liempt, 2011a, 2011b), AECs, their job searches, and integration into communities attract little attention. They are relatively absent from the discourse, not only because they are mistakenly subsumed into a category of European migrants, but also because they are located on the ‘edge territory’ of labour markets (Hall, 2018: 981). As a group, ubiquitous yet invisible in what Hall (2018: 980) dubs the ‘migrant margins’ or ‘discriminatory borders’ of post-industrial cities, they are relatively hard to reach, hence more elusive, being hidden in plain sight. Faced with structurally limited options, they risk entrapment in temporary low-paid employment (Bryson and White, 2019) or in a range of precarious and demeaning jobs (Anderson, 2010).

The burgeoning literature on non-skilled migrants points to shared meaning scripts that facilitate migration mobilities among ‘new’ migrants, leading to many distinct groups being subsumed into larger, more generic categories. Ironically, their capacity for employment mobility represents a potential resistance to precarious work (Alberti, 2014; Chacko and Price, 2021). What remains unclear in the literature is how socio-spatial relations and networks of obligations bind these groups of migrants constitutively to power

their performativity of mobility. Understanding this, we argue, can trigger insights into the context within which the socio-spatial relations between migrants, and their spatio-temporal journeys, influence their opportunities to mobilize and convert resources into potentialities (Caarls et al., 2021; Erel and Ryan, 2019). In our effort to address this lacuna, we reconfigure the meaning of place as relational through interconnections, and citizenship as provisional, to explore how relational interdependencies foster the mobility of AECs from EU states to the UK.

Our emphasis on evolving networks of interdependent relations to account for the performativity of mobility and the socio-spatial relations within which these mobilities are constituted drew us to Elias's figurational theory as a lens to guide our empirical inquiry. Prioritizing how social relationships change over time, and how changing social conditions shape human emotions and dispositions (van Krieken, 2017), Elias's figurational theory provides opportunities to probe how relationships between individuals in the 'field' of transnational migration reproduce processes, routines, and shared meaning scripts to facilitate mobilities (Laudel et al., 2019). Figurational theory offers two principal advantages. First, emphasizing both structure and action, it provides a nuanced, temporally informed interpretive framework to address the challenge of integrating individual agency and structural conditions of agency. This framework is intrinsically multi-level, showing that macro-level migration flows depend on meso-level network interdependencies informed by individual actions at the micro level. Second, focusing on individuals in webs of interdependence can extend understanding of individuals' actions, values, ideas, and experiences by bringing into sharper relief their relations with others and the functional interdependence between people. In the following section, we present our figurational approach to AECs' intra-EU migration. In doing so, we draw on Norbert Elias's figurational theory to explore the relational interdependencies, social interactions, and shared meanings of low-skilled AECs in the context of intra-EU mobility.

Elias's figurational theory

Norbert Elias (1897–1990) was a German Jew whose parents perished in Breslau and Auschwitz, who fled Nazi Germany to settle in Britain (Elias, 2000). The novelty of his ideas meant he struggled to find recognition in British academia, acquiring his first lectureship aged 57 at the University of Leicester. He briefly served at the University of Ghana (1962–1964) as chair of sociology (Salumets, 2001). His work has been used in migration studies, albeit relatively sparsely (Elias and Scotson, 1994 [1965]; Rosenthal and Köttig, 2009). Elias's theory of 'figuration' elucidates the importance of network interdependencies, relational capital, and 'habitus'. Notably, his *oeuvre* predated that of Bourdieu, whom Elias inspired (van Krieken, 2019), and whose work is used extensively in migration research (Erel, 2010; Erel and Ryan, 2019; Groutsis and Arnold, 2012). Their shared theoretical approach, however, is rarely the subject of academic commentary (Bowen et al., 2012).

The desire to avoid false dichotomies between concepts such as structure and agency, individual and society, resident and outsider, micro and macro, is central to Elias's figurational sociology (Newton, 2001; Roseneil and Ketokivi, 2016). Emphasizing social life as a process, Elias's (2009 [1997]) figurational sociology prioritizes figurations of

humans – defined as networks of interdependent individuals in continuous transformation – as key to understanding the human condition by overcoming the ‘imaginary gap between the individual and society’ (Quintaneiro, 2006: 57). Figurational sociology conceives of human relations as emergent, contingent processes, fundamentally dynamic, and constantly changing (Dopson, 2001), where ‘temporary stability’ is the norm (Elias, 1997: 371). Elias’s interest in migration was triggered by his background. Conducting research on migrants in Leicester, he discerned a power differential between established residents and recent incomers to the area, classified as outsiders. As Elias and Scotson (1994 [1965]: 4) clarify, ‘[e]xclusion and stigmatisation of the outsiders by the established group were two powerful weapons used by the latter to maintain their identity, to assert their superiority, keeping the others firmly in their place’. While space precludes an exhaustive account of Elias’s concepts, we now provide a brief analysis of three salient, interrelated elements of his approach relevant to extending understanding of AECs’ migration mobilities: namely figuration, configuration of interdependent networks, and the unplanned character of figurations more broadly.

At the heart of figurational sociology is the concept of *figuration*, ‘the continuously shifting and competing networks of human interdependencies’ (Salumets, 2001: 5), human-made but ultimately unplanned and unintended, which for Elias (2000) direct the civilizing process. Such figurations exist because individuals are fundamentally predisposed to forge lasting and transient relations with others. We establish multiple networks with others as (provisional) ways of making sense of the world. Reflecting a web of interconnections between individuals or groups, the individual, Elias argues, is not merely a single entity but is both an actor and a network.

Relatedly, a *configuration* may be said to exist when ‘two or more individuals or human groups establish some kind of link fostered by the dependences they have on one another, and which render them capable of exercising some form of reciprocal constraint’ (Quintaneiro, 2006: 59). In situations where individuals are interconnected, individual sovereign actors may be perceived to act in relation to each other (van Iterson et al., 2002). Hence, rather than focusing on the decisions and actions of individuals in theorizing human agency, Elias encourages us to attend to interdependencies and networks, as individuals’ actions and decisions are conditioned by ‘lengthy historical interdependency networks’ in which they are embedded (Newton, 1999: 420).

The versatility of figurations means they are never fixed but ever-changing and mutually interdependent. The absence of a relationship between the wider social order and individual plans implies that figurations are in a constant *process of becoming*, making their size and scope limitless. The social order that characterizes figurations is neither planned nor intended but essentially blind. The outcomes of figurations and their effects on individuals are therefore the resultant interweaving of multiple individual interests and intentions. Thus, ‘something comes into being that was planned and intended by none of these individuals yet has emerged nevertheless from their intentions and actions’ (Elias, 1994: 389).

Elias’s figurational sociology provides a useful lens to explore the effects of human interdependencies on migration mobilities. Valuable as Elias’s figurational sociology is for studying processes of migration in a globalizing world (Newton, 2001), the choices made by AECs in exercising their right to free movement suggest a more pronounced

purposefulness, indicative of active agency, than is credited by Elias, and this requires further explanation.

Research process

As part of a research project exploring the lives and labour market experiences of first-generation West-African migrants in the southwest of the UK, this study examines how AECs, normally located on the margins of European labour markets, deploy their spatio-temporal relations to facilitate their move to Britain in search of opportunities. We conducted our study in Bristol, a city whose multi-ethnic population has links to colonization, EU citizenship, and migration through asylum (Hall, 2015, 2018). With a population of approximately 460,000, 16% of whom (69,200) belong to a black or minority ethnic group, Bristol's migration figures are among the highest in Britain (Bristol City Council, 2020). Having won the EU's European Green Capital Award in 2015, Bristol was rated the best British city to inhabit by *The Sunday Times* in 2017. Parts of the city nevertheless feature among the 10% most deprived in England, where 'urban marginalisation intersects with global migration' (Hall, 2018: 968). Since 2000, it has experienced a marked influx of 'EU Somalis', many relocating from the Netherlands (Ahrens et al., 2016; Bristol City Council, 2020; van Liempt, 2011a, 2011b). In 2020, Bristol attained global notoriety when, during a Black Lives Matter protest, the statue of a Bristolian benefactor linked to the slave trade, Edward Colston, was toppled and dumped in the harbour.

We devised the following theoretical sampling strategy to select our research participants. First, participants needed to be first-generation AECs, holding an EU (not UK) passport. Second, they needed to have relocated from the EU to live and work in Bristol. Third, they should be employed in elementary occupations. We relied on a temporary job agency to reach over 100 of this 'hidden' migrant population (Saunders and Townsend, 2016; van Liempt and Bilger, 2012). From this initial sample, 30 AECs, employed in diverse low-paid employment ranging from security to healthcare, who met our sampling criteria, agreed to participate in our study.

Data for the study were collected over a 12-month period in 2019–2020, through in-depth semi-structured interviews (Mahat-Shamir et al., 2021), which allowed the generation of reflective data on participants' mobility experiences (Allen et al., 2022; Alvesson, 2003). We invited participants to tell their stories of their migration and employment journeys (Maclean et al., 2012, 2015), including relocation, network ties, and integration (or otherwise). The fieldwork for our study coincided with a time when Britain was renegotiating its future relationship with the EU, which might adversely affect AECs' right to live and work in Britain (Kerr and Śliwa, 2020). Some interviews were conducted in the wake of the Conservative government's election victory of 2019 on a promise to 'get Brexit done'. Life-story interviews provide an opportunity for participants to 'be heard, recognized, and acknowledged by others' (Atkinson, 1998: 7). Each interview lasted approximately 90 minutes, and all were digitally recorded and transcribed within 24 hours of collection. We gave each participant a pseudonym appropriate to his or her gender to preserve confidentiality. Table 1 provides a summary of our interviewees.

Table 1. Biographical information on interviewees.

#	Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Nationality	Years in EU state	Years in UK	Occupation
1	Aaron	Male	30	Spanish Nigerian	8	2	Security guard
2	Adamo	Male	43	German Cameroon	10	6	Construction worker
3	Barack	Male	23	Spanish Senegalese	7	1	Factory hand
4	Caleb	Male	64	Belgian Nigerian	15	8	Taxi driver
5	Darius	Male	36	German Nigerian	10	9	Sales assistant
6	Dennis	Male	50	Hungarian Cameroon	14	7	Laboratory assistant
7	Enoch	Male	44	Dutch Nigerian	12	10	Security guard
8	Enzo	Male	47	Dutch Nigerian	10	15	Teaching assistant
9	Farouk	Male	43	Dutch Nigerian	12	3	Security guard
10	Fred	Male	53	Italian Ghanaian	10	4	Healthcare assistant
11	Habib	Male	48	Belgian Cameroon	11	5	Front house porter
12	Jason	Male	43	Irish Nigerian	9	8	Delivery driver
13	Kaden	Male	41	Italian Sierra Leonean	15	8	Security guard
14	King	Male	45	Spanish Ghanaian	9	3	Healthcare assistant
15	Kristina	Female	33	Cypriot Cameroon	9	8	Healthcare assistant
16	Marcus	Male	50	Italian Sierra Leonean	12	1	Healthcare assistant
17	Michele	Female	45	Dutch Ghanaian	9	16	Supermarket worker
18	Noah	Male	43	German Nigerian	10	12	Accounts assistant
19	Ophelia	Female	50	Italian Ghanaian	11	1	Healthcare assistant
20	Paulina	Female	45	Dutch Cameroon	10	12	Retail assistant
21	Reynolds	Male	36	Spanish Nigerian	8	7	Security guard
22	Ricky	Male	40	Dutch Cameroon	13	3	Security guard
23	Rose	Female	45	Austrian Ghanaian	7	13	Healthcare assistant
24	Stanley	Male	34	Belgian Nigerian	8	4	Fast food waiter
25	Stevo	Male	38	Spanish Senegalese	8	4	Factory hand
26	Taiwo	Male	35	Belgian Nigerian	7	5	Fast food worker
27	Toby	Male	33	Belgian Nigerian	12	11	Retail assistant
28	Smith	Male	42	French Senegalese	7	8	Delivery driver
29	Usain	Male	25	Spanish Senegalese	8	1	Healthcare assistant
30	Vivien	Female	29	Portuguese Ghanaian	8	5	Beautician

Our AECs originated from the West-African countries of Cameroon, Ghana, Nigeria, Senegal, and Sierra Leone. Together, they reported an average of 10 years' residence within their naturalized EU member states, followed by approximately six years residing in Bristol. Most participants came from EU15 member states, with one from Eastern Europe (Hungary).

Our data analysis followed three main steps, which were not strictly sequential. The process was dynamic and iterative, and involved traveling back and forth between data and theory in practice. First, given our exploratory research design, we employed an abductive, grounded theory approach (Glaser and Strauss, 2017) to code our textual data. We open coded for how our AECs mobilize and appropriate their spatially dispersed relational networks to produce coordinated actions, using frequently repeated phrases

from the data such as ‘*I have a family in the UK*’, ‘*We discussed my plan*’, ‘*They hosted me*’, ‘*He promised to help me*’. In doing so, we iteratively probed the data to identify recurrent comparative phrases to identify connections between open codes, and sorted the codes into larger sub-categories (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Following our theoretical perspective, we focused our initial textual analysis on mapping the ‘doings’ and ‘sayings’ of interviewees onto the evolving networks of interdependent humans, human figurations, relationships, conflict and cooperation, and social forms (Maguire, 1988; Mouzelis, 1993), which served as our basic social processes (BSP) (Glaser, 1996). We did this by engaging in an iterative line-by-line coding of our data to ensure the relevance of our BSPs.

In the second step of coding, we bundled the sub-categories into second-order themes through axial coding (Pratt et al., 2022). This entailed comparison with the extant literature on migration and figurational sociology, which helped us to grasp better how the culturally-situated social practices enable (or impede) opportunities for integration and inclusion. The identified segments were then analysed and interpreted iteratively until common themes emerged and became saturated (Suddaby, 2006). These themes were then sorted, reconstituted (Strauss and Corbin, 1998), and indexed to generate the analytical categories of foraging relations, conversion, and meaning of networks. We systematically examined these configurations of relations to see ‘how things hanged together in a web of mutual influence or support or interdependence . . . to describe the connections between the specifics of [what we heard in the field]’ (Becker, 1996: 56).

The final step in our analysis concerned probing further the connections and conceptual properties of the respective categories to explore viable theoretical explanations of AECs’ mobilities. Here, we developed the aggregate theoretical dimensions along three lines of attention: figuration foraging as ‘way-finding’, trans-substantiation of figurations, and deriving meaning from networks and relations. Following this, the final categories in the form of thematic frameworks were applied to the entire dataset by annotating them with numerical codes that were also supported with short descriptors. Systematic comparison of the indexed themes against existing literature helped us to build a better understanding of how intersecting ‘configurations of relations among different actors or institutions’ (Desmond, 2014: 547) facilitated participants’ migration mobility. This involved zooming in and out of the discursive explanations of how participants claimed they built and utilized kinship networks spanning their home and naturalized countries, to glean greater insight into how they accumulated and exploited relational capital to aid mobility. To identify logical patterns and produce generalities, we re-arranged our data under the key themes in a matrix (Rivas, 2012), and generated typologies and causal associations between the various themes. Finally, we used our emerging patterns to develop greater insight and form descriptive explanations to produce generalities (Eatough and Smith, 2017; Polkinghorne, 1995), on the mobility experiences of our AECs in practice. We summarize the research process we followed in Appendix 1. We now present the fine details of our research findings.

Research findings

The often-difficult decisions taken by participants to migrate from their naturalized countries to the UK are bound up with the degree of settlement, assimilation, and

inclusion experienced in the country where they acquired EU citizenship. While the acquisition of citizenship is key to accessing citizens' rights in their naturalized countries, it proved no guarantee that AECs would not experience discrimination (Fox, 2013). This frequently accompanied what Ahrens et al. (2016: 86) describe as their real or perceived inadequate 'structural incorporation' (access to education, political engagement, and participation in the labour market) coupled with deficient 'socio-cultural integration' (feelings of belonging, meaningful social networks, and opportunities to practice their culture) in their naturalized countries. Thus, AECs' decisions to migrate onwards to the UK were often designed to improve vital dimensions of their integration process (e.g., education) in what was then an EU member state (Kraal and Vertovec, 2017). Borrowing from Elias's description of the civilizing process over time, we use the term 'sociogenesis' as a sensitizing concept to describe the historicity of mobilizing geographically patterned social and spatial networks to aid relocation. As Elias (2000: xi) summarizes: 'By a kind of "sociogenetic ground rule" individuals, in their short history, pass. . . through some of the processes that their society has traversed in its long history.'

In extending understanding of the spatial and social character of AECs' relational (dis) embeddedness in their home and naturalized countries, we employed two analytic chosen points: T_1 , referring to migrants' relations in their home country that prefigured their relocation to Europe, representing their *sociabilities of displacement*; and T_2 , referring to relations migrants developed *en route* while settling in an EU member state, representing their *sociabilities of emplacement*. The desire for displacement from the country of origin was expressed by many interviewees. As Reynolds, a Spanish Nigerian security guard, explained, 'you know the situation in Nigeria, every young man wants to travel'. Dennis, a Hungarian Cameroonian laboratory assistant, put it more starkly: 'Africans, they say we are nomads, we have always moved, we always migrate. If the grass is greener, we always try to move to where the grass is green.' The fragile relationship between sociabilities of displacement and emplacement nevertheless evokes what Hall (2018: 970) calls the 'duality of social attachment and nihilistic forms of re-attachment'. This echoes Bauman's (2004: 69) view that the advantage of transient networks over more durable bonds is 'that they make connecting and disconnecting equally easy'. The network of relations developed by our migrants at T_1 and T_2 constitute the relational capital that informed productive mobility outcomes. The practices driving the exploitation of these networks for mobility involves what we call relational network foraging. This entails searching for and (re)building networks of relations; the trans-substantiation of networks and relations through the active (re)conversion of networks into relational capital; and the productive gleaning of meaning and possibilities of action from network relations.

For almost all interviewees, relocation represented a time of instability, uncertainty, and often pain. Despite the lengthy 'time served' in naturalized countries and the 'sunk costs' of accumulated investments to build a home there, many reported making relatively quick decisions to move on. Divorce, hardship, and loss of employment often played a role. Participants based their decisions on what they heard from their geographically extended relations concerning the limits and potentialities available elsewhere, compared with their own interpretation of the constraints and opportunities available to them and their families in their naturalized countries, and decided accordingly. As Jason, an Irish Nigerian delivery driver, articulates, personal problems were often key:

The main reason why I relocated was because I divorced my first wife. . . It was a big drama, and it affected my work and other things in Dublin. She got the custody of my son from the court and so it affected me because I was very close to him. Anyway, the main reason to relocate apart from the divorce was also the 2008 meltdown. . . Work was slowing down because of the economy. So, I visited one of my friends that I normally stay with when I visit London and I explained to him about my job and the family problem. He advised that I should relocate to start fresh in the UK, that it will help me to forget about the problems, and I can start again. . . I went back and made up my mind to come [to the UK]. (Jason, delivery driver)

Michele, a Dutch Ghanaian supermarket employee, cites analogous difficulties as a divorcee with children in leaving the Netherlands:

It was difficult, very difficult, I will tell you. Leaving friends, your home and going into the unknown from your comfort zone. It was a trying period, as a lone woman raising her kids, and I had to keep my children with my mum before they could join me. It was challenging financially, emotionally. Sometimes, you must dig in and think of your kids. You put emotions aside and think of your children and make up your mind that you just must survive for the sake of your children. It was really difficult, but you put on a smile and be strong and get on with it. (Michele, supermarket employee)

Here, Michele exhibits a high degree of coping efficacy, perceiving in the (difficult) migratory move the chance to build a new life (Bandura, 1995). Her decision was motivated by what she terms the ‘subtle segregation for foreigners’, called ‘allotone’, she experienced in the Netherlands, impacting the type of jobs she could secure in the job market:

People feel that the language will be a barrier, but I schooled there full-time, so I speak fluent Dutch. But there is a problem about Holland if you did not grow up there as a child there is this subtle segregation for foreigners. They are called ‘allotone’. So, jobs that you could get. . . the chance to push up foreigners is not there, and that is the difference between the UK and Holland. Even if you are a Dutch citizen, with their passport and speak their language and everything, you’re still seen as a foreigner.

Despite speaking Dutch fluently and having been educated in the Netherlands, Michele felt that her children would be unable to achieve their potential there because, she claimed, ‘they will never push you to their own level’, unlike the UK:

Let us say a Dutch teacher comes to your house and your child says, ‘I want to be a lawyer’, the Dutch teacher will rather say your child will be better as a bricklayer. But when my son goes to school in the UK and tells the teacher, he will be supported. In Holland, they will not bring out the best out of you. The education is there, the schools are there, but they will never push you to their own level. (Michele, supermarket employee)

Rose, an Austrian Ghanaian healthcare assistant, confirmed that in Austria she failed to fulfil her potential, whereas she considered the UK more encouraging:

You know the Germans are funny in terms when it comes to foreigners, and you being a black person, sometimes you can’t really go up. So, I said England will be the best place for me to try and further my education. (Rose, healthcare assistant)

Ophelia, an Italian Ghanaian healthcare assistant, confirmed the difficulties of achieving labour market integration in Italy at a level commensurate with her qualifications, asserting that despite training as a teacher, 'I never practiced in Italy because they won't allow you'. Like Rose, Ophelia attributed the barriers experienced in Italy in practicing her profession to her skin colour:

When I came here [to the UK] I realized that they help you to realize your potential, they help you get to where you want. But Italy, it wasn't like that. . . and the kids have been repeated [retaking years in school]. . . In Italy, since they don't allow foreigners, to become a nurse you need this white colour, like the Romanians some of them even struggle to get into that cadre. (Ophelia, healthcare assistant)

Figuration foraging as 'way-finding'

Following their decision to move to the UK, participants, who given their social class possess little social capital, often sought to mobilize their extended spatial networks comprised of relations from their home countries and ethnically specific networks built up in their naturalized countries to assist relocation. This type of network, which we term a 'piblings network', comprising a loose affiliation of would-be relatives, is built around shared culturally-situated notions of belonging and solidarity. Reflecting a shared script and mindset apparent in all our conversations, participants referred to the people forming such networks as 'aunties' and 'uncles' without necessarily sharing familial bonds with them. These 'piblings networks', which may appear overly familiar to outsiders, foster loyalty and help to seal the impermanent bonds between AECs and their co-ethnic networks. The conversion of such 'piblings networks' of what often amounted to 'weak ties' (Granovetter, 1973; Ryan, 2016) into productive outcomes entails an extensive search to find actors who could potentially provide information or help in relocation. The process manifests itself as foraging by social agents to ascribe meaningful order to their social relations to achieve desired results. Ricky, a Dutch security guard from Cameroon, explains this very simply: 'I had some Africans that came from my own region living in the UK. I asked them questions and found out how the system works here' (Ricky, security guard).

Adamo, a German construction worker from Cameroon, unpacks the intrinsic value of such 'weak ties':

You take it for granted that it's always there, always has been there. There has never been a time when you don't have those connections. And if you stumble or come across any problem, the first thing you think is, 'Oh, do I know someone who has a friend who can be of help?' So, friends, acquaintances, family have always been there. So, I haven't thought about it, what it would have been like if they weren't there, but I can tell you that things might not have been the same. (Adamo, construction worker)

Underpinned by intersecting notions of identity, place, and mobility, network foraging reflects deliberate, consciously reflexive orders of actions to cultivate the sociability of (dis)emplacement (Glick Schiller and Çağlar, 2016; Wessendorf and Phillimore, 2019)

to enhance migrants' connectedness with their home countries and those they pass through or in which they settle. This complex integrative practice concerns the building of rich networks of transnational relational ties with family and friends, particularly those domiciled in the potential destination country. Adamo highlights one tenuous connection that was instrumental to his move to the UK, a 'weak tie' that proved especially strong:

It's a funny story because I went to the city of London. I went there to look for somebody, okay. And the person did not come on time, so I was standing and waiting and then this black guy came and asked me, 'Are you Bartey?' Because he was expecting a friend from Italy called Bartey. And then he looked at me and said, 'Okay, you are [Adamo]', and I had not seen him for 14 years. And the funny thing is the person he came to pick up was a childhood friend of mine; we went to the same primary school. . . And then I came back to London. . . to live in one of his houses in London. (Adamo, construction worker)

This foraging process was idiosyncratic and non-linear. Some AECs could re-connect with relations after contacting relations back home. Others used social media platforms like Facebook to build and maintain personal networks and transnational ties (Komito, 2011). Brief, serendipitous encounters on social networking sites sometimes presented opportunities to strengthen existing ties, reactivate lapsed ties, and create new ones. Dennis's case is illustrative:

I started looking for Cameroonians on Facebook who are living in Bristol or around Bristol. . . Because I didn't have any relative here in Bristol, I decided to check Facebook, check Cameroonian associations. . . to see if I can find someone who lives in Bristol or around Bristol who can at least host me for one week, you know, while I sort out myself. So that was how I found this lady on Facebook who is a Cameroonian, Monica. I was just very fortunate to find her because and it turns out. . . one of my senior sisters in Cameroon, her name is Monica, my great great grandmother her name is Monica, my wife her name is Monica. And the lady who helped me, her name is Monica. That's no coincidence. (Dennis, laboratory assistant)

Here, Dennis attributes significance to the tenuous connection of a shared name (Monica), which suggests to him that their relationship was somehow destined to be. Casting a wide net in search of ties, Dennis's story shows how new relationships in transnational networks may be formed, mobilized, and legitimated from insubstantial links that prove more material than they first appear. Nevertheless, our data also suggest that forming new ties within networks involves risks, effort, and resources. The story of one AEC who struggled in the UK, as recounted by Habib, a Belgian Cameroonian porter, illustrates the breakdowns that may disrupt such relations:

I know one guy who came here from Belgium. Things were very difficult, he had to go back, because he did not know any person, it was not easy for him. You know, he came and did not have any place to stay, he went to the hotel, it was very expensive. The kind of people he met there. . . oh it was terrible, dealers, drug dealers and things like that so it was not easy, he did not achieve what he came to achieve. So, he had to go back, he told his story, that the UK is not easy. (Habib, porter)

In trying to improve his precarious life, the returnee arrived in London without having any connection to the city. He was, Habib claimed, unable to cope because he could not access employment through low-paid jobs, which often rely on informal recruitment networks (Clark and Colling, 2018). Habib's story highlights the relevance of relations to networks and embedding. It suggests that the actual realities of contemporary transnational mobilities on the ground are such that 'piblings networks', particularly for the low skilled, often determine who gets access to what and how.

Trans-substantiation of figurations

The stock of relational capital garnered by AECs from their webs of 'piblings networks' in their home and naturalized countries, however, was often insufficient. Rather, the strategic importance of such assets lies in their convertibility into other vital resources to facilitate relocation. Following Bourdieu (1986, 1990), who uses the term 'transubstantiation' to express the means through which capital is converted into other forms, the transubstantiation of networks refers to the culturally specific practice of transforming relational capital into other forms of capital that contribute meaningfully to facilitating onward migration. One notable outcome of the transformation of migrants' network and relational capital that impacted on their mobilities is the temporary 'free' accommodation proffered by members of extended networks during their early days in the new country. The accounts of Reynolds and Ophelia are typical:

Settling down in Bristol was easier for me. Maybe it's because I got a job in less than two weeks of arrival and had free accommodation for three months. (Reynolds, security guard)

I first went to my sister in Manchester, and it was on the outskirts. I have two boys and where they got school was quite far off. I also have a friend here and I told her that I would like to move down to Bristol. She agreed to take me in, and I came with my two boys. After a week of arrival, I decided I like this place. (Ophelia, care assistant)

Sometimes lasting up to six months, such 'free' accommodation linked to the possession of a durable network of family and friends offers a safety net of reliable financial support from which migrants benefited until they found their feet. Farouk, a Dutch Nigerian security guard, speaks movingly of the support he received from relations on arriving in the UK, something he considers intrinsic to African culture:

It's actually like a culture in Africa that a brother, a cousin, a good friend will always open the door for you. . . Someone opening the door for you, keeping you for two months. With all the consumption you have been having, paying no bills, it is very, very wonderful here in the UK. . . It was thanks to my cousin that I have a house through the council, and it wasn't easy, even though I was having a job, it wasn't easy but thanks to my cousin who had to fight, support me in any way he could. . . everything is going good, and life is getting better. (Farouk, security guard)

Such culturally-situated support as Farouk describes was not only critical to newcomers' survival; it also served as the glue holding this subgroup of migrants together. It channelled their identity, sustained them in time of need, and enabled their interdependent

networks to coordinate in unforeseen ways. Consequently, it enabled them to start afresh, helping them find employment through informal recruitment processes without the need for qualifications (Behtoui, 2008). As Noah, a German Cameroon accounts assistant, clarifies:

My host [Teslim] explained to me about how to get an NI [National Insurance] number. He literally took me to Canning Town [district in East London] job centre where I applied for it. He coached me and even accompanied me to the subsequent interview. The next day he took me to the bank to open a bank account. It was all plain sailing for me. (Noah, accounts assistant)

Noah's story highlights how 'piblings networks' in the form of figuration may be converted into alternative forms of capital (Kreiner et al., 2015). Thus, Noah's connection with Teslim, based on shared circumstances in the village in which they grew up, is converted on this occasion into the practical support he needed to obtain vital paperwork and a bank account to access job opportunities. Our data suggest that the potential reproduction and culturally-situated transformation of AECs' network capital has profound consequences for onward mobility (Castles et al., 2013; Portes, 1998). The productive outcomes of interdependency networks are transmitted among members through interactions that over time become part-and-parcel of the taken-for-granted culture of sustaining the transnational migration networks in which they are embedded.

Deriving meaning from networks and relations

Consistent with prior research, large and sparse interdependent 'piblings networks', relatively loose and geographically extended but nevertheless effective, are invaluable to migrant mobility (Alberti, 2014; Ndukwe, 2017; Ryan and Mulholland, 2014). While the depth and quality of this complex web of networks is conditioned by lengthy historical interdependence (Levitt and Jaworsky, 2007), they are rooted in culturally-situated notions of belonging (Eve, 2010; Wessendorf, 2019), often predicated on shared traits, and even religious syncretism. In the context of AECs' trans-European mobility, this played out in the form of securing relational benefits for their 'incorporation processes' (e.g., access to employment, accommodation etc.) from like migrants with whom they share a perceived socio-collective identity (Sarpong and Maclean, 2017). Thus, one of the most powerful benefits AECs found in the UK, which they claimed not to have experienced in their naturalized countries, was an ability to be themselves in a country they found to be open, relaxed, and where there were many others like themselves. Adamo puts this best when explaining that, despite the litter and chaos, he felt at home in Britain:

My impression of the UK was that it was a very laid-back country, very liberal and very open society. What I didn't like about it was the chaos. It was very, very disorganized and I took some time to adapt to the fact that, you know, the streets are not tidy, and you could just throw things on the road like that. It didn't happen in Germany. So, I was comfortable with the fact that it was an open country, very relaxed and had a huge migrant community. (Adamo, construction worker)

Contrary to received views that migrants come to the UK to ‘scrounge welfare benefits, launch crime waves, and import ideas and practices that undermine the very fabric of society’ (McGovern, 2007: 218), evidence suggests that migrants in general pay more in taxes than they take out in benefits. The combined productive human capital of EU migrants alone would have cost the UK an estimated £6.8b in spending on education (Dustmann and Frattini, 2014). All our AECs claimed they felt at home in the UK because they were able to find employment, even if this meant, as it did for Jason, working as a cleaner for six months until he found work as a van driver, which he deemed more suitable. Paradoxically, while the healthcare systems, and general orderliness may have been superior in their naturalized countries, the UK appears to offer something more valuable: the ability to improve themselves while making a positive contribution to their families, at work and to society (Dawson et al., 2018). As Ricky explained, ‘the first thing I was thinking was how to improve myself and my family, and not the social benefit system’. Whereas ostensibly the UK seems to make it difficult for people to move there, the long-term labour market opportunities for progression are potentially superior. This apparent paradox between UK and EU approaches to immigration and integration versus approaches to labour market progression may partially explain why many young, ambitious naturalized European citizens may wish to complete their migration journeys there. Our AECs claimed to feel far better integrated in the UK. For Adamo, in addition to securing employment, integration meant embracing an active social life with his family in a vibrant Cameroonian community:

We’ve talked a lot about jobs and employment and all the rest but there is one other important area of life, that is social life. . . There is a big immigrant community in the UK and in Bristol, and also outside our job, we do interact, we have parties, we have birthdays, we have death celebrations, we have all sorts of celebrations which, we, when I say we, I mean myself and my family, do attend and participate, and they are very important in keeping our morale at a high level. You know, after a weekend party, after a weekend celebration, you go back to work fresh and with springs in the steps. (Adamo, construction worker)

This freedom to be themselves, participating actively in co-ethnic communities, reinforced AECs’ sense of integration. This was clearly something participants wanted for their children too. As Ricky clarified, ‘the UK has got a very free system, in the fact that my children will one day be able to study what they want to do as compared to other European countries where children might be restricted to get into some particular trade’. As a result, Ricky, like other participants, expressed no regrets about leaving the Netherlands, but rather confidence in the future: ‘No regrets, the kids are happy, and there is a way to move forward.’ While the nature of the culturally-situated support we identified increases rather than decreases with use, our data suggest it is less valuable in creating opportunities for entry into the professions or access to better quality employment. In this regard, such support also has the potential to limit AECs’ employment opportunities in terms of type and level of work (Thondhlana et al., 2016).

Nevertheless, the ability of the network sustainably to generate the productive relational capital that lubricates migrants’ mobility and affords access to opportunities, we

found, lies in the intersection of the network renewal (regeneration of existing and lapsed relational ties) and the network content (flow of resources within the network). These two characteristics combined to generate meaning and possibilities of action for AECs. The renewal of the network rests on a commitment on the part of migrants freely to extend offers to others, and it follows that they are keen to provide such assistance despite the potential risks and sacrifice entailed. As Jason explains:

She knew my story. She knew I just wanted a decent life for myself and my family. I reckon that made her think, I have an empty room no one is using. You know, you can come and stay here for a while to sort yourself out. (Jason, delivery driver)

Jason interpreted such help as integral to intergenerational reciprocity (Wade-Benzoni, 2002) in which migrants are expected to share benefits or assume burdens on behalf of an extended family member, friend, or home-town fellow. This type of norm is necessary to reinforce commitment and longer-term exchanges within their migrant networks.

Participants were acutely conscious of the web of reciprocal obligations associated with accepting support, and the advantages and liabilities it confers. The expectation is that individuals contribute when they have surplus resources and receive provisioning when in need. Reminiscent of the 'potlatch' system (a gift-giving feast practiced by indigenous peoples of the United States and Canada), the productive relational capital outcome experienced as an unforced 'gift' is at any point in time precarious and vulnerable. As Kristina, a Ghanaian Cypriot healthcare assistance, clarified:

I knew only one person when I was coming to the UK. She took me to a family that opened their arms for me. . . That was great, massively great. We've got the Cameroonian community association too. We really help each other to navigate the social and labour market. (Kristina, healthcare assistant)

For Farouk, this reciprocity was fundamental to AECs' integration into the local community: 'We are the Africans; we always love one another. We always want to give a helping hand to one another. It is only thanks to our community, and our system of, style of living that we can easily integrate' (Farouk, security guard).

Drawing on Ubuntu, the African humanistic philosophy that advocates 'the desire to live in harmony with others and to submit one's own needs for the benefit of the social framework in which one lives' (van Vlaendren, 2001: 150), this relationality reflects the 'grace and favour' aspect of the interdependent, close-knit culture that regulates the network, typically characterized by strong norms with little tolerance for opportunistic behaviour. Our data suggest that AECs derive subjective relational well-being from their spatially dispersed interdependent networks (Cross et al., 2003). The outcome is not spontaneous, requiring effort and the constant, purposeful nurturing of relational pluralism.

As mentioned, we conducted our interviews at a time when, following the UK's EU membership referendum, the country was engaged in a period of transition, during which it negotiated its departure from the EU. This was an issue of material interest to AECs as EU

citizens, potentially exacerbating their sense of insecurity in the UK. What was surprising, however, was that participants were remarkably sanguine about the likely impact of Brexit on their prospects. As Habib put it, 'I think the UK is fine. Without the EU, without this thing, without you know, without other European countries, I think the UK is fine.' Kristina expressed relief that African migrants were no longer in the limelight, having been superseded by Europeans: 'When I came it was Africans this, Africans that, immigration. . . . But Africans just went out, and now it's always EU migrants, EU this, EU that, so at least we have some rest.' She expressed little concern that Brexit would dampen her prospects in the UK: 'I think it's gonna be brighter, brighter than before. At least I have got a profession. . . . So, I'm happy about that, really happy, and I know I will be making money.' As an EU migrant herself, Kristina's take on Africans and EU migrants not only provides insight into AECs' identity consciousness, but also brings into focus how AECs as a distinct migrant group may derive feelings of belonging from their new country of residence, despite being naturalized Europeans and 'Africans who were not any longer from Africa' (Devichand, 2013: 1). When asked about Brexit, Jason was similarly candid:

Brexit? Which Brexit? It doesn't concern me. I have been here for eight years, I work, pay my taxes, and my last two children were born here. Brexit is not my business. . . . I will continue to live in Bristol. After eight years, I think I am entitled to be a chief here. (Jason, delivery driver)

Enzo, a Dutch Nigerian teaching assistant, empathized with those who voted to leave the EU:

Anybody from Nigeria in my own shoes will not like to choose any of these European countries over England. It is a multi-cultural setting society. I think it is more encouraging, and this explains why this country is so congested, and who knows, it could be one of the reasons why they want to be out of the European Union structure. . . . Britain doesn't want to be constrained by the European approach, you know. So, you could see the arguments to be free to do their own thing. I don't see anything wrong with that, it is tricky, but let's wait and see. . . . I hope the country strikes the balance to make the most of it. (Enzo, teaching assistant)

As Enzo elaborated, 'what we have here in the UK is an opportunity for all, particularly migrants'.

Reflecting both the rootedness and geographical spread of the subgroup of migrants we studied (Alberti, 2014; Collyer and de Haas, 2010), we interpret these views as an indication of the strength of AECs' commitment to relational networks in the UK, their naturalized countries, and their home countries. All interviewees expressed their willingness to host in return and provide support to acquaintances from their naturalized countries who chose to relocate to Bristol. None, notably, foresaw this changing owing to Brexit, nor did any display any intention to leave the UK for their naturalized country in consequence. The outspoken view of Fred, an Italian Ghanaian care assistant, was typical: 'No, no, so nothing will make me go back there.'

Discussion and conclusion

This article advances the theory and scholarship on migrants in three principal respects. First, drawing on Elias's emphasis on networks of interdependent individuals in flux

and transformation, the simultaneous co-existence of sociabilities of displacement and emplacement reflected in AECs' accounts casts the meaning of place in a new light. The implication is that our understanding of the spatial should be recalibrated as fundamentally 'relational through connections' (Massey, 2005: 81). This suggests a dialectic between embeddedness and disembeddedness that is poorly understood, according to which inclusion 'does not depend only on individual migrants' efforts to integrate but clearly also on the economic and cultural opportunities and space offered to migrants by the host society' (van Liempt, 2011b: 3396). Crucially, our interviewees spoke of enjoying the space or freedom to be themselves in the UK, to integrate within their communities as they saw fit, which they claimed not to have experienced to the same extent in their naturalized countries. This, counter-intuitively, affords greater opportunities for inclusion. Our first contribution is thus to discern that that even transient associations within co-ethnic communities do not preclude integration but paradoxically promote it.

Related to this, our second contribution to the literature on migration is to discern that in a world of frail securities (Bauman, 2004), impermanent bonds can be strong because they help to anchor people in co-ethnic communities even when these are in constant flux (Granovetter, 1973). Despite the low-level occupations many performed, AECs claimed to be located within socio-cultural webs of interdependences where they felt at home, forging, even when such links were transitory, a sense of belonging that complicates and confounds assertions of migrant enclaves (Hall, 2018). This sentiment of being at home with friends, relations and 'piblings', even when these groups were constantly reconfiguring, appeared sufficiently strong as to override other considerations, including social security, housing, healthcare systems, transport, congestion, and cleanliness, which were often inferior to their naturalized countries. AECs spoke of their belief that they could realize their potential in the UK, something they deemed vital for their offspring. The direction of travel experienced by participants was thus 'as much about moving away from constraints (such as racism and discrimination) as it was about moving towards opportunities in the labour market and cultural realm' (Ahrens et al., 2016: 95). Contrary to perceptions of migrants as benefit scroungers, the labour market integration they felt able to achieve in the UK was crucial to their happiness, fostering a sense of self-worth and opportunities for inclusion (Uberoi and Modood, 2013), enabling them to make a meaningful contribution to society. As Habib puts it, 'because the issue is having a job, getting a job'.

Our third contribution concerns the meaning and enactment of citizenship, which migration research has tended to overlook. EU citizenship affords rights, including the right to free movement. In a world where individuals can be stripped of their citizenship, the acquisition of EU citizenship is a categorical game changer for AECs. Yet, remarkably, none expressed the desire to return to the countries where they had gained it. This reveals citizenship as altogether less binding than commonly conceived, implying a greater acceptance of the provisional, indicative of the temporary stability identified by Elias (1997). Viewed in this light, citizenship emerges as essentially *pro tempore* for AECs, 'for now', not a final goal but a means to an end, a stepping-stone or passport to another, more attractive future, such that 'even temporary migration plans are open to change' (Ryan and Mulholland, 2014: 597). Crucially, citizenship in AECs' former countries of residence did not diminish their sense of exclusion there. If, by extension, belonging to a country means

experiencing at first hand the membership of social inclusion, then the UK would appear to 'fit the bill' better than their naturalized countries. Notably, our AECs intended to remain post-Brexit, which they claimed did not phase them unduly. This points to the intrinsic paradox of Brexit, whereby the UK appears still to be perceived as an open, welcoming country, at least among African-born EU citizens.

Through these three contributions, we extend understanding within migration research of how relational capital in transitory networks promotes relational embedding and belonging (Mulholland and Ryan, 2022; Lubbers, 2021). Relational capital evokes notions of ethnic privilege, bio-political identity, inclusion/exclusion, and rootedness in assorted networks (Goh, 2019). Our analysis highlights that the power of relational capital derives in large part from the ease of connection and disconnection it enables (Bauman, 2004), emplacement and displacement, such that it becomes easier to move on and still find a home. This implies that, analogous to Granovetter's (1973) notion of 'weak ties', the strength of relational capital stems paradoxically from the 'temporary stability' (Elias, 1997: 371) it affords, offering a rootedness that nevertheless facilitates mobility. We began this article by alluding to heightened tensions around migration coinciding with Brexit. Our AECs could relocate to the UK unimpeded owing to their EU citizenship. Low-skilled EU migrants are often presumed to be fashioned into precarious workers in the UK (Anderson, 2010; Sporton, 2013). However, what we found was not what we might have expected. Participants expressed the view that they could be themselves in the UK, because 'the emphasis is on you per se, not [where you come from]' (Ahrens et al., 2016: 91). This in turn enhanced their sense of meaningful belonging in Bristol with its large migrant community where, as Adamo observed, they could blend in.

Elias's figurational sociology provides a valuable theoretical lens to examine how AECs' taken-for-granted interdependencies within transnational migration networks are exploited to support migration from their naturalized country to the UK. However, our analysis suggests more method in figurational webs than is apparently discerned by Elias. The fluidity we witness in migration flows today is not devoid of intentionality (Bauman, 2004). The 'world of flows', which in our study flow from West Africa to Europe and from Europe to the UK, is not the product of an unplanned order (Massey, 2005: 81). On the contrary, these macro-level migration flows are the combined result of the exercise of thousands of micro-level decisions and wills. Together, they belie 'the apparent *lack* of relationship between social order and human intentions, the seemingly *alien* character of the social world to the individuals making it up' (van Krieken, 2019: 161) and speak instead of agential micro-level self-efficacy (Bandura, 1995). Elias's emphasis on the unplanned serendipity of actions and relations fails fully to acknowledge the determination exhibited by migrants to relocate to a place where they can be themselves. Taken together, countless micro-level relocation decisions feed into macro-level migration flows.

Earlier, we posed the following research question: How can we better understand the puzzle of AECs who have acquired citizenship in an EU country, often with generous social security systems, choosing after some time to 'up sticks' and relocate to the UK? In answer, we propose that relocating to the UK offers AECs the opportunity to exercise self-efficacy to realize desired futures (Bandura, 1995). Exercising

self-efficacy entails escaping discrimination in their naturalized countries, finding work, achieving integration in the labour market and co-ethnic communities, and crucially nurturing hope that their children will enjoy better futures. As Dennis emphasized, ‘my priority now is for the children to have a better future’. The chaotic aspect of the UK alluded to above is deemed unproblematic because within that disorganization there is room for the self to develop and for hope to arise that children can flourish (Grey, 1994). The personas linked to their former naturalized countries, cast aside through a process of stepwise international migration (Paul, 2011), are, as exemplified by Kristina who no longer identified as ‘European’, analogous to the provisional ‘dead selves’ that McKinlay (2002: 611) evokes when he writes: ‘We climb upwards on the stepping-stones of our own dead selves.’

This study has limitations, which in turn yield avenues for further research. First, our study concerns AECs at a particular point in time, and different groups of migrants of varying ethnicity in other time periods might yield divergent results. For example, Ryan et al. (2008) found that Polish migrants in London tended not to look after their own, the specific ethnic enclaves they inhabited being inclined to foster competition, rivalry, and exploitation between members. Second, our research focuses on AECs who persisted in their quest to relocate, and does not feature returnees who, as Habib indicated, may have different stories to tell. Better skilled migrants may likewise have different experiences. Our study also coincides with a challenging historical time when tensions were raised by Brexit, an uncertain spatio-temporal context whose final contours have yet fully to emerge, in which EU migration, citizenship and their consequences are being recalibrated (Jonczyk Sédès et al., 2022). Future studies will be able to ascertain more clearly the effect of this reconfiguration on the challenges facing AECs alongside their prospects for societal and workplace inclusion.

Inclusion is a quintessential element in engendering positive outcomes for organizational and societal diversity (Guo et al., 2020; Klein and Amis, 2021; Mor Barak, 2019). Our study highlights the lack of coordination regarding migration at the international, EU level, where all sub-categories of EU migrants are subsumed into larger, more generic categories, and migrants become an unwanted problem for individual nations, to be externalized elsewhere. It demonstrates, at one extreme, the effective decentralization of UK migration policy to other EU countries, each of which has differing eligibility measures for admitting non-EU migrants into the EU (Gorodzeisky and Semyonov, 2009; Sarpong et al., 2020). With the hollowing out and disarticulation of the organs of state in recent years (Groutsis et al., 2015), organizations at the meso level have become the main drivers of migration in terms of determining who is employed in the UK, since institutional coordination is often absent.

The upshot of these institutional voids is that it is the exercise of agency at an individual, micro level, informed by countless small-scale decisions and ‘fluid understandings of “provisional” circumstances’ (Hall, 2018: 981), combined with employers’ recruitment decisions at the meso level, which together determine the significant macro-level migration flows we see today. The AECs we interviewed had come to the UK by means of their EU citizenship, prior to which they had travelled from West Africa. All had personal stories to relate about their journeys. Individual life stories inform those of

larger communities (Maclean et al., 2017), feeding into broader historical interdependency networks of which they are emblematic. AEC biographies intersect with meso-level urban migration and the bigger picture of global migration at a macro level, highlighting the complex interchanges between local, organizational, regional, and global domains. The macro level thus only makes sense when seen through the lens of individual stories, strategies, and searches for opportunities. We conclude with the observation that the often-poignant narratives we heard in the field challenge the illusion that researchers can remain objective when researching contexts of discrimination and displacement that entail immense political and material inequalities.

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Appendix I. Overview of methodological approach.

	The what	The how	Key assumptions	Questions asked	Outcome
Step one	Exploratory stage of research	Grounded, abductive approach to coding interviews	AECs' lived experiences in naturalized countries inform decision to explore migratory move	How do relations and networks of migrants inform their mobility?	A subjective sense of how AECs mobilize and appropriate their spatially dispersed relational networks
Step two	Identifying salient discursive acts reflecting the mobilization of relational capital	Leveraging data from interviews informed by our theoretical lens of figurational sociology	Factors such as access to education and inclusion influence AECs' decisions about work and relocation	How do culturally-situated social practices contribute to migration moves? Why, after gaining citizenship in an EU member state, do AECs choose to remain in the UK, even post-Brexit?	Understanding how culturally-situated social practices by AECs enhance opportunities for work and inclusion. Understanding how economic and cultural space offered to AECs fosters opportunities for inclusion in host society
Step three	Zooming in and out of discursive experiences of intra-EU mobility	Further probing and analysis of our data to generate empirically driven insights concerning the (in)efficacy of AECs to actualize mobility and opportunities for inclusion	Family, friends, and acquaintances play a vital role in facilitating migratory moves		

Source: Adapted from Poldner et al. (2019: 156).

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