Linda M. Mülli

Privileged Precarities

An Organizational Ethnography of Early Career Workers at the United Nations



campus

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Work and Everyday Life
Ethnographic Studies on Work Cultures
Series of the Commission "Working Cultures" in the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Volkskunde (German Society for European Ethnology and Folklore)

Edited by Irene Götz, Gertraud Koch, Klaus Schönberger and Manfred Seifert

Volume 19

Linda M. Mülli, Dr. phil., completed her Ph.D. in cultural anthropology at the University of Basel and the Ludwig-Maximilian-University in Munich.

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Campus Verlag
Frankfurt/New York

The open access publication of this book has been published with the support of the Swiss National Science Foundation.

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ISBN 978-3-593-51389-8 Print
ISBN 978-3-593-44758-2 E-Book (PDF)
DOI 10.12907/978-3-593-44758-2

Copyright © 2021 Campus Verlag GmbH, Frankfurt/Main
Some rights reserved.
Cover design: Campus Verlag GmbH, Frankfurt/Main
Cover illustration: Bernsten / Shutterstock.com
Typesetting: publish4you, Roßleben-Wiehe
Printing office and bookbinder: Beltz Grafische Betriebe GmbH, Bad Langensalza
Printed on acid free paper
Printed in Germany

For further information:
www.campus.de
www.press.uchicago.edu

For P.A.

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When we reject the single story, when we realize that there is never a single story about any place, we regain a kind of paradise.

(Adichie 2009)

Above all, I think of anthropology as a study of human diversity—trying to describe the latter accurately, and to understand it as a whole and in its parts, not focusing too narrowly or prematurely on what is closest at hand, at home, or dominant.

(Hannerz 2016, 6)

Ethnography can be said to have two lives. A first life consists of fieldwork. Its defining character is participant observation during long periods of time—being there and living among. A second life entails writing. It corresponds to the analysis of the empirical material and its elaboration into a theoretical framework that give birth to a document—a book, an article, or a film. […] But then the situation changes when works are published. They escape their creators. They are shared with a public. Their afterlife begins.

(Fassin 2017, 314–15; 318)

Prologue: Entering the Field of Research as an Intern-ethnographer

July 15, 2014. It is a Tuesday morning shortly before 8.30 a.m. in Vienna, Austria. I am on my way to work. The subway, line U1, takes me to the Vienna-based UN organization where I was hired as an intern for three months. Subway passengers are listening to music, reading a book or simply staring into the void blankly, apparently fighting the morning tiredness. I look around, noticing that I already have developed a trained gaze to recognize "UN people" in their pre-working attitude among the few locals who supposedly are on their way to the nearby shopping center. I become aware of the one or other UN newbie proudly wearing the UN badge—also to be referred as temporary grounds pass—protected by a transparent plastic holder on a neon-blue braided nylon cord around their neck. Some days, I spot a few tourists curiously gazing out of the windows or an agitated class of chattering school children from Austria or nearby countries.

Coming from the city center, Stephansplatz, the subway takes the bridge over the Danube river. It stops at Donauinsel. I glimpse out of the filthy subway window to enjoy the view of the tranquil river in the morning atmosphere. The subway continues its way towards the second part of the bridge, and loudspeakers announce the next station, "Kaisermühlen-Vienna International Center." In general, those passengers who have been traveling in the rear part of the train take the back exit of the subway station. It leads to the neighborhood called Kaisermühlen, which used to be a small village before it was swallowed up by the city of Vienna. From the subway cars at the front, women and men in business attire hurriedly disembark. They head to the entrance of the Vienna International Center (VIC). This building complex, located in the extraterritorial trans-Danube area of the Austrian capital, houses the principal office of the United Nations. Some of the passengers descend the stairs in small groups, having a little chat. They could be work colleagues; others might be part of a diplomatic delegation on their way to one of the many multilateral conference meetings. Most, however, rush down the staircase of the subway station's exit over to the entrance of the VIC building. While descending the stairs, the UN officials remove their staff identity card from their pockets and handbags. They get

ready to pass the entrance gate. It seems that this discreet action of taking out the grounds pass before even leaving the metro station initiates the work day. It expresses the need to avoid wasting time on entering in order to quickly pass through the left-hand door of the portal at the main VIC entrance Gate 1 that is reserved for UN staff, consultants, diplomats and assigned visitors such as members of diplomatic delegations.

At the gate in the entrance hall, they swipe swiftly over the identification device with the badge that identifies them as UN staff. The automatic doors open quickly and smoothly every time an official passes the gate. Simultaneously, their image (a passport photograph that was taken on their first working day) appears on a screen above everyone's head and is thus visible for a short moment to the half-queuing, half-bustling crowd. The photograph of the employee who is about to enter allows the UN security officer surveilling the scene to verify the entrant's identity better—and reveals to those waiting behind how much someone can change over the months or years; how quickly people transform their look (or not at all). After this effortless security check, the international civil servants cross the plaza between the gate and the massive grey building whose architecture combines concrete elements with large window facades that were the aesthetic preference in the early 1970s. Finally, each staff member heads towards the four different entry doors of the VIC building. The identification badge issued by the UN Pass Office is mandatory to wear for everyone walking inside the UN compound. It is a compulsory object in the everyday life of a UN worker since, at least in certain UN bodies, it is required for the daily routine of clocking in and off at the end of the working day. Thus, after having passed Gate 1 and entered the building, it is another gentle touch with the identification badge on the small machines located at walls in different spots of the building that immediately start counting the staff member's working hours. After clocking in, the arriving officials turn towards the elevators that will take them up to their offices. The timekeeping machines serve as governmental instruments of surveillance and control. Yet, these details would only become familiar to me after signing my second contract as a UN intern in October of the same year. This would give me the opportunity to collect even more observations and to deepen my understanding of the everyday life in and around the UN head-office in Vienna—and beyond. Daily, when attending meetings, interacting with senior colleagues and junior fellows, as well as participating and simultaneously observing processes of project-based work, I gradually gained a greater understanding of the mechanisms within a particular unit and the institution for which I worked. In a small notebook that very soon became a field diary, I collected knowledge about the organizational structure, different protagonists and business procedures to better understand the professional environ-

ment of the UN entity I was working in and its complex entanglements. In parallel to my work notes, I wrote numerous observations, trying to sort my emotions, understand my feelings and reactions, which ranged from admiration combined with enthusiasm to skepticism mixed with frustration toward my new workplace.

Meanwhile, and while queuing in the long line at Gate 1, I can only observe these scenes from a distance and imagine how effortless it must feel to access the VIC within only a few minutes. There are days I have mixed feelings; my initial enthusiasm to work for the UN is troubled by incomprehension and impatience. My frustration for that matter would only increase over the coming months. I had already learned that at the second entrance, located on the right-hand side of the portal, things take more time. By arriving before the rush hour at around 9.00 a.m., I try to avoid long periods of queuing that, on busy days, stretch to thirty minutes and more—so it has become a joke among the interns to ask who had waited for the longest. Waiting in the line of visitors and other non-accredited persons who have to pass the high-security zone at Gate 1 before being allowed to enter UN ground feels like a mundane daily routine. The security procedure the other interns and I have to undergo before starting our working day becomes a ritualized act. This ritualized everyday practice will eventually enhance our metamorphosis from civilians, still enrolled or recently graduated university students and early career professionals, into interns at one of the many UN organizations. The daily routine also enables me to develop a distant, but strong gaze on the scenes at Gate 1. The observations kindle my awareness that feeling part of the "UN family" might be almost elusive. In contrast, to those with grounds passes, the daily, inescapable, pre-work body-scan reminds me that my belonging to the organization is, as an intern, more uncertain. It is a moment where many of my fellow interns and I are indirectly coerced to show a bit of humility and gratitude.

Less visible at that moment, but no less critical, was the message conveyed through the unpaid internship contract and the frequently precarious living conditions created as a result. During these three months of my internship, the unpaid work was merely a minor issue in my case since I had been able to put some money aside during a previous paid job. Likewise, for many of my intern colleagues paid work elsewhere was the way to finance unpaid work for the UN. Against this background, I remember that, on November 19, 2014, after finishing a day's work while I was on my second UN internship in Vienna, I attended a public talk by a German sociologist organized by the *Arbeiterkammer* (Vienna Labor Chamber). At the cocktail reception that followed, I met a colleague who I knew from the VIC. She was working as a waitress serving wine to the audience who seemed very thirsty. Only in this very moment, it came to my attention that she, after having finished her working

hours as an unpaid intern at the VIC, put in a second shift as a paid waitress to make a living. When I raised this issue with her, she told me that it was only due to this job that she could afford the living expenses. Additionally, it would guarantee the work and resident permit that she, as a non-EU/EFTA citizen, had as a student of the University of Vienna. Others, however, were luckier and received a living expenses stipend for the duration of the internship, which allowed them to live in Vienna and work for free. There are also interns, usually in their mid-twenties when applying for an internship, who depended on parents for financial support. A colleague even took out a loan to finance her unpaid internship, which created further financial dependencies and pressure.

Besides these financial challenges, I learned in my daily conversations with my peers about the absurdities and contradictory mechanisms in the UN working world. It includes, in the case of unpaid interns, the volatility of contractually fixed eight working hours. Some interns, being unable to complete their tasks during the week, would continue working on weekends. They learned very quickly about the importance of respecting hierarchy. Because of the prestige the non-UN world associates with an UN internship, another intern did not dare speak up for his right to reasonable working hours. On September 5, 2014, when preparing our farewell party, he told me about his frustration. Having almost finished this internship at the UN, which is an organization striving for industrial development around the globe, as well as one that should provide relevant work experience after completing undergraduate studies prior to Masters courses, he described the predominating work climate in his unit as one of fear and compliance, "Even the consultants were afraid of our supervisor." He added contritely, "I only saw my supervisor two or three times during the internship—and always when having a break at the coffee bar. Very unfortunate." Yet, he knew from a more experienced colleague, who has been a consultant for many years, about the essential rules, stating that "it's not your achievements [that] count, but what you represent and how you are perceived. If you take a nap, close your office door, and be cautious in whose company you are in." My friend feared for his recommendation letter, although it was the only laurels he could expect as an unpaid intern, "My supervisor said, 'I think you're enjoying your internship too much; your work is not good enough'." These experiences and observations would be confirmed when talking to the representative of the Fair Internship Initiative (FII) in Geneva almost five years later in May 2019. "Many interns save money or simply try to lower their expenses to the minimum," the FII spokesperson said. Having worked as an unpaid intern in international institutions himself, he knows, "People have their strategies, you know, they do babysit or walk instead of taking the tram." He continued that there would be a group on social media called Free Intern

Food Group where interns announce free croissants in this room or free cake in that room, "This is how people eat breakfast to save money." In Vienna, during the short period of three to six months, interns have to submit to the unavoidable routine procedure at Gate 1—that is, the daily, inescapable, pre-work body-scan combined with the acceptance of the sometimes unfair treatment by their supervisors. Interns who do a weekend shift at the office are aware of the perpetually present, but never expressed pressure as during these months they have to give everything for the job and perform in a way that might possibly enable them to be offered a consultancy. And, as this book outlines, the distinguishing line between the "right" and the "wrong" performance can be both slim and hazy.

Still staying in line for the right-hand entrance at Gate 1, my feelings oscillate. I am motivated to work on my assigned project, yet, I am haunted by the feeling that I remain an outsider. Eventually, this feeling and self-perception as an outsider would help me conduct ethnographic research. Interns must take another entrance—for those not officially counted as UN staff. The daily check at Gate 1 is a practice generating hierarchies. Respecting the safety rules at UN headquarters by queuing on the right-hand side of Gate 1 turns into a metaphor for the state of waithood of those hoping for a UN career. Some interns wonder, "How is it possible to get from this line to the other?" Are there really some secret ingredients for a successful UN career as suggested in the job advertisements published by the UN on social media? Meanwhile, the line is moving. Not sideways, but at least forward. Some of those waiting are listening to music, chatting and gossiping, or are just blankly staring into space (probably wishing they could have slept a little bit longer). Apart from interns, I can spot country officials, NGO workers and researchers signing up for a conference held by a UN organization headquartered at the VIC and who apparently weren't lucky enough to have someone pick up the temporary grounds passes for them, as well as secondary school students and tourists. Of course, interns do not take precedence nor are allowed to queue in a separate line that would enable them to access the building more quickly.

I take the few steps up towards the right entrance at Gate 1. I pass a UN security officer in their light-blue UN uniform. The female or male UN security officers usually stand with their backs against the wall of Gate 1 guarding the entrance while observing the queuing people with a half-concentrated, half-grim facial expression. If a face is familiar, we greet each other. It is true that, over time, faces become familiar; interns daily passing the same procedure and security officers greet each other. But usually, there is no time for a short chat as the line has to move on. I arrive at the foyer where the security zone begins. In the entrance area, a barrier tape guides the waiting crowd to form a line that slowly moves towards the body scanner. In

my opinion, it looks more like a labyrinth than an organized queue. Again, some forward-looking individuals get prepared for what is about to come. So do I. As if I were at the security check at an airport, I have to take off my coat, sometimes my shoes or a scarf I use to be protected against the air-conditioned cold inside the VIC building, and the machines scan everything I have in my backpack. "Do you always carry so much stuff?" the guard asks me, joking. Mostly, the security officials are friendly, and they try to talk to the passing individuals quickly. On the one hand I understand, I think it must be truly boring to stay here and watch us take off our coats, reminding us that we have to put the trays, which transport our belongings through the X-ray machine, back to speed up the process. On the other hand, I finally want to get to the office. There is a lot of work waiting for me.

When passing the security zone that separates the public space of the city of Vienna from the international UN space of the VIC, I often thought about whether tourists and other visitors also perceive this process as a confirmation of the UN's status as a powerful and perhaps even elitist organization. I thus started to observe not only the international staff heading to their offices, but also my fellow interns, and compared the different manners of entering the VIC to those of visitors, tourists, or young students. It seemed to me that some fellow interns shared my mixed feelings about the contradicting mechanisms of the working world we encountered. Many remained—or at least presented themselves as—highly enthusiastic when talking about the possibility of gaining work experience. They demonstrated an unfettered admiration for the UN and the "good work" they would be able to deliver. As newcomers, these interns resembled the tourists marveling at the space they would encounter behind the high fence of the VIC. I—who, as an anthropologist is used to being the observer—felt remarkably observed, if not policed. Being body-scanned every single day before starting my work reminded me that I did not belong to the organization at all. Consequently, I felt like an outsider, too. (Eventually, this feeling and self-perception as an outsider would help me to conduct ethnographic research). After the security check, I finally get closer to my office. After a gentle touch with the white identification badge—it differs from those of the staff entering on the left side of Gate 1—the electronic gate opens, I step out into the plaza area, and my workday is about to begin. There is only the elevator ride left to go. People step into the cabin densely packed with colleagues while the elevator goes floor by floor up the building. Sometimes, people in the elevator greet each other with a quick nod or address familiar faces with a short "Hi, how are you?" Mostly this is not meant as a question but rather expresses formal politeness. When they finally reach the right floor, the UN white-collar staff and the interns walk in the direction of their office to start their working day.

From the perspective of the interns, queuing in line is both a promise and a stigma. On the one hand, it is possible to physically access the UN premises. On the other, it feels like a stigma to stand in line each day in order to do a job for which you are not paid a dime. And it creates an enormous pressure to perform in a manner that will eventually enable one to enter the left portal at Gate 1 one day.

1 Introduction

> Large corporations are often formidable and mysterious to people outside them, like giants that populate the earth but can only be seen through their shadows. […] Corporations are often equally mysterious to the people inside, whose views can be limited and parochial because they rarely get a sense of the whole.
>
> *(Moss Kanter 1993, 4)*

Large organizations and corporations use their historically built magnificence and reputation to maintain attractiveness on the one hand and intangibility on the other. This observation still holds true, particularly for international organizations (IOs) such as the United Nations (UN) comprising of a dense network of sub-organizations, special agencies, and funds. This present work focuses on this large international body and, in particular, on UN workers[1] who are still at an early stage of their potential UN career. With a look behind the scenes, this book aims to enhance the understanding of the dynamics and work culture(s) of the rather closed-off world of the UN and the practices of people working there.

1.1 Point of Departure and Research Aim

In 2020, the year I submitted the doctoral dissertation on which this book is based, the UN celebrated its 75th anniversary.[2] According to its Charter of 1945, the main purpose of the UN is "to maintain international peace and security" (UN GA 1945, 3). To quote from the organizational website[3] established for the 70th anniversary of the UN, the following words are used to paraphrase the organization's *raison d'être*:

1 For terminology, see Chapter 2.4.

2 Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the 75th session of the UN General Assembly primarily took place in a virtual format.

3 For reader-friendliness, the title is mentioned directly, whereas the URL is only given in the references. If there is no date mentioned, I quote the date I accessed the websites. Usually, these websites are periodically updated.

The work of the United Nations reaches every corner of the globe. Although best known for peacekeeping, peacebuilding, conflict prevention and humanitarian assistance, there are many other ways the United Nations and its System (specialized agencies, funds and programmes) affect our lives and make the world a better place. (UN 2015a, *History of the UN*)

In the present day, the UN and the respective actors within advocate for achieving the goal of global peace and security to which UN member states agreed in 1945. Thus, the objective of the UN seems to be defined by clear words: to "make the world a better place." To achieve the above-mentioned goals, there are experts needed. The channels and entry paths through which early career workers[4] enter and cope with the UN as an employing institution and working environment are the main concern of this book. A growing number of younger[5] employees are, according to my experience, trained in historically recent and supposedly specialized degree or certificate programs such as peace and conflict studies, global health studies or nonproliferation studies. This type of formation is supposed to lead to a specific field of employment. However, today, there is still a vast number of university graduates who have a more general background. According to Eurostat, more than "one third of tertiary education students in the EU in 2016 were studying social sciences, journalism, information, business, administration or law" (Eurostat 2019, *Your Key to European Statistics*). Applying this statistic to my field of research means that, besides those university graduates who went through a specialized curriculum preparing them for the field of humanitarian aid and international development cooperation, the UN also has a strong appeal for many early career professionals who have a background

4 I use the terms early career workers and early career professionals interchangeably to refer to persons who are still at the beginning of their UN working life. With the exception of the senior and more experienced UN staff with whom I conducted expert interviews, my informants have, at the time of the interview, around two to five years of working experience in the UN system and are between 26 and 39 years old. Some entered the UN right after graduation, others had previous work experience in other fields or with other employers. In turn, emic terms such as UN staff categories are marked using italics when first mentioned (e.g. the category *entry-level professionals* refers to persons with a minimum of two to five years of working experience; this category is, as I will outline later, divided into two levels of seniority: *P2* and *P3*).

5 It goes without saying that "young" is a blurry category. As I will explain later, I allude to the organizational definition of young; this category is applied to persons until they are in their early thirties. This, of course, raises a series of questions regarding being young as a lifestyle. In order to distance myself from the emic definition of young, I refer to the informants in this study as "younger."

in law, political science, international relations, business administration, economics and other fields with wide scopes of focus.

Being interested in sustainable development and various forms of international development cooperation (IDC), admiring the UN's ideological appeal for peace and equality, and aiming to work with colleagues coming from across the world are attracting factors for younger professionals interested in an *international* working atmosphere where people (at least indirectly) contribute to "bettering the world." It is therefore hardly surprising that, in the present day, the UN has a strong appeal for early career workers who aim to pursue a career in the professional field of international development cooperation. As staff of the UN Secretariat, *international civil servants* (this is what UN personnel are called officially) shall administratively support the UN and its member states to "achieve international cooperation in solving international problems of an economic, social, cultural, or humanitarian character, and in promoting and encouraging respect for human rights and for fundamental freedoms for all without distinction as to race, sex, language, or religion […]" (UN GA 1945, 3), as it was phrased in the UN Charter. The administrative officers shall follow "the highest standards of efficiency, competence, and integrity" (ibid., 18).

The appeal of this important work in IDC to follow the highest standards possible is molded, in part, by the many imaginations of the UN circulating for decades. It is transported by movies and books, testimonials of former UN staff praising or accusing the UN. It is addressed in the context of exhibitions[6], in educational institutions, at career fairs, and more. It is also influenced by discourses and practices shaped by the organization itself. In a recruiting initiative, for example, the UN Secretariat, which could be described as the political and administrative centerpiece of the UN, is looking for "talented, highly qualified professionals to start a career as an international civil servant with the United Nations Secretariat" (UN Careers 2020c, *Where we are*). By addressing them as "talented" and "highly qualified," the organization labels the targeted early career professionals as "young talents."[7] (As I will show in this book, the perception of belonging to a bureaucratic elite is eventually embodied by the UN workforce.) From an external point of view and, in particular, compared to the vast majority of citizens in the

6 In April 2015, the art project *UN.KNOWN SPACES*, applying Foucault's concept of *heterotopia* (Foucault and Miskowiec 1986) to the UN, was exhibited in Vienna.

7 The global call for the recruitment of "young leaders," "young potentials" or "young talents" can be found in management discourses beyond the UN context.

UN member states, international civil servants can be described as a group of *privileged* professionals. This category finds evidence in the fact that these professionals are highly trained and thus recruited for high wages to work at the UN. Other than being well-situated, many UN workers express feeling "privileged" to work at the UN. This self-ascription goes along with a claim of moral superiority that is common in the field of IDC and NGO work (Lashaw, Vannier, and Sampson 2017).

This book is the result of the research project titled *Rituals in an International Work Environment. An Anthropological Research Study on Cross-cultural Relations and Interactions in United Nations-Affiliated Organizations in Geneva and Vienna*. It focuses on the work and lifeworlds of the UN context. Taking the United Nations Headquarter Duty Stations (hereinafter referred to as UN HQ duty stations) in Geneva and Vienna as points of departure, I analyze the intertwined professional and personal backgrounds of international civil servants with a transnational mobility approach. This, as I will outline in the following, means applying a fourfold theoretical perspective including organizational anthropology and the anthropology of work, as well as approaches of biography and mobility studies.

The aim of this work is to provide an actor-centered, concrete and relational perspective. Precisely, this ethnography follows the perspectives of professionals who, at the moment of the interview, are at an early stage of their potential career in the UN context. The multi-method research aims to analyze biographies and careers of international civil servants working in the main offices of the UN in Geneva and Vienna. By applying different analytical lenses on the gathered material, this book offers biographical insights into UN workers' lives. It contributes to the understanding of highly qualified and highly mobile professionals. Moreover, it provides insights into the globalized work and lifeworlds of transnational elites—that is, groups of privileged professionals in the context of the UN. Thus, in a first step, this study inquires into the specific working conditions of young UN workers, a more neutral term that includes all contractual statuses. It analyzes the characteristics of this work system, which seems quite inaccessible, at least to outsiders. I would like to exemplify how this separation is perceived and therefore constructed by professionals working in UN agencies with a short excerpt from my field diary:

Arriving in one of the UN organizations headquartered in Vienna felt "like a cultural shock," remembers a workshop participant when talking about their everyday work experience in the United Nations. Another confesses that, despite being Austrian,

her feeling of belonging to the UN community is much stronger than that felt in relation to "the world outside." [8]

These observations I had written down in my field diary after participating in a two-day workshop on intercultural communication and understanding, to which I shall return later for a closer analysis. The passage is an example of how UN professionals verbalize the different dynamics between their working environment and the society perceived as the "outside world." By doing so, they contribute to the drawing of the borderline between the lifeworld in the UN context and beyond. Therefore, the cultural practices and narratives in the UN context belong to a "third space" (Bhaba 1994; Rutherford and Bhaba 1990). The process of identification also happens with and through the intervention of the otherness—or "the world outside," as phrased by the workshop participant.

To add a second layer, this study will also examine the international frame within which international civil servants work, operate and live. It analyzes the dynamics and the impact of the everyday working culture of the UN on personal encounters and social orders. I endorse the following definition: Cultural anthropology affirms the semiotic nature of culture (Geertz 1973, 5).[9] Cultures, as Homi K. Bhabha (1990, 210) phrased it, "are symbol-forming and subject-constituting, interpellative practices." I also embrace the understanding of culture as an "organization of diversity" (Hannerz 2016, 143) affirming that "people as actors and networks of actors […] invent culture, practice it, experiment with it, reflect on it, remember it (or store it in some other way), and pass it on" (ibid. 2016, 144).

I have termed this everyday working culture consisting of formal and informal elements *ritualized cross-cultural relations and interactions*. These ritualized encounters and habitualized practices impact not only the working culture in the field of international development cooperation and humanitarian aid, in general, but the corporate culture of the UN, in particular. The notion of ritualized cross-cultural relations and interactions also draws attention to the identity of UN workers. I claim that this identity is particularly influenced and formed at the early stage of their UN career. Hence, the

8 Fieldnote, Vienna (July 2015).

9 Geertz (1973, 5) sketches his idea of "culture as text" (Schneider 1987) with the following words: "Believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in *webs of significance* he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretative one in search of meaning" (emphasis added).

specific working culture of the UN is understood in close connection to cultural practice which, in this study, is termed *habitus of transnational life and work*. By means of a modified version of Pierre Bourdieu's (1984) habitus-field theory, I analyze this specific habitus that, by the same token, appears in the context of biographies and careers of UN employees and their social surrounding.

1.2 Early Career Workers at the UN: Critical Perspectives on Work and International Organizations, Biographies and Mobility

The UN has been an object of research since its foundation in 1945. From the very beginning, the main disciplines involved in the organization, its functioning and impact were the areas of law, political science and international relation studies. However, these disciplines are merely interested in the meticulous description of the organization by publishing encyclopedias (T. G. Weiss and Daws 2018), and providing a platform for "UN voices" (T. G. Weiss et al. 2005). In contrast to the field of cultural anthropology/European ethnology[10]—sister disciplines, which traditionally apply an inductive approach to deconstruct and therefore understand lifeworld phenomena with all entanglements and references to other phenomena and discourses (Lindner 2003)—political scientists utilize a rather deductive research approach, and, in consequence, tend to understand the UN as a rather self-contained system. As a cultural anthropologist, I challenge these scholars from neighboring disciplines to take a more in-depth and everyday approach.[11] By analyzing what influence the present *regime of work* entangled with *regimes of*

10 European ethnology is part of the ethno-disciplines, Brigitta Schmidt-Lauber clarifies, and the scholars identifying with this discipline "study everyday life (especially in Europe) in the past and present and the emergence of contemporary phenomena from an actor-centered perspective" (Schmidt-Lauber 2012, 560). Being aware of the historically grown and geographical distinction, in the following, I will solely use the broader term cultural anthropology or simply anthropology.

11 I refer selectively to literature from these neighboring disciplines, as I believe that it is pertinent to seek cooperation beyond disciplinary boundaries. This endeavor is, for multiple reasons, not always easy to achieve, as has also been noted by other cultural anthropologists (Bendix, Bizer, and Noyes 2017).

mobility (Glick-Schiller and Salazar 2013) has in the specific context of the UN, I underline the entangled discourses in and about the organization.

I will now take a look at the relevant literature on the UN, and similar fields such as NGOs, the EU, and more. I will refer to studies mostly written by cultural anthropologists, with the exception of some sociological research. There exists a rich corpus of ethnographic research on UN entities and internal policy making in the UN arena, consisting of cultural anthropological volumes on the World Trade Organization (WTO) (Abélès 2017; 2011a), the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) (Fresia 2014; 2012; 2009), the UN Human Rights Committee (OHCHR) (Halme-Tuomisaari 2017), in general, and, in particular, the Human Rights Council (J. K. Cowan and Billaud 2017; 2015). Other studies focus on the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) (Hafstein 2018), the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) (Bendix 2013; 2012; Groth 2012; 2011), the World Bank (Mosse 2011b) or the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) (Müller 2013b; 2011). The interest in the UN stems mostly from the communities and topics in which these anthropologists investigated, for instance, indigenous rights, refugees and displaced people, intangible heritage and intangible knowledge, to mention just a few. The titles of the edited volumes reveal the kaleidoscopic approaches ethnographers use to explore the complex organization. The titles allude to the dazzling facade for one thing, and, on for another, suggest that processes at UN entities are nebulous to outsiders. While the title *Palaces of Hope* (Niezen and Sapignoli 2017) alludes to the moral claims of what the editors call "global" organizations, an edited volume on policy-making in what the editor refers to as "multilateral" organizations is called *The Gloss of Harmony* (Müller 2013b). The different terminology refers to the manifold aspects scholars encounter when studying the UN and comparable global "arenas" (Brumann 2012). Still others summarize their work under the title *Bureaucratization of Utopia* (Billaud and Cowan 2020), echoing thoughts regarding bureaucratic apparatuses that challenged thinkers throughout the past century until today. Additional to these studies on policy-making at the UN, innovative approaches in the field of anthropology of policies (Shore, Wright, and Però 2011) are insightful to understanding processes at the UN. Moreover, ethnographies of comparable fields such as the European Union (EU) help to understand the UN as an international body. This includes edited volumes on multilateral negotiations in the EU context (Thedvall 2012; Bellier and Wilson 2000). It is enriched by research on EU civil servants (Shore 2007) and on the formation of the "EU

class" which is characterized by a particular habitus (Lewicki 2017; 2016). It is also worth looking at studies done at educational institutions related to the EU, such as the *Collège d'Europe* (Poehls 2015).

Existing research recognizes the critical role played by employees at the UN and beyond. Different research approaches and perspectives on work complement each other. There is the focus on mobility that comes with working at a global organization. Scholars apply concepts such as cosmopolitanism to grasp the UN workers' "cosmopolitan universes" (Nowicka 2006), their "cosmopolitan identities" (Nowicka and Kaweh 2009) or to study how they become "elite cosmopolitans" (Jansson 2016; 2015). There is also an increasing interest in professionals in international development, everyday (work) practices and the possible impact on individual life trajectories. Anthropologists and sociologists conduct research on the broad field of what has been labeled Aidland (Apthorpe 2011)[12], including the international cooperation and development work done in (international) NGOs. There is the focus on aid workers' fascination with this type of work and the resulting paradoxes showing in their (work) lives (Roth 2015b; 2015a). Other wide-ranging volumes gather anthropological perspectives on the everyday work of development workers (Fechter 2014; Mosse 2011a), while single articles evaluate, for instance, the humanitarian imperative of aid work (Fechter 2016) and the impact of remote work in humanitarian aid (Fradejas-García 2019; Fisher 2017). Others examined NGOs as lifeworlds operating along the lines of transnational development orders and project logics (Kalfelis 2020).

The theoretical concepts and methodological debates anchoring the analysis of ethnographic work at the UN are comparable to other areas, be it contexts of humanitarian aid or development. Some studies tackle issues related to access to the field and discuss what it means to engage in participant observation at multilateral negotiations (McNeill and Lera St. Clair 2011) or to mingle among diplomatic delegates and interns (Halme-Tuomisaari 2018). Other methodological concerns focus on what it means to examine, for instance, the WTO as a *para-site* (Deeb and Marcus 2011). A rich volume offering a wide array of case studies on what the editors label *The Cultures of Doing Good* (Lashaw, Vannier, and Sampson 2017) enhances the analysis and understanding of what is labeled as emotional work (Hochschild 2003) in the UN context. This is productive because it offers inspiring thoughts on

12 Now widely articulated, the notion of Aidland was coined by Raymond Apthorpe and presented at conferences at British universities (Harrison 2013, 263).

anthropologists' engagement in studying NGOs and the resulting emotional entanglements with which academics and NGO workers are confronted, yet also addresses the organizational entanglement and conflicts of interests between donors and receivers in the field of humanitarianism and international development cooperation (Sampson 2017). This means, for instance, reflecting upon issues that are linked with the very nature of engaged ethnographic research. Cultural anthropologists are well-trained in sensitively navigating between multiple roles in the field (Schuller 2017), the blurring boundaries between different actors (e.g., IO/NGO and nation states, stakeholders, donors, and more) (Lewis 2017) and ethical concerns while maintaining their independent perspective as critical social scientists (Bornstein 2017).

While a number of studies have investigated the diplomatic decision-making processes in various UN bodies, there is little data published on the bureaucratic side of the UN specifically focusing on the perspectives of international civil servants, let alone focusing on the insecure employment of persons at an early stage of their career. Moreover, there has been no detailed investigation of everyday work at the UN HQ duty stations Geneva and Vienna nor on what could be framed as the UN lifeworld. A systematic understanding of how job instability at the UN molds individual life stories is still lacking. Up to now, far too few ethnographers have conducted participant observation over a longer time frame; comparable studies to this book are solely based on interviews and questionnaires (Roth 2015b; Nowicka 2006) or approached the institutions from outside (Lewicki 2017).

The above-mentioned trajectories of research have been and will continue to be productive. The approach presented in this book overlaps with them significantly, but its point of entry, and its mode of analysis are distinct. What this book offers is an insight into the UN from an insider perspective while embracing a collaborative research approach (Konrad 2012), and acknowledging the para-ethnographic knowledge of fieldwork interlocutors (Holmes and Marcus 2012; 2008; 2005a). Having worked as an intern at two Vienna based UN organizations for thirteen months, I was not only able to gain a deep understanding of everyday work rituals and habitualized practices, but I also accompanied some of my informants over a long period of time and, by doing so, gained insights into their life situation at a selective moment in their biographies (Picard 2014; Bourdieu 2004). This study examines the changing working world, using the UN as an example.

Hence, this study builds upon a wide range of cultural anthropological literature, and critical social studies addressing work(ers) in a globalized world

(Sennett 2008; Beck 2000; Moss Kanter 1993; Boltanski 1990) and complex organizations (Garsten and Nyqvist 2013; Gellner and Hirsch 2001).[13] It particularly focuses on the impact produced by the epochal transformations of capitalism starting in the last third of the 20th century. The phenomenon is of a global nature and has been interchangeably labeled as the *New Spirit of Capitalism* (Boltanski and Chiapello 2007), the new economy/new capitalism (Sennett 2006; 1998), cognitive capitalism (Moulier Boutang 2012; Lorey and Neundlinger 2012a), or post-Fordism (Götz 2013b; Gorz 1982), to mention a few. The new economic regime influences different domains; it affects individual lives and has a broader impact on society. The effects on a socio-political level have recently been scrutinized by contemporary critical thinkers (from Arjun Appadurai and Zygmut Bauman, Nancy Fraser and Eva Illouz to Bruno Latour and more) in a volume titled *The Great Regression* (Geiselberger 2017). The pieces by these authors inspired the present book on a broader scale.

While the title of the aforementioned edited volume might be intended as a warning, the aim of the present book is twofold. Indeed, it seeks to address the phenomenon of the increasing flexibility at work and in people's lives (Seifert, Götz, and Huber 2007) and sees this as a consequence of an increasing demand for mobility (Götz et al. 2010). It tackles the dissolving of boundaries between work and non-work areas (in German, *Entgrenzung*), the general liquidization of life (Z. Bauman 2000), mechanisms of subjectivation and new forms of personhood (Bröckling 2016; Moldaschl and Voss 2003; Rose 1998) that come along with the commodification of emotions and feelings (Koch and Everke Buchanan 2013; Hochschild 2003) as well as with the cognitive and aesthetic practices in everyday work (Sutter and Flor 2017). It acknowledges different forms of precarity among a growing number of (professional) groups, which has repeatedly been addressed by cultural anthropologists (Groth, May, and Müske 2020; Sutter 2013; Götz and Lemberger 2009b).

This book attempts to be accessible for readers beyond academia. It therefore attaches great importance to readability. This is why each chapter is introduced by an ethnographic vignette. Just like the prologue, the vignettes aim to enhance the reader's memory. Despite the importance of writing and reading in cultural anthropology, little attention has been paid to ethno-

13 This section is a first *tour d'horizon* presenting a variety of possible research perspectives on IO in general and the UN in particular. Aiming to bridge the still existing gap, I will address more relevant studies in the chapters to follow.

graphic vignettes as an academic genre, which will be addressed in the next section.

1.3 From Description to Interpretation and Analysis: On Writing Ethnographies and the Purpose and Potential of Ethnographic Vignettes

> Humboldt created poetic vignettes when he wrote of strange insects that "poured their red phosphoric light on the herb-covered ground, which glowed with living fire as if the starry canopy of heaven had sunk upon the turf". This was a scientific book unembarrassed by lyricism.
>
> *(A. Wulf 2015, 305)*

In the field of cultural anthropology, it is common to combine different writing styles when presenting ethnographic data. Therefore, in this book, each chapter is introduced by an ethnographic vignette. In what follows, I will briefly elaborate on the significance of these text passages, which are grounded in and composited by data collected at different moments of the research process. They are a successful strategy for conveying atmospheres and transporting the ethnographer's thoughts and emotions. I will address the significance of this writing technique in ethnographic writing in general and what particular function these more literary text passages have in this work.

The research process of composing an ethnographic text is closely linked with different writing practices that vary in form and genre. The writing process also differs depending on the specific circumstances of the research. During participant observation, ethnographers write down their observations and possibly even theoretical links in their notebooks, on a piece of paper or—as I often did—on a cell phone or directly on the personal laptop. Due to a hectic environment and the limited time resources available to describe the observed situation properly, observations are usually noted as keywords, brief statements, or sketches. I will address this issue later in this book.[14] In a second step, these notes are re-written into a comprehensive field

14 See my reflections and remarks on the process of participant observation and fieldnote writing in the methodological chapter.

note containing detailed and elaborated descriptions, which include texture, minutiae, sensations, and colors. They are enriched with primary analytical associations and the application of theories, and are complemented with self-reflective notes. In their field diaries, anthropologists also note their personal feelings, insecurities and maybe even judgmental thoughts, as was first evidenced in the posthumous publication of the diary of Bronislaw Malinowski (1989), who is considered an ancestral figure in anthropology. The subsequent call not only for critical engagement with the analysis of field diaries but also for a critical reflection on the representation of ethnographic data (Geertz 1973; Clifford and Marcus 1986) are well established research practices in areas of study which traditionally practice ethnographic field work. In the second part of the 20th century, anthropologists started to stage their ethnographic data and to write *thick descriptions* (Geertz 1973).

In the field of cultural anthropology, the qualitative ethnographic writing method in the form of *ethnographic vignettes*, also referred to as *ethnographic highlights* or *ethnographic portraits*, is frequently used. In the light of this, it has to be mentioned that, especially in recent decades, the attribute ethnographic has been used in an almost inflationary way in the area of management and organizational studies, from which critical cultural analysis studies done in the field of cultural anthropology—the present study included—distance themselves.[15] Anthropologist Barbara Tedlock observed this already two decades ago. She noted that countless studies across disciplines and languages "have been encoded as 'ethnographic'" (Tedlock 2000, 459), yet often lack critical ethnographic research methods and writing tools.

Etymologically, the word vignette derives from the diminutive form of *vigne*, the French word for vine. Vignette thus means small vine. This type of border ornament was frequently used in portrait paintings of the 19th century. Likewise, the title page of a book or the beginning or end of a chapter was adorned with ornamental pictorial representations. The analogy of these paintings to the text passages that constitute ethnographic vignettes results in their vivid and brisk writing style. The impressionistic text passages are characterized by a particular linguistic picture that reminds one of a novel. Figurative language is key to ethnographic vignettes.

In ethnographies such as the present one, these text passages function to thematize a specific situational quality encountered in the field of research:

15 Management scholar Michael Humphrey, for example, remembers how he was influenced by the writing of anthropologists (Humphreys and Watson 2009, 44).

situations, interactions, processes and procedures, feelings or simply places, persons, animals, or objects, for example. In short, the ethnographic vignette is a condensation of relevant statements about the field and composed using empirical material. Written from the perspective of the ethnographer, ethnographic vignettes "figure as either polished fieldnotes or introspective storytelling about fieldwork. They are often written to distill and more intuitively grasp the big themes in an ethnographic project" (Bönisch-Brednich 2016, 199). Moreover, written at the beginning of an article or when figuring as an introduction to a book chapter, ethnographic vignettes serve as the "guiding story" (ibid.) for developing central arguments presented in the analytical parts of an academic text. The empirical material is usually condensed into a scene or plot and usually foregoes excursions, time jumps or explanations. This is why ethnographic vignettes have also been labeled as "prototypical descriptions" (Huber 2012, 11). The visual vocabulary in ethnographic vignettes is close to the literary genre of creative non-fiction, which uses storytelling techniques to write about actual events while presenting the most accurate descriptions possible. The difference, however, is that the writing of ethnographic vignettes is usually based on (repetitive or particular) observations that have been collected during the long-term research process. Thus, even if the reader might interpret the descriptive scene-setting passages as a snapshot, ethnographic vignettes presuppose observations and an analytical view over a long period of time. Hence, ethnographic vignettes are mainly informed by passages of field diaries written by the ethnographer, their notes taken after interviews, and even sometimes enriched by memories by evoking empathy and emotion. I endorse the statement that "the ethnographer as author and storyteller is very much at the heart of crafting the act of storytelling" (Bönisch-Brednich 2018, 8). As a result, telling stories "demands a visible author […] who acknowledges that she/he is also a gatherer, a constructor, an analyzer and a baker of stories" (ibid. 2018, 24).

What is the potential of ethnographic vignettes? Being mainly visual and descriptive (and decidedly not analytical or deconstructing), these text passages evoke meaning through imagination rather than convincing the reader with a deep analysis that is connected to the scientific discourse. They add color to the writing and create reading memories. Since ethnographic vignettes can be composed of quasi-fictional text compositions or elements, this writing strategy allows us to present data on situations or persons in an anonymized (and still comparative) form (cf. Knöhr 2018, 42). By aggregating data that the writing ethnographer considers relevant for the ethnogra-

phy, they leave traces that will lead and accompany the reader to the more analytical text passages. The threads spun in the ethnographic vignette are then taken up again in other parts of the ethnography and linked to analysis. This conversely means to not blindly reproduce personal narratives nor individual testimonials but to retain the necessary "degree of distance from the narrative material we collect, analyze and produce" (P. Atkinson and Delamont 2006, 169).

In this book, ethnographic vignettes have a particular purpose. They are based on roughly 250 pages of hand-written and digital fieldnotes collected during the initial period of participant observations at the VIC and other field visits to Geneva, Turin or to career fairs. This also includes notes written after interviews, especially conversations my informants and I had before and after the interviews.[16] On the one hand, I include these descriptive text passages to open the reader's eyes to certain aspects. The ethnographic vignettes provide a deep insight into specific patterns and assemblages encountered in the field of research in order to address routines and practices, to describe atmospheres in the places of recruitment and transit as well as to visualize the encounters with informants and other agents in the field. On the other hand, ethnographic vignettes support and contextualize the analytical chapters. The readers will be able to find thematic emphases that are important for the analytical analysis. Since the ethnographic vignettes have an intermediary function, they are a bit longer than common vignette descriptions comprising of a few sentences and orient themselves towards longer descriptions that are becoming more and more popular (e. g. Harper 2000).

The prologue is the first ethnographic vignette. It describes the often lengthy path interns take to enter the UN. It shows how my view oscillated between the intern-self and the ethnographer-self. The main venue for this first ethnographic scene is Vienna. In the second vignette, I address my attempt to find the tourist gaze and describe how the UN in Geneva presents itself to a public audience. Located in Geneva, this vignette introduces the chapter about the UN as an ethnographic field site. The third ethnographic vignette tells about the relationship between the ethnographer and the informants, and how they negotiated their (narrative) positions. It uses a fieldwork anecdote in Turin to introduce the methodological reflections. The fourth ethnographic vignette introduces the ethnographic chapter on ritualized actions, habitualized practices and social orders in everyday work situations. The

16 Only isolated passages are based on interview transcripts.