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‘Thriving instead of surviving’:

A capability approach to geographical career transitions in the creative industries

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Abstract

This article examines career transitions in creative industries that involve geographical relocation from large metropolitan creative cities to small, remote and marginal urbanities. Drawing on 31 in-depth biographical interviews with freelancers who have relocated to peripheral Southern European locales, the article explores the ways in which creative workers make sense of and justify their career transitions away from the metropolis, while reflexively reassessing the shifting meaning of their career success. We propose the adoption of Nussbaum’s capability approach in the study of such career transitions as a means of strengthening current theorizing about the role played by urban contexts in individual conceptualizations of career success and meaningful professional identities. Applying this analytical lens, we tease out the ways in which our informants perceived the influence exerted by different urban contexts on their individual agency to enact a set of capabilities for the attainment of wellbeing and quality of life at different stages in their careers while striving to preserve a stable professional identity as creative workers. We argue that a ‘good life evaluation’, which include a reflexive reassessment of the capabilities to live life well while pursuing a creative career, underlies creative workers’ shifting interpretations of geographical career transition.

Keywords: Career transition; Career Success; Creative Careers; Career Sense-making, Identity Work, Creative Cities; Capabilities; Creative Labour; Creative Industries, Cultural Economy, Cultural work, Capability Approach, Nussbaum, Sen

1. Introduction

The connection between cities and careers is nowhere more pronounced than in creative industries. Defying claims about 'the end of geography' (O'Brien, 1992) and the elision of distance (Gregg, 2012) in a globalized digital era, the literature on creative industries postulates a compelling link between core metropolitan cities, creativity, and creative careers. Metropolitan cities are almost invariably lauded as 'icons of the creative economy' (Howkins, 2002: 74) and 'cauldrons of creativity' (Florida, 2005: 1). Informal urban social networks, vibrant artistic scenes and robust art markets are assumed to stimulate a geographical clustering of 'creative class' workers, attracting an ever-greater agglomeration of creative enterprises into much-hailed 'creative hubs' (Lingo and Tepper, 2013; Oakley et al., 2017; Comunian, 2011). In the absence of labour market institutions to regulate access to creative careers, such as certification for example (McRobbie, 2016), many creative workers seek the aura and iconic status of creative metropolises as sources of validation. To quote Lingo and Tepper (2013: 346): 'You're not a real artist unless you've made it in New York.' As paradigmatic embodiments of boundaryless careers, creative careers are largely free from organizational determinations of success and progression (Tams and Arthur, 2010; Svejenova, 2005) but are intimately bound with the symbolic status of cities (Hracs et al., 2011). 'Cool' and 'fashionable cities' are imaginary spaces of creative work that possess the power to 'symbolically consecrate their inhabitants by allowing them to partake in the social, economic or cultural capital accumulated by the inhabitants as a whole' (Bourdieu and Accardo, 1999: 129; Allen and Hollingworth, 2013).

Unsurprisingly, therefore, studies of creative careers are overwhelmingly focussed on core or metropolitan creative cities such as London, Berlin and New York (McRobbie, 2016; McLeod et al., 2012). These studies typically examine the career entry of young graduates who flock to the 'big city' in great numbers, lured by the promise of internships in fashion, music or film, enticed by

mythologized aspirations of urban coolness, cosmopolitanism and fortune that surround a 'metropolitan creative career' (Allen and Hollingworth, 2013). Critical studies contend, however, that core creative cities have become 'unliveable' due to contextual factors such as labour oversupply, fierce competition and gentrification – all of which reinforce precarity and social inequalities and inflict severe psychosomatic illness, burnout and anxiety (Oakley et al., 2017; Brook, O'Brien and Taylor, 2020), resulting in high exit rates from creative professions (Cattani et al., 2008).

Challenging the idea that creative careers are only viable in core cities, and offering a corrective to the 'unliveable' 'creative metropolis' thesis, recent scholarship has started examining less glamorous creative careers in crafts, folk art and home-based creativity in places considered second-tier, marginal and remote, both in a symbolic and geographical sense (Alacovska, 2018; Gibson, 2014; Hracs et al., 2011; Luckman, 2012; Oakley and Ward, 2018). Such studies examine how remote urbanities, conjuring 'liveable', slow-paced, idyllic and cooperative settings, can influence the ability of creative workers to access creative careers and attain economic sustainability while accomplishing personal and alternative versions of meaningful work.

Since core cities have often been found to become 'unliveable' for poorly paid and precarious creative workers, while remote localities have been found to be conducive to sustainable creative careers, one may reasonably expect that creative workers would tend to migrate away from creative metropolises, especially after an initial youthful 'honeymoon' period filled with inflated aspirations of a metropolitan creative career (Boswell et al., 2005). However, despite the recognised influence of metropolitan and marginal urbanities on entry into and exit from creative careers, there remains an analytical blindspot with regard to career transitions, i.e. movements across occupational and organizational boundaries, work roles and geographies (Louis, 1980; Ng et al., 2005). The lack of studies on inter-city career transitions in creative industries is all the more puzzling given the

documented high levels of dissatisfaction with 'metropolitan' creative careers (Hracs et al., 2011). Such dissatisfaction is a factor that has elsewhere engendered job change intentions (Chen et al., 2011; Chudzikowski et al., 2009), including cross-national border transitions (Zikic et al., 2010).

This article addresses the geographical career transition gap in the literature by empirically examining, through 31 in-depth biographical interviews, the career transition narratives of creative workers who have relocated from metropolitan cities to marginal places in Southeast Europe in order to be able to continue working as creative professionals and preserve their occupational roles. In exploring the post hoc self-narratives and retrospective sense-making of creative workers who have undergone career transitions from metropolitan to peripheral cities, we examine how creative workers make sense of their inter-city career transitions. In this way we seek to understand how creative workers interpret their career transitions in relation to urban context. The article thus also teases out the meaning of – and changing personal orientations to – the spatiotemporal dynamics of career success, defined as 'an internal compass' integral to career change (Shen et al., 2015: 3).

By empirically focusing on workers in creative industries in Southeast Europe, we contribute an emic perspective to careers from a region and an industry that have been long neglected in career literature – a literature that has universally theorized careers drawing on limited empirical evidence gleaned from a relatively small set of Western developed countries and traditional industrial sectors (Briscoe et al., 2018). Our study thus responds to recent calls for more qualitative career research that encompasses the diversity and complexity of career transitions across geographies (Briscoe et al., 2018; Chudzikowski et al., 2009; Rodrigues and Guest, 2010).

The inter-city transitions we empirically study are less-studied 'intra-role transitions' involving 'a changing orientation to a role already held' (Louis, 1980: 330), in contrast, that is, to 'inter-role' transitions entailing a change of occupational and organizational identities (Ibarra and Barbulescu, 2010). Intra-role transitions entail *changing* perceptions of one's *continuing* and

immutable professional role brought about by personal experiences, values and lifecourse events. As intra-role transitions, the inter-city transitions we studied involved well-calculated and reflexive efforts at professional role preservation via shifting reassessments of the meaning of well-being and quality of life in various urban contexts. Given our empirical focus, we do not approach career transition sense-making as a form of rhetorical and discursive identity-making process that mobilizes organisational narrative identity templates such as vision and mission statements or corporate strategies (Ibarra and Barbulescu, 2010; Ebaugh, 1988). Instead we propose to analyse intra-role career transitions self-narratives by applying the capability approach to human development, as an approach that focuses rather on peoples' subjective re-assessment and re-evaluation of the capabilities needed to achieve 'a life lived well' in given local contexts (Nussbaum, 2011). Drawing on the capability approach, we show that performing and constructing an authentic and coherent discursive career identity represents only one aspect of career change sense-making. A sustained re-reinterpretation and re-assessment of the opportunity to lead a good life within specific spatio-temporal contexts is an equally important dimension.

The capability approach foregrounds the role of 'real' contextual constraints (Sen, 1987), including economic, social and normative constraints that limit or enable people's capabilities to achieve wellbeing and quality of life, i.e. to choose a life one personally values as meaningful and important (Nussbaum, 2011; Hobson, 2013; Ayudhya, Prouska and Beauregard, 2019). Disconnecting people from their values is a major source contributing to individual experience of meaninglessness at work (Bailey & Adrian, 2016). We align with these findings and emphasize the role of contextual factors in assessments and construals of subjective career success and meaningful work identities. In so doing we demonstrate how the capability approach contributes to and extends existing studies of career sense-making and career success. Career success studies typically define success as based either on subjective perceptions such as personal meaning or happiness, typically

operationalized as 'job satisfaction' (Ng et al., 2005), or on objectively measurable achievements such as increases in salary, promotion and upward mobility (Heslin, 2005). However, a recent 'contextual turn' (Gunz and Mayrhofer, 2011; 2018; Arthur et al., 1995), with which we ally, has argued for the mutual dependence between subjective and objective career dimensions and advocated a sustained consideration both of spatial factors, such as national, cultural and urban context, and temporal factors, such as age and life-course events, for the personal reassessment of career success.

Following in these footsteps we show how the career change interpretations we studied involved both structural 'objective reasons' to leave the metropolis (such as unaffordability of housing, restricted access to healthcare, scarcity of available jobs, long commuting distances, and overcrowded labour markets) as well as 'subjective evaluations' of the opportunities (or the obstacles) to live a life well while pursuing a creative career (including cherishing close relational and community ties, enjoying nature, privileging recreation and creative experimentation) (Sen, 1987; Nussbaum, 2011). In articulating their experiences of inter-city career change, these individuals were not only (narratively) performing identity work but were also coming to terms (interpretively) with what it means to live a life well, including the meaning of a good life, well-being, and quality of life. We also demonstrate how the interviewees' reassessments of their career capabilities were neither fixed nor monolithic but varied with chronological age and career-stage.

2. Literature

2.1 Career identities and career success in career sense-making narratives

Scholars of identity work usefully argue that workers have a varying scope of agency to co-construct their self-identities while acting upon and with institutionally prescribed discursive, symbolic and epistemological resources for career and/or corporate identity-formation (Brown 2019: 15). Despite

their recognition of worker agency, however, identity work scholars presuppose that organizations or firms are the typical providers of discursive identity and narrative identity scripts to be worked upon by active social agents. As organisations have long been taken to furnish 'objective markers' of career success such as progressive upward movement, material advancement and promotion (Dries, 2011), so the associated discourses of 'stable path' and 'the rhetoric of "stability", "linearity" and "progress" 'have become 'reified' subjective identity-making, discursive and sense-making resources (Potter, 2019: 4). Such discourses permeate wider cultural, social and biographical contexts, in spite of (rather than because of) a unitary nature of identity never being achievable 'in practice' (Ibarra and Barbulescu, 2010). Even when career scholars investigate the assiduous identity work that accompanies significant inter-organisational career transitions, such as role changes entailing movement in-between radically different types of organisation and 'socially undesirable' role changes such as leaving a high-flying 'career as a banker to become a candle maker' (Ibarra and Barbulescu, 2010: 148), the focus is overwhelmingly on coherence, continuity, authenticity, and the validation outcomes of 'efficient' identity work, which always implies getting to grips with the entrenched tenet that 'a role transition should represent progress' (Ibarra and Barbulescu, 2010: 139; see also Hoyer and Steyaert, 2015). Recognising individual desires for identity continuity and coherence, organisations have been found to use onboarding and socialization programmes to ensure the stability of identity-making processes following inter-organisational transitions (Sullivan and Al Aris, 2019).

However, in an era when urban areas as a whole rather than singular organisations are increasingly being recognised as one of the most important contexts for careers in the 21st century (Kennedy et al., 2018), the identity work perspective provides only partial answers to how people negotiate 'who they are and want to be' (Brown, 2019: 15) and what constitutes a 'successful career' (Dries, 2011). Moreover, in an era in which individuals are making more frequent and more

substantive transitions not only across organisations, industries and occupations but also across cities, countries and regions (Sullivan and Al Aris, 2019), the identity work perspective is insufficient to explain career sense-making processes. When organisational, managerial and occupational entities are no longer the central 'regulators of identity' and primary 'manufactures of discourses' to be actively mobilized by social and institutional actors to 're-create themselves' via the microprocessors of identity 'performance' and 'co-construction' (Creed et al., 201: 1339), approaches to identity-making must be refined and updated accordingly. What are the identity-making processes involved when, instead of undertaking an inter-organisational and/or highly institutionalized career change, people undertake an inter-city but intra-role transition? When cities become the primary contexts of careers instead of organisations, how do workers negotiate their identities beyond authenticity, coherence and stability?

To capture the importance of the shifting career context for career narratives and career success evaluation, in this article we refocus analysis away from subjectively constructed self-understandings of who people are and aspire to become, drawing as these do on idealized discourses of progress, promotion and upward mobility (Brown, 2019) that are indelibly linked to notions of 'career success' associated with organisational and industrial 'stable' career trajectories (Dries, 2011). To foreground the salience of contextual and material (as opposed to only discursive) conditions and resources, we propose adopting the capability approach (Nussbaum, 2011; Sen, 1987). Capabilities, according to Sen (1987: 36), are 'the real opportunities' one has to pursue a life that one personally considers good and flourishing within a given political, structural and cultural context. In this view, a broader set of contextual factors, including, *inter alia*, the opportunity to 'objectively' access housing and education, as well as self-respect, imagination and recreation (Nussbaum, 2011), play a vital role in subjective negotiations and re-assessments of the capability to achieve a good life.

We therefore shift our analytical focus to the ways in which people negotiate and make sense of the capability to achieve a ‘good life’ in specific spatio-temporal (urban, geographical) circumstances while actively pursuing careers of their choosing. By focussing on capabilities we do not undermine the salience of identity work; rather we argue that the discursive construction and performance of a narrative identity is only one aspect of career sense-making. The subjective construal of capabilities, or the re-assessment of ‘real opportunities’ to ‘live a life well’, is an equally important yet under-researched and neglected aspect of career sense-making. The identity work perspective has already been criticised for dis-embedding identity-making processes from contextual ‘socio-material conditions’ (Brown, 2019: 16) and thus disregarding the actual practices of coping that these processes enable or curb. Scholars have already warned that ‘identity work cannot be divorced from the broader structural arena’ (Nadin, 2007: 465).

Studies of boundaryless careers, i.e. careers that are not confined to any single organisation or firm but stretch across organisational settings through engagements in temporary projects (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996), have already postulated that individual and contextual factors are tightly interwoven in sense-making processes of career success. As boundaryless career identities are necessarily fragmented, transitional, non-linear and unpredictable (Tams and Arthus, 2010), evading any singular organisation’s discursive power, individuals not only have to sustain discursive identities (always in reference with a new employer) but also to devise proactive behaviours, career competencies and adaptive abilities to cope successfully with boundary-spanning. For example, both the competency model of boundaryless careers (DeFillippi and Arthur, 1994) and intelligent career theory (Arthur et al., 1995) propose that, in addition to a person’s need to perform identity work as embodied in the competencies of ‘knowing-why’ (entailing a person’s identification with a firm’s culture), the competencies of ‘knowing-how’ (cultivating cutting-edge skill-sets and expertise) and the competencies of ‘knowing-whom’ (building robust network support and reputation) are equally

important in negotiating boundary transitions and career success. In his influential career resource model, Hirschi (2012) proposed that identity resources are only one feature in a series of critical career resources that include psychological resources, human capital resources and social resources, all of which are indispensable for successfully managing career transitions. In this agentic perspective, individuals proactively plan and constantly subjectively negotiate and re-examine the (objective) possibilities of achieving successful career goals as they go about their career transitions.

Structural perspectives on career transitions posit that no matter how agentic and proactive actors are, contextual and 'objective' factors such as occupational barriers, labour market segmentation, social class, and demographic factors such as age all serve to constrain career trajectories and career success (Gunz and Mayerhofer, 2018; Meyerhofer et al., 2007; Zikic et al., 2010; Jung and Takeuchi, 2019). Increasingly, however, many prominent scholars have argued that objective and subjective career dimensions are interdependent rather than isolated or dualistic (Hughes, 1958; Tams and Arthur, 2010; Guan et al., 2019). These studies emphasize the primacy of subjective interpretations of contextual and structural conditions relative to both the 'old' and the 'new objective reality' of each career transition, and especially of transitions that involve cross-national border movement, as in the case of highly-skilled immigration (Zikic et al., 2010: 670). In addition, every career transition entails shifting evaluations of 'broader aspects of one's life such as the interaction between family and work' (Zikic et al., 2010: 669), in turn entailing conceptualizations of 'career satisfaction' that fluctuate across individual lifespans 'as people grow older' (Jung and Takeuchi, 2019: 75).

Initial efforts have been made by some scholars to capture multifaceted personal perceptions of career success wherein work and non-work 'life' considerations of career success are not understood as static or compartmentalized but as intimately intertwined. Derr (1986), for example, suggested a career success map, while Schein (1971) proposed 'career anchors' to frame the multiple

idiosyncratic psychological and integrated work-life dimensions of job satisfaction. Through this lens, the meaning of a successful career is not determined solely by organisationally confined upward job successions in (inter-)organisational spaces) but rather by 'what one is realizing in comparison with one's internal career anchors' within family, community and neighbourhood spaces (Cohen and Duberley, 2015; De Vos and Van der Heijden, 2015: 4). A growing number of studies thus stress the importance for career success of subjectively experienced contextual factors and assessments of the quality of whole 'life worlds' (Gunz and Mayerhofer, 2018). In particular, meaningfulness of work may not necessarily derive from work-related factors, but more so from elements of life enrichment (Bailey & Adrian, 2016).

We propose adopting the capability approach as an alternative 'quality of life assessment' tool for a holistic appraisal of career narratives and personal orientations to career success in career sense-making (Nussbaum, 2011: 20). The capability framework posits that 'well-being' and 'overall quality of life' be premised on a fusion rather than separation of work and life, and as such to be central to an evaluation of career success across 'worklife' (Hobson, 2013). Such an approach is especially apposite in the study of boundaryless careers, including creative careers, in which life and work domains are fluid and interpenetrating (Gregg, 2011) and wherein identity threats do not necessarily emanate from a single organisation (as postulated in identity work perspectives) but from multifarious complex obstacles to achieving a 'good life' (Banks, 2017). As the link between boundaryless creative careers and particular urban settings is now already well-established, the urban context becomes the central locus that either affords or curbs workers' career capabilities for attaining a life lived well.

2.2 Capabilities for Pursuing a Life Lived Well in Specific Spatiotemporal Contexts

The capability approach to human well-being is currently enjoying renewed vigour and popularity in areas far removed from its original context of economic development (Sen, 1999), including

having recently been deployed in analysis of creative work (Banks, 2017), cultural value (Scott, Rowe and Pollock, 2015) and careers (Robertson, 2015).

What scholars find especially valuable in this approach is its definition of well-being as a form of 'flourishing' that takes into account the plurality of 'good ways of living' that people personally value as worthy and strive to pursue in different local socio-economic and socio-cultural contexts (Sayer, 2011: 135). Some scholars reject a relativistic understanding of well-being in which the value of flourishing is relativized as a discursive construct or culturally coded convention (Sayer, 2011). For example, Sen (1999) advocates for a plural-objectivist principle that allows for specifying the 'objective conditions' under which humans may subjectively flourish or suffer, i.e. be 'better or worse off' (Banks, 2017: 156). Sen (1999) further argues that 'objective conditions' such as environmental factors (including infrastructure, geographic location, physical set-up) and societal factors (including political systems, public policies, institutions) serve not only as constraints but also as resources available to people who possess various capabilities to convert them into actual life outcomes or functionings. A 'good life' in this sense thus consists of being able to live and work in supportive, sustaining and meaningful environments, including urban environments that offer minimum conditions of 'liveability' and, by extension, offer at least the minimum conditions necessary to nurture and expand citizens' individual capacities to achieve a 'good life', i.e. to achieve 'flourishing' by enacting their fullest social, economic and psychological potential (Nussbaum, 2011).

Nussbaum (2011) specifies ten sets of 'central human capabilities' as minimum preconditions for a life lived well. The concept of capability refers to the freedom or choice people have to act, do and perform certain things they subjectively value as salient and meaningful (Sen, 1999: 18). Economic, social, political and cultural factors constrain or facilitate individual capabilities, which in turn constrain or facilitate their 'functioning', i.e. people's actual realization

of their capabilities within specific contexts (Nussbaum, 2011: 25). According to Nussbaum (2011: 20), the idea of capabilities is 'the basis for a comprehensive quality-of-life assessment'. In this model, people assess which actual functionings are better or worse for the accomplishment of their well-being or flourishing by gauging the extent to which they are able to actualize or are constrained from actualizing their capabilities, as comprehensively spelt out in the pre-set list of ten capabilities. This list of capabilities comprises a set of criteria against which one can assess a personally meaningful life, including the adjacent considerations of work-life balance and the pursuit of a successful career (Hobson, 2011). Through this lens, a successful career should enhance well-being by affording the ability to accomplish the core set of human capabilities in practice (see Table 1).

Table 1: Capabilities proposed to foster Career Well-Being (based on Nussbaum, 2011: 33–34):

Capability (Operationalization of quality of life)	**Abridged Description**
Life	Being able to live a life of normal length.
Bodily health	Being able to have good health, nourishment and adequate shelter.
Bodily integrity	Being able to move freely and securely from place to place.
Senses, imagination and thought	Being able to use one's senses, imagination and thought, informed by adequate education, to produce works of one's own choice, as informed by freedom of expression, including artistic expression, and to avoid non-beneficial adversity.
Emotions	Being able to form attachments to things and people outside of oneself and not having one's emotional development blighted by fear and anxiety.
Practical reason	Being able to critically engage in planning one's own life and to form a conception of the good life.
Affiliation	Being able to live with others, to recognise and show concern for other human beings, and to have the social basis for self-respect and non-humiliation.
Other species	Being able to live in connection with nature.
Play	Being able to laugh and play and enjoy recreational activities.
Control over one's environment	Being able to seek employment on an equal basis with others; to work as a human being exercising practical reason and entering into relationships of mutual recognition with other workers.

By virtue of its substantive and multifaceted account of human well-being, the capability approach furnishes a valuable tool for attaining more holistic reappraisals of career success within specific local contexts by offering an integrative life-work model of well-being in which non-work factors

such as family relationships, community affiliations, health, recreation and purposeful activities are intertwined with work and local economic factors. On this basis, some scholars have defined the capability model as a framework 'of what it means to be fully human' (Scott et al., 2018: 181). The approach differs from prevalent psychology-based approaches to career success and subjective well-being that measure only job satisfaction and happiness at work (Briscoe et al., 2018) in that well-being is always evaluated within the capability approach in conjunction with plural contextual factors and multiple personal value judgements of what 'constitutes quality of life' (Robeyns, 2005) and what it means to be 'fully human' (Scott et al., 2018). This idea aligns with intelligent career theory in that a career is explored as an overall process that can accommodate multiple elements of influence from different sources (Parker, 2002; Arthur et al., 1995). Capabilities do not exist in a void but in a person's functional and imaginative relation with their working and living environment and with temporality. Through a capability lens, therefore, career success implies the freedom or ability to enact in practice a set of career-related capabilities across life-work domains in specific spatiotemporal settings. In other words, a 'good career' enables the *in situ* realization of valued lifestyles, i.e. of 'being' and 'doings' (Sen, 1999) that are self-determined and not restricted only to work (Robertson, 2015). A 'good' career provides a minimum threshold of conditions that enable the accomplishment of a 'life lived well'. The meaning of a 'good life', however, is not static; rather it involves rebalancing and re-ranking the relative importance of capabilities, as individuals come to value different capabilities (and types of life) differently at different stages in their lives and careers (Robeyns, 2005).

Based on our empirical evidence, we argue that workers' reassessments and renegotiations of their abilities to accomplish these capabilities within specific urban contexts and across their lifespans constitute a central facet of career sense-making that coexists with oft-studied processes of identity-making. Our analysis of creative workers' experiences of inter-city transitions, elucidates

the ways in which people negotiate the meaning of a 'good life' (central to the subjective evaluations of career success) against a set of contextual and structural (objective) career challenges/opportunities encountered in the creative metropolises they abandoned (push factors) and those they met in the 'marginal' city to which they migrated (pull factors).

However, some points of criticism are in order. Although the capability approach allows us to understand geographical career transitions beyond organisational structures and discursive constructions of career success and situate career within the broader life and life course, its top-down imposition of central capabilities may blind us to the impending complexities and multifariousness of people's career aspirations and career sense-making processes (Robeyns, 2005). Equating life capabilities with career capabilities may thus unduly delimit the understanding of a successful career only to a pre-determined set of individual subjective conceptions of the 'good life' as linked to a pre-set list of career capabilities for the achievement of wellbeing. In this way, by outlining what is objectively meaningful to people, the capability approach may in fact obfuscate the boundaries of an individual's agency (the sheer availability of choices) to actually achieve wellbeing and the 'good life' (the feasibility of real choosing). We maintain however that a contextualized empirical analysis is well-suited to clarify the blurred links between pre-given 'ideal' conditions enabling 'substantive freedoms to choose' (Sen, 1999) and lived and situated choices in concrete socio-political and socio-economic conditions.

3. Method

The data on which this article builds was generated as part of a larger project that investigated the experiences of work and career success in post-socialist creative industries in South-East Europe. The project was supported by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation and was undertaken in the period 2014–2016. A total of 166 in-depth interviews were conducted with creative workers in various cities in Macedonia and Albania, including their respective capital cities

of Skopje and Tirana, as well as five cities with smaller populations: Ohrid, Stip and Bitola in Macedonia; and Durres and Elbasan in Albania. We drew informants from four creative industries selected on the basis of their local economic significance: music, theatre, new media, and fashion. Following the definition of 'career' given by Arthur, Hall and Lawrence (1989: 8) as 'the evolving sequence of a person's work experiences over time', we conducted in-depth life-history interviews and solicited meaning-making accounts of creative work experiences, including biographical accounts of education, aspirations to pursue a creative career, entry into the industry, and subjective responses to experienced work conditions.

In this article we draw on 31 interviews (14 women and 17 men) that 'serendipitously' (Merton, 1968) included interviews with creative workers who had settled in 'remote' cities of South-East Europe after protracted periods of trying to establish creative careers in core creative cities. The respondents in the sample had a mean age of 41, with most being in mid-career stage, i.e. 10 to 15 years into their creative careers. At the time of the interviews, our informants had lived in South-East Europe for 3 to 4 years on average. The first author, who originates from the region, conducted the interviews in local languages with the dedicated assistance of local data-gatherers. The interviews lasted from 1 to 2.5 hours and were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The first author provided the initial coding schemes in English-language translation. The authorial team then reiteratively discussed the data until consensus was reached. The informants were solicited via a local non-profit art organisation. Snowballing was used to ensure the breadth, diversity and spread of the sample. Meticulous anonymisation has been undertaken to protect privacy.

Our sampling approach did not specifically target creative workers who had experienced a geographical career change, although snowball sampling inevitably increased the likelihood of obtaining a sample with similar demographic and personal characteristics. 'A strong component of chance' turned our empirical case into a 'serendipitous case' (Merton, 1968). According to Merton

(1968: 157), 'accidental circumstances' in research generate epistemologically relevant results by facilitating the discovery of unanticipated 'serendipity patterns' that can then be subjected to systematic analysis and theorization. A 'serendipity pattern' refers to 'the fairly common experience of observing an *unanticipated, anomalous and strategic* datum which becomes the occasion for developing a new theory or for extending an existing theory' (Merton, 1968: 157).

The importance of the urban context for career transition and success thus emerged from, not prior to, our data analysis. Given the strong validation influence of metropolitan creative cities in creative careers, with self-concepts of career success inextricably linked to core cities (Lingo and Tepper, 2013), our informants felt compelled (largely unprompted) to justify and post-rationalize their seemingly 'awkward' and 'improper' acts of relocating to 'lesser' cities at Europe's peripheries. Such retrospective sense-making, or post-rationalization, refers to the desire, often unconscious, to account for counterintuitive behaviours and motives in order to make them appear plausible, viable and well-planned (Hoyer and Steyaert, 2015; Ibarra and Barbulescu, 2010).

Our informants' post-rationalizations of their career transitions from core metropolitan cities to remote and marginal cities thus constituted an 'unanticipated finding' that gave rise to 'a serendipitous pattern' in our data that did not fit with the predominantly 'metropolis-based' theory on creative work. On observing this serendipity pattern, we proceeded to abductive analysis, entailing 'a recursive moving back and forth between a set of observations and a theoretical generalization' (Tavory and Timmermans, 2014: 4). Abductive analysis begins with an initial observation and proceeds with the aim of finding the simplest plausible explanation of the phenomenon observed. Following these procedures, we first set out to distil first-order categories relative to the serendipitous observation, thematising the main ways in which our informants made sense of their career transitions across geographical boundaries and categorizing the data in terms of ongoing semiotic construction of meaning. We compiled a 'vocabulary of motives' (Mills, 1963)

and a list of 'why-s', or emic reason-giving, for career transitions (Tilly, 2006). The following key thematic clusters emerged: 'bad/improved health'; 'unaffordable/affordable rent'; 'long/short commute'; 'work-life misbalance/balance'; and 'competitive/collaborative spaces'. All the clusters appeared to thematise the perceived push/pull factors of metropolitan and marginal cities in terms of the extent to which they enabled our informants to pursue and preserve creative careers.

On the basis of this first-order reason-giving we subsequently 'formed plausible conjectures' by asking and iteratively discussing between ourselves 'what the data plausibly could be a case of' (Tavory and Timmermans, 2014: 5). We thus undertook an inferential inquiry aimed at producing a higher-order plausible explanation for our informants' perceived causes (or 'why-s') of their geographical career transitions. According to Tilly (2006: 15), reason-giving is often a means of negotiating, repairing and confirming social identities and lives, typically following the occurrence of a rupture or transition. Following the procedures of abductive analysis, we 'revisited the data' (Tavory and Timmermans, 2014: 58) and developed second-order categories in accordance with Tilly's (2006: 34) theory of reason-giving as a means of repairing ruptures in social life. We then ordered the informants' multifarious reasons and justifications of relocation into higher-order thematic clusters according to their salience in regard to 'repairing social life'. These included 'a quest for a well-integrated work-life', 'escaping a city's unlivability' and 'striving for a life-lived well'. These 'reason-giving' categories defied the basic tenets in the existing literature on careers that define career success as merely job satisfaction or a positive narrative identity construct. Following Tavory and Timmermans (2014: 123), we then 'applied alternative casings' to the understanding of our data by applying the capability approach (Nussbaum, 2011). The capability approach offers a holistic and integrative model of human well-being as the individual fulfilment of ten human capabilities requisite for the attainment of 'good life' in specific spatiotemporal settings, including urban settings. We first used this model of wellbeing as a means of systematically

capturing our informants' sense-making of their career transitions. We then 'revisited' the data again and 'cased' it in the novel alternative framework. In this way we cross-examined the informants' career self-narratives against the list of ten capabilities, leading us to rethink career transitions as a function of workers' continuous re-assessment and re-appraisal of their career capabilities, which to varying degrees bestowed them with the ability to pursue a 'good work-life' within specific contexts.

In the process of iterative coding, the temporality of our informants' career accounts also emerged as a significant theme, coinciding almost completely with the theme of ever-changing individual reassessments of capabilities. Noting this theme led us to distinguish at a meta-analytical level between the different career-stages in which our informants reflexively recounted shifts and breaks in their definitions of a good life and the capabilities required to live a life well. Once the career-stage model had been identified, we re-reviewed the data for consistency and validity.

4. Findings – Pursuing a Good Life in a Creative Career

In their efforts to justify their career transitions from creative metropolises to peripheral cities, our informants habitually attended to and interpreted the city contexts in which their creative careers had unfolded. The success of a career, whether in a remote and marginal locality or in a metropolis, was always evaluated by the interviewees in reference to a set of capabilities provided in different urban career contexts for pursuing a 'good life' (for an overview, see Table 2).

Table 2: Findings plotted onto Nussbaum's capability framework: capabilities enabled by metropolitan versus small city creative careers

HUMAN WELLBEING	CAREER WELLBEING	
Capabilities	*Creative career in a metropolitan city*	*Creative career in a remote marginal city*
Life	N/A	N/A
Bodily health	Jeopardizes health, as long commutes to jobs/clients cause anxiety and stress (n=30)	Alleviates stress and anxiety by easing work intensity, given lower costs of

	Inflicts burnout from overworking to cover the costs of unaffordable accommodation and rehearsal space (n=28) Threatens ability to stay in the city and maintain a professional creative role, given high living/rehearsal costs of gentrified areas (N=31)	living and affordable housing/rehearsal space (n=31) Improves health, since slow-paced and laid-back urban and working environments perceived to favourably impact and assuage psychosomatic illnesses (n=29)
Bodily integrity	Offers the ability to move to other urban centres by leveraging the 'symbolic' capital accrued in the 'big city' (n=28)	Jeopardizes future ability to move back to a metropolitan creative career (erosion of symbolic capital) (n=27)
Senses, imagination and thought	Nurtures artistic prowess and critical appreciation, which are crucial for career success, through proximity to rich metropolitan cultural amenities and offerings such as theatres, exhibitions and festivals, though these are often considered expensive and inaccessible (n=16) Precludes the cultivation of cognitive and imaginative capacities, given the severity of labour market competition and unbearable overwork that obstructs self-development and self-growth (n=27)	Offers contemplative space for reflection and cultivation of imagination and thought (n=27) Undermines the confidence needed to create specific types of creative work (in more mainstream genres, for example), due to being far away from centres of art, and because perceived as severing access to distribution and exhibition networks as well as media coverage (n=23)
Emotions	Risks forsaking emotional attachment with the products of one's labour, as need to be profitable results in 'emotional selling out' and 'churning out substandard art' (n=29)	Provides the potential for developing self-respect on one's own terms (rather than the terms of the art market, for example) (n=26) Offers the ability to work on emotionally significant and personally meaningful projects that are not necessarily profitable (n=27)
Practical reasons	Helps build youthful confidence in career success and professional achievement as a result of the strong validation effect of the big city (n=26) Undermines the ability to plan confidently and optimistically for the future, given fiercely competitive urban creative labour	Builds confidence in personal agency and future career outcomes, since small cities are perceived as providing collaborative spaces and interpersonal webs of exchange – e.g. of resources, ideas and knowledge - that foster a positive outlook on future job success (n=28)

	markets, dwindling job opportunities, and unpredictable short-term contracts, etc. (n=30)	
Affiliation	Presupposes strategic networking career opportunities (social capital) (n=26) Thwarts the ability to forge close, intimate and familial relationships (care relationships) (n=24)	Enables collaboration with local communities and thus enhances the ability to work in personally valuable art forms such as social practice art (n=26) Enables friendship and mentorship (rather than competition) with other creative workers (n=29) Facilitates proximal and intimate relationships of care within local communities and neighbourhoods (n=28) Enhances strong attachment to place through creative work (n=17)
Other species	Severs the ability to be frequently close to nature (n=19)	Opportunity to be constantly close(r) to nature (lakes, mountains), which in turn is perceived to enhance work quality insofar as artists relate to nature as the basis for their creative work (n=25)
Play	Diminishes the opportunities for recreation and play, given work intensification (n=25)	Increases leisure time by reducing work intensification (n=18) Facilitates exploration, experimentation and play with different artistic identities, work styles and business models (n=25)
Control over one's environment	Offers the ability to work in non-creative side-jobs to subsidize a creative career (n=31) Reduces control over one's ability to choose when and how to work and what types of jobs to select (n=28) Reduces the ability to work in personally meaningful art forms or genres (n=28)	Enables non-monetary forms of exchange that increase well-being (such as creative work in exchange for accessing rehearsal space) (n=17) Enables collaborative creative work involving mutual support and recognition (n=25) Enables lower cost life in parallel with the possibility of working on lucrative gigs remotely via the Internet (n=20)

		Enables work in less-profitable but personally meaningful genres and art forms (n=28)

The definitions of 'good life' and 'wellbeing' applied by our informants to evaluate career success were neither static nor monovalent but evolved with different career/life stages and urban contexts, acquiring plural meanings. In the early stages of their creative careers, the creative metropolis, with its symbolic aura of creativity, cosmopolitanism and urbanity, was perceived to offer the ability to gain confidence, knowledge, networks and critical skills for becoming 'a real artist'. The vigorous metropolitan job market increased their ability to cross-subsidize the development of creative careers with part-time work in unrelated fields. In contexts of protracted low-wages, intermittent and casualized creative work, however, our informants had begun to perceive the metropolis as a threat to their professional roles. Long commutes, unaffordable prices for renting accommodation and rehearsal space, fierce labour competition, stagnating wages, long work hours and intensified work schedules necessary to cover ever-inflating living expenses all led to a range of psychosomatic illnesses, personal debt and cost constraints that jeopardized their capability to 'live life fully'. By mid-career stage, our informants had come to see metropolitan careers as enforcing a decoupling of work and life, with work prevailing over life and forcing a neglect of their own well-being and ultimately posing a threat to their lifespans.

In contrast, remote and marginal cities were perceived as spaces where earning potential could be optimized (given lower costs of living) and quality of life could be boosted. A transition to a creative career in a small city was seen as enabling a better quality of life, with life considerations such as relational commitments, community affiliations, bodily integrity, and closeness to nature all brought to bear on evaluations of career success. Our informants perceived creative careers in small marginal cities as enabling a greater degree of control over their work and life environments, as well

as enacting the emotional, affective, practical and affiliative capabilities of living life fully, even in spite of precluding the ability to attain objective career success in the form of celebrity status or commercial gain. Given the ‘serendipitous design’ of our study (Merton, 1968), the post-career-change narratives we explore do not explicitly account for the ‘hangover-honeymoon effect’ (Boswell, Boudreau and Tichy, 2005). Given the average post-turnover period of 3-4 years among our informants at the time the interviews were held, however, we believe our informants were still reporting relatively enthusiastic rather than declining affectivities and stances towards the outcomes of their geographical career transitions in spite of being in a post-honeymoon phase (i.e. a phase characterized by ‘a hangover’ from an initial inebriation with a new job’s positive facets). Below we present illustrative career self-narratives in order to elaborate on the informants’ shifting assessments of the nature of quality of life in metropolitan versus marginal urban contexts.

4.1 Metropolitan Careers: The Metropolis as a Source of Validation at Early-Career Stage

In the absence of legally sanctioned access to creative industries, the creative metropolis functioned for our informants as a proxy for success in the early stages of their careers, demonstrating the “knowing how” aspect of intelligent career theory (Arthur et al., 1995). In lieu of formal legal qualifications and training, informal and tacit knowledge were considered vital and largely seen as resulting from dwelling in the city milieu. The metropolis was initially perceived as a liberating and supportive environment, affording possibilities for risk-taking, individuality, networking and fun, as well as opportunities for keeping up with the newest cultural, artistic, technological and professional trends. Our informants derived a sense of worth, confidence and stamina from the creative identity, symbolic status and prestige of living in a creative city.

Mario, a 37-year-old fashion designer, recalled a major ‘breakthrough’ at the beginning of his career as a fashion designer:

> Rewind ten years ago. I am 27 and on a bus on my two-hour commute downtown. Every day – even weekends – for three years. I was doing an internship at a fashion house of my dreams – in New York of all places! It was too good to be true. I had to pinch myself in the morning to believe this was happening to me. Going out, meeting wonderful people, having fun. The hustle and bustle of the city, the nightlife! Wow!

Gary, a 45-year-old fashion designer, deployed the tropes of 'the creative city' and its aura and symbolic identity as a resource for career success in describing his fascination with Paris where he had studied fashion design. For Gary, career worth was initially attained by direct association with the creative city:

> In my field, Paris is the pinnacle of success. If you make it there you are a fashion designer for real. All that flair, all that history, all that taste makes you special as an artist. And if you make it there then you can make it everywhere! You might be a mediocre fashion designer, but simply the fact that you work in Paris inflates your value abroad. So that's why I put up with so many years of misery there.

For some informants, hopping from one creative city to the next creative city had become a normalized practice. In the hope of finding her real 'home', Nela, a 46-year-old graphic designer, lived in three regional creative cities before finally going back to her small hometown:

> I was upwardly mobile – a graphic designer with cutting-edge skills. I was unburdened with other responsibilities, so it was easy to just follow the tide. Every time I moved to a new city my salary went up but my workdays become longer.

At early-career stage, three capabilities seemed to play a distinctive 'architectural role' (Nussbaum, 2011: 39) in establishing a 'successful' creative career: affiliation; practical considerations; and control over one's environment. The metropolis had at first empowered our informants by offering them the freedom to plan their work and lives in line with their dreams and aspirations, as well as

vis-à-vis other creative workers in the urban social network. The metropolis thus provided a social and symbolic basis for professional self-respect, seemingly enabling the "knowing whom" aspect of intelligent career model (Arthur et al., 1995). However, the metropolis eventually ceased to be commensurate with personal assessments of quality-of-life and dignity, especially since at a different life stage the 'knowing why'—the internal career motivations and values (Arthur et aal., 1995) required a major makeover given that simultaneously another set of capabilities became 'architecturally' salient for the evaluation of the meaning of work-life success.

4.2 Metropolitan Careers: The Metropolis as a Threat to Living Life Well at Mid-Career Stage

For the majority of our informants it was a slow, protracted and agonising realization that the metropolis was unliveable while pursuing a creative career that underpinned their accounts of why they had decided to 'move away', abandoning their youthful dreams of creative work and of success measured by external criteria of celebrity, fame and fortune. As they grew increasingly disillusioned with metropolitan creative work, many informants contemplated a full role exit from the creative profession (e.g. by taking up more stable and lucrative teaching or service sector jobs) that would have enabled them to continue living in the metropolis, albeit no longer as professional creative workers. Given our sample we only had access to creative workers who had decided to preserve their professional roles by undertaking an inter-city transition rather than compromising on their preferred professional identity.

Mario is a fashion designer who lived in New York for two years. He felt that the injunctions of connectivity, individualization and overwork requisite to sustain a successful metropolitan creative career were becoming ever more onerous. His sense of ineptitude was exacerbated by sky-rocketing rents, and thus 'being in the metropolis' itself became a cause of agony, anxiety and constant burnout, eventually leading to his decision 'to get out':

> Then I got another internship, and then a lousily paid job for a sexy fashion label. I was juggling three jobs simultaneously to pay my rent. The rent was prohibitive. I was already sharing the flat with another five people who constantly rotated. […] I was telling myself 'I'll succeed. This is because I'm not working hard enough. I'm not challenging myself enough. I'm not creative enough. I'm not out at night as much as I should be. I'm missing out on things…' And so I self-sacrificed myself to the point of collapsing one day from exhaustion. It was then that I decided it was time to get out, to escape all that madness.

Asan, a 45-year-old musician, lived in London for seven years with his wife, also a musician, before reconsidering the future as a result of a growing recognition of the city's unliveability and the toll it was taking on his life in pursuing a career in music:

> My life in London had one common theme – squeezing. Squeezing ourselves into a one-bedroom apartment on the edge of the city, squeezing more mileage out of our meagre pay, squeezing more work in an already elongated week to squeeze ourselves into that apartment. Squeezing ourselves in overcrowded public transport – squeezing, squeezing, squeezing. And, then it was too much to take. An alternative had to be found. Then my wife got pregnant. And then it was time to reconsider everything from scratch. The choice was to stay and squeeze until you become toast or give up entirely on doing music by going into banking or something. But hey! There was also another option – just going back home to the Balkans and continuing to work as musicians!

From our interview material it emerged that by mid-career our informants had started perceiving the metropolis as an obstacle to the realization of a range of capabilities and thus as a source of suffering. The obstacles they cited to their enacting of an adequate range of capabilities included an inability to preserve bodily health (jeopardized due to unaffordable 'adequate shelter'), an inability to lead a life free from emotional and physical pain (due to overwork and underpay), an inability to access

workplaces providing dignified employment (with dignified pay and protection), an inability to enjoy free time and recreation (due to long commutes and intense work schedules), and an inability to forge meaningful relational attachments to others (due to long working days and work demands encroaching on their lives). They perceived their initial youthful choices to work in the metropolis at the expense of the accomplishment of these capabilities as a death spell. At mid-life the capability of preserving bodily integrity, which entailed moving from the metropolis to a marginal locality became an appealing exit option. The ability to move away from the metropolis to marginal localities is what Nussbaum (2011: 44) calls a 'fertile functioning', 'supporting capability formation in many other areas' of work-life that have been previously prevented from being fully realized. Below we turn to the capabilities that marginal cities helped revive for our informants.

4.3 Creative Careers in a Marginal City: Reconceptualising Success and a Life Lived Well

Given the immense symbolic significance of the metropolis for creative careers, leaving the metropolis to pursue creative careers elsewhere incurred psychological costs for our informants, including grieving for the forsaken fantasy of living and succeeding in a global artistic powerhouse. This grieving was accompanied by copious amounts of soul-searching and intense mental work. In the words of Tina, a 37-year-old dancer who left London: 'Leaving the big city was akin to grieving – grieving a lost sense of being in the fast lane close to the source of the ultimate opportunity.'

By mid-career, however, our informants had come to recognize that one of the main obstacles to pursuing a life lived well in a creative career was the unliveability of the metropolis. Over the lifespan a life lived well became incompatible with a metropolitan creative career. Our informants' career transition decisions, however, were rarely driven by naïve escapism or gullible optimism for remote 'promised lands'. Rather, their geographical career transitions were underpinned by a wholesale reconfiguration of their assessment criteria for evaluating well-being and career success, involving a reorientation of their dreams and a recalibration of their priorities.

Such reconfiguration was inextricably linked to changing perceptions, calculations and recalibrations of the liveability of small and remote urbanities, which informed their perceived ability to pursue personally meaningful lives lived well while simultaneously pursuing creative careers. Small cities were perceived as offering balanced work-life, less invasive surroundings and calmer scenery, enabling a sense of attachment, love and care, a feeling of purpose and self-respect, improved health and recreation (Nussbaum, 2011) as a reason d'être of career success. When we visited Vera, a 46-year-old theatre actor, she was living in a four-bedroom apartment together with her mother in Skopje. Vera had moved back to live with her mother some five years earlier after 'a breakdown' in her 'stellar career'. She now runs a small acting studio for schoolchildren, which in her own words has rekindled her 'joie de vivre'. Here is how Vera expounded on her ability to pursue a good life by reassessing the capabilities afforded by a career in a peripheral city:

> Working as an actor in Belgrade took its toll both financially and spiritually. The city was toxic, the theatre scene vibrant but corrupting. I became a drug addict… God saved me somehow, and I craved the peace and quiet of my hometown. […] I've always considered Skopje a parochial, ugly place. Not anymore. It offers me a simple life close to nature – a slow life, not letting it spiral away in a whirlwind. I have total serenity here. I don't pay rent, since this is my parents' home. I get to work most days with beautiful kids. The pay is enough for a decent life. It isn't easy every single day. There are periods, for example in the summer, when I struggle a bit, but it is calm – more human, more bearable!

In many cases, as with Vera, reinvigorating attachments and relational commitments to family and relatives, as well as to wider communities through the performance of socially responsible work, were cited as an important capability afforded by pursuing a creative career in a small city. Such a career shift nonetheless entailed a deep reconsideration of what constitutes 'successful' creative/artistic work, especially since local art markets far away from the dominant centres of media

and purchasing power made work in specific niche genres or art forms economically unviable. Moreover, many informants felt that the metropolitan urban sprawl had obliterated the civic engagement dimensions of both their art and their lives. Many felt that the marginal city, by contrast, had reanimated and rekindled their lost sense of community interdependencies, relational ties and local bonding. A feeling of doing meaningful work, such as 'being able to live with and towards others, to recognize and show concern for other people and animals' (Nussbaum, 2011: 33), was paramount for many informants. This was elucidated clearly in the account given by Mia, a 39-year-old performing artist:

> London had all those fascinating things, but I was not on a fascinating wage. I felt I was haemorrhaging money on a hectic life, meeting people because I needed something from them, going out, dining out to pester prospective employers. Suddenly it all became so impersonal. Then I had my son, and my panic attacks got more frequent. It was impossible to maintain a decent standard of living […] I now have the woods and the lake. This is what I worship. […] I set up an NGO and now I work with autistic children. This gives me a sense of purpose. The pay is just enough, but my expenses are also minimal. There is a community spirit around. We help each other here. Friends, relatives, neighbours. Fixing broken windows, cleaning the chimney. I can count on neighbours for childcare, and they can count on me. All this basically means fewer actual expenses. When I lived in London I was having panic attacks that I'd forgotten my son in day-care. Not anymore. I always have someone to call for help.

Our informants typically acknowledged having carefully weighed up their personal economic circumstances before 'escaping the race to the bottom' and venturing to move to a small city with affordable housing. Adam, a 43-year-old new media worker, suffered from severe panic attacks in Berlin that made him dread public spaces and avoid busy rush-hour trains, all of which jeopardized

both his general health and his job. Two years ago, he moved 'back home' to a sleepy tourist city in the Balkans with the purpose of attaining what Nussbaum (2011: 33) defines as 'emotional development' not 'blighted by constant fear and anxiety':

> Working as a visual effects designer in Berlin for a famous game developer earned me a solid deposit. Now in Berlin that would have not gotten me far enough to be honest. But in Macedonia this was more than enough for a small house with a garden overlooking the lake! I work when I feel like it. Now I've a great reputation on online freelance websites and only accept jobs that are interesting. I work freelance for local developing companies, but just part-time. Life doesn't cost much around here. I save on high rent, high insurance costs, high-priced commuting. I have no car. … My mental health improved vastly almost overnight! I chose thriving instead of surviving!

Most of our informants reported having experienced a reinvigorated imagination and capacity to create artistic work upon relocation. Once they had relieved themselves of the pressure to earn 'an inordinate amount of money', they came to see the places to which they had relocated as a source of 'reinvigorating' creative stimuli and inspiration. Nussbaum (2000: 78-80) insists that 'being able to use one's imagination and thoughts in connection with experiencing and producing works of one's own choice' is a crucial instantiation of capability. Our informants commonly saw the small cities to which they had relocated as enabling the realization of this capability. Nina, a 43-year-old new media worker specializing in digital art, had studied and lived in Vienna for 11 years before fleeing the city. After a traffic accident diminished her capacities for full-time work and thwarted her ability to attain 'the desired level of lifestyle in increasingly unaffordable Vienna', she moved to a coastal city in Albania (from where her husband originated):

> From the moment I got here I was immediately replenished with élan. I am now in an algae-inspired digital art phase. It's so reinvigorating for me to be around here... This place is pretty quiet and sleepy. There is no big art fair coming up, nor any funky

> music concert to get you going in November. So turning to nature means really reconnecting to an important part of myself that I had numbed since moving to the big city.

Some informants were disappointed by underdeveloped local infrastructure, including a lack of established cultural venues and offerings, sluggish labour markets, slow economies, and inexistent occupational support, all of which they had taken for granted in the metropolis. For example, Martin, a 40-year-old new media worker who 'abandoned a well-paid' game-development job in Berlin in order to run a game developing company in Macedonia, voiced the following complaints:

> I miss a reliable postal system that delivers the books I order online and doesn't steal them. Now I only order ebooks or get books through friends in Western Europe. I miss a reliable Internet provider. The connection, which we need to be superfast, is slow during the day, though we come to work in the evenings so it works out somehow. […] I miss more government control over food in supermarkets, but my family and I have now found trusted farmers who deliver food directly to us. […] I also miss the clean air.

The decision taken by our informants to settle in remote cities in the Balkans was neither haphazard nor driven by naïve images of mythologized landscapes promising 'a better life'. On the contrary, all our informants were already deeply familiar with the regions to which they moved, either because they were returnee migrants or because they had forged protracted attachments to the region through repeated trips for reason of leisure, work or family. At the same time, digital technologies were commonly identified by our informants as having facilitated their geographical transition in practical terms. The possibility of digitally-enabled 'working from everywhere' encouraged our informants to leverage the social network and employment contacts they had developed in the metropolis while at the same time adapting to new economic, social and cultural environments. Our

informants mobilized such knowledge and attachments when evaluating the capabilities afforded by pursuing a creative career in marginal localities in South-East Europe.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

This article has examined the ways in which creative workers make sense of their geographical career transitions after moving from metropolitan urban centres to peripheral cities. Our study investigated how creative workers perceived and interpreted the role of the urban context for the development of their careers, their career transitions and their evaluation of career success. We show that career transitions are not only occasions for conducting 'narrative identity work' but also key junctures at which workers re-evaluate and re-calibrate their own capabilities for attaining well-being and good life within given spatiotemporal circumstances.

To foreground the role of contexts, including urban contexts, in the accomplishment of well-being and a life lived well as the basis for subjective evaluation of career success (Rothausen et al., 2015), we propose the adoption of the capability approach (Nussbaum, 2011; Sen, 1987). By providing a universal set of alternative benchmarks of well-being that are localizable in specific 'objective' contexts, the capability approach offers a promising analytical tool for analysing the role of context in considerations of subjective evaluations of career success and career transitions. Moreover, the capability approach goes beyond the subjective-objective dualisms in definitions of career success by furnishing an integrative model of well-being wherein work and non-work considerations of what constitutes 'good work-life' are closely intertwined and equally salient for the evaluation of career success across an individual's lifespan and in specific objectively-definable structural contexts (Cohen and Duberley, 2015; Gunz and Mayrhofer, 2011). From this approach, career success can thus be defined as a contextualized – local and practical – enactment of a set of career capabilities that facilitate the attainment of a good and personally meaningful work-life.

By mobilizing Nussbaum's capability approach we contribute in multiple ways to the career literature. First, we contribute to conceptualizations of career capabilities in prior career literature such as 'the intelligent career model' (DeFillippi and Arthur, 1994; Parker, 2002; Hirschi, 2012), which posits the importance of personal career competences and career resources (in addition to career identities) for 'successful' career change. While the career competence models are limited to an entity conception of career competences, with competences seen as being 'owned' by the individual, Nussbaum's approach is much broader. The capabilities approach contributes an understanding of the construal of career success in relation to context, in our case within the context of cities. Also, Nussbaum's capabilities approach emphasizes wider life-world factors in addition to work-related factors (Gunz and Meyerhofer, 2018) that are relevant to individual well-being and that drive transition decisions and affect career enactments. The capabilities approach thus expands the remit of the established competences in the 'intelligent career model'. For example, it foregrounds additional relevant factors (e.g. familial relationships and relationships of care within local communities, as listed in our Table 2 in connection with the affiliation capability) beyond those of career networking and belonging immanent in the competence of 'knowing-whom'. Similarly, 'knowing-how' competence relates to senses, imagination and thought, but Nussbaum's capability perspective encourages consideration of more than just job-relevant knowledge and skills. Also, Nussbaum's capability approach extends the 'knowing why' competence that links a person's overall work motivations and identification with 'an industry region' (Arthur et al., 1995: 16) to urban context and a range of non-work circumstances, beliefs and values arising from context that affect a person's overall career change adaptability (access to nature, ability to plan one's own life, recreation, enhanced bodily health, etc.).

In addition, we also contribute to career literature that emphasises the salience of contextual factors and the dynamic interdependence between objective and subjective career aspects in career

sense-making (Tams and Arthur, 2010; Guan et., 2019; Gunz and Mayrhofer, 2011; Briscoe et al., 2018). Using qualitative methodology, we focus on creative workers' subjective interpretations of 'objective' career barriers and opportunities (Zikic et al., 2010). We argue that the capability approach is well poised to elucidate the interplay between subjective and objective career experiences that vary over a worker's lifespan. The capability framework foregrounds considerations of 'well-being' and 'overall quality of life' that underpin the construal of career success in direct relation to contexts, including urban contexts. Such a framework is especially apposite for the analysis of boundaryless careers (Arthur et al., 1989; Tams and Arthur, 2010), of which creative careers are emblematic, as it becomes increasingly unclear which metrics one should employ to measure creative career success (Svejenova, 2006). Neither objective and institutionally scripted criteria such as increases in salary, promotion and status, nor subjective psychological factors such as satisfaction, self-worth and self-expression, provide sufficient explanations of success. By providing a substantive account of the basic minimum of a 'good life', the capabilities framework furnishes alternative benchmarks with which to assess career success as intimately coupled with shifting definitions of 'quality of life'. Nussbaum's (2011) list of ten central human capabilities provides an integrative model of work and non-work criteria for success with which to holistically assess the subjective experiences of contextual factors such as the social, institutional and urban arrangements that underpin career success. Through this lens, a successful career is defined as enabling the individual enactment of a set of capabilities requisite for pursuing a life lived well in specific urban and career-stage contexts. By the same token, career transitions are predicated on reassessments and recalibrations of capabilities offered by contextualized careers.

Relatedly, the capability approach also brings a lifecourse perspective on career success, helping us to appreciate how an individual's evaluation of a good life changes across their lifespan, which influences to varying degrees their career self-management. While current literature has

examined the importance of chronological age in relation to changing vocational self-concepts (Jung and Takeuchi, 2019), we still lack a full understanding of how people adapt and renegotiate their personal definitions of quality of life and wellbeing as they grow older (Rothausen et al., 2015). Our approach thus also corresponds closely with the 'Social Chronology Framework' recently outlined by Gunz and Mayrhofer (2018). This Framework seamlessly merges ontic, temporal and spatial perspectives in the study of careers, and treats the personal characteristics and intentions of actors, the role of time and social space, as being all equally salient in the assessment of career success. Career transitions often correspond with life transitions, such as transitions to parenthood, adulthood or retirement, that challenge youthful notions of mobility and progression; thus an integrative life-work model of career success as furnished by the capability approach is especially apposite for the study of career changes across geographies and across lifespans.

Moreover, by emphasising the shifting calculations of capabilities for living a life well over different life phases, life-work domains and urbanities, our research ties in with recent career scholarship that acknowledges considerations of well-being and work-life balance as being pivotal to careers (Ayudhya, Prouska and Beauregard, 2019; Williams, Berdahl and Vandello, 2016; Rothausen et al., 2015). Our approach offers a fine-grained understanding of career transition: one that comprehends career success and wellbeing not as the result of means-end strategizing in which the achievement of economic prosperity or status is merely a means of attaining wellbeing, but that instead takes the attainment of well-being and a good life as an end in itself and thus a central criterion in evaluating career success within specific urban contexts and at specific life- and career-stages. Both the capability approach and the intelligent career model increasingly acknowledge a multifaceted set of contextual influences, including well-being, personal meaning and family affiliation, on one's professional experience.

Our data show that while metropolitan creative cities are perceived as validating entry into creative careers, such cities may become perceived as unliveable by mid-career, obstructing capabilities to pursue a life lived well, including the capability to enjoy health, bodily integrity and sufficient recreation, the capability to feel concern and care for others and to lead a painless and dignified life. Among our informants, this inability to enact key capabilities while pursuing a metropolitan creative career had led over time to revised conceptions of what constitutes quality of life, and, by extension, career success. Such findings chime well with recent studies showing that creative workers' attitudes to work are stratified by age and career stage (Brook, O'Brien and Taylor, 2020). There is ample empirical evidence that 'mid-career crises' impose the need for significant revision and comprehensive makeover of 'early-stage' subjective perceptions of career success (Jung and Takeuchi, 2019; Potter, 2019). Our data further suggest that peripheral and remote cities may be associated with improved quality of life and well-being by creative professionals in mid-career stage. In addition, our informants' subjective re-ranking of the relative importance of specific capabilities from the list shifted in relation to the lived temporality of different career stages, typically coinciding with important 'transitional' life-course events such as establishing a family, founding a household, raising children, or suffering a major illness or accident (Ebaugh, 1989; Arthur et al., 1995). At different stages of work-life the accomplishment of basic capabilities, such as having shelter, access to education and healthcare, interfered in intricate ways with more complex aspects of wellbeing, including having self-respect, being able to use one's imagination, and having sufficient time for recreation and family. Similarly, Bateson's (2011) study of careers in adulthood foregrounds the salience of 'life review'—a process in which aging people bring their wisdom to bear on changing priorities and ideas about good life-work. By emphasising the prioritization of different capabilities at different life-stages, we show how the capability approach contributes a lifecourse perspective on career transitions and success in creative work.

Relatedly, the capability approach refines the well-established identity work approach to career sense-making. Our findings indicate that in times of transition, narrative identity formation is only one facet of career sense-making. We argue that such reassessment of the capabilities needed to achieve what constitutes a life lived well is an equally important aspect of career sense-making in which role preservation rather than identity transformation is the goal. In contrast to oft-studied cross-sectoral transitions such as changes in-between industries, organisations and types of jobs (Louis, 1980), which necessitate copious amounts of identity work to ensure coherence, authenticity and stability in the face of transition (Ibarra and Barbulescu, 2010; Hoyer and Stayer, 2015; Creed et al., 2010), our case study brings a less-examined case of geographical intra-role transitions, namely transitions geared towards the preservation of occupational identity but a changing inner attitude towards career success (Louis, 1980). Given such transitions, our informants were thus less concerned with how to ensure coherence between disparate transitional work identities predicated on career change (e.g. reconciling a former identity as an academic with a newly chosen identity as a candle-maker (Ibarra and Barbulescu, 2010) than with sustained reassessment and renegotiation of career capabilities, that is the extent to which the preservation of a creative career affords the capability to live a life well within specific spatio-temporal contexts as linked to subjective perceptions of a city's livability/unlivability versus the symbolic or discursive power of the metropolis to 'consecrate' or validate a creative career identity.

In addition, our study contributes to the burgeoning literature on work in the creative industries. The majority of current creative career studies focus on examining career entry while neglecting career transitions (Allen and Hollingworth, 2013; Oakley and Ward, 2018). Digital technologies have been found to alter the spatial-clustering of creative industries by dispersing the corporate, physical and social infrastructure formerly concentrated in large urban hubs (Hracs et al., 2011), thereby giving rise to alternative spatial forms of work organisation such as 'digital

nomadism' (Makimoto and Manners, 1997) and teleworking (Gregg, 2012). As digital technologies extricate creative work from the metropolis by providing user-friendly and accessible tools of production, we can expect an increase in geographical career transitions; and yet in spite of this emerging trend there is a complete absence of studies on such transitions (for an exception, see Hracs et al., 2011).

Our data suggest that core cities may be facing incipient challenges to their hegemonic status in the forging of creative careers, while marginal cities on Europe's peripheries may be enjoying a renewed attractiveness. Given the global race for creative talent, it is therefore a matter of some urgency for future studies to investigate the transitional and migratory dynamics of creative professionals across different urbanities in order to understand the impact of contextual factors, including urban and technology factors, on their locational choices. In this way the groundwork can be formed for developing more effective local urban policies to attract creative workers. Whereas networking in creative meccas is intimidating and challenging (Hracs et al., 2011), the close relational affinities in smaller locales furnish opportunities for hands-on and situated care for family, friends, neighbourhoods and communities (Alacovska and Bissonnette, 2019; Alacovska, 2020).

Turning scholarly attention to the lived, emic and self-interpretive dynamics of how and why people decide to leave 'the big city' seems timely. Policy-makers and experts across the globe, prompted in part by demographic data about migration patterns, are hotly debating the latest trends of people 'fleeing' and 'quitting' the 'big city' (Elliott, 2018; Thompson, 2017); and our study contributes directly to this wider public debate through a rigorous investigation and theorization of career transitions from metropolitan to marginal cities.

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