

## ***Homo UN.* Early career professionals adapting to the organizational culture of the United Nations**

### ***Homo ONUense.* Adaptación de los funcionarios junior a la cultura de la Organización de las Naciones Unidas**

**Linda Martina MÜLLI**  
**University of Basel \***

**Abstract:** An advertisement on the United Nations' social media website announces that 'the dream' of pursuing a UN career has to be approached 'with a healthy mix of realism and idealism'. Taking this quote as a point of departure, this paper examines early career UN professionals' adaptability to the organizational culture. This aim is approached by juxtaposing the actual experiences in the UN headquarters in Geneva and Vienna with what is condensed in the notion of *homo UN*, the UN's corporate subject. Junior professionals' modes of adaptability are reflected in their ability to 'create uniqueness' and a 'balanced modesty', an attitude that enables to bridge the frictions between concepts of ideal international civil servants vis-à-vis the individuals' real experiences. The modes of adaptability become visible through the analysis of the informants' self-narrations. This paper postulates that specific strategies of adaptability to the UN's corporate subject *homo UN* are needed to be able to cope with the UN environment.

**Key words:** United Nations (UN); international civil servants; corporate identity; modes of adaptability.

**Resumen:** Un anuncio publicado en la página web de la ONU señala que una persona puede acercarse «al sueño» de hacer una carrera en la organización con una «mezcla sana de realismo e idealismo». Tomando esta cita como punto de partida, el artículo examina cómo los funcionarios de la ONU que inician su carrera profesional van adaptándose a la cultura de la organización. Este objetivo se aborda mediante la yuxtaposición de sus experiencias reales en las sedes de Ginebra y Viena, lo que ha sido condensado en el término de *homo ONUense*, el sujeto corporativo de la ONU. Los modos de adaptabilidad de los funcionarios jóvenes se reflejan en la habilidad de «crear singularidad» y en «una modestia equilibrada», actitud que les permite superar la discrepancia entre el concepto ideal de un funcionario internacional y su experiencia individual. Los modos de adaptabilidad se manifiestan a través del análisis de las auto-narraciones de los informantes. El artículo postula que se necesitan estrategias específicas de adaptabilidad al sujeto corporativo de la ONU por parte del *homo ONUense* para poder hacer frente al entorno de la organización.

**Palabras clave:** Organización de las Naciones Unidas (ONU); empleados internacionales; identidad corporativa; adaptabilidad.

---

\* Received: 22nd of May 2017. Accepted: 5th of September 2017.

This paper has been made within the framework of the «Rituals in an International Work Environment. An Anthropological Research on Cross-cultural Relation and Interactions in United Nations Affiliated Organizations in Geneva and Vienna» project, funded by Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF). Email: Linda.muelli@unibas.ch. Institute for Cultural Anthropology and European Ethnology, University of Basel, Switzerland.

## 1. PROLOG

After more than seventy years of existence, the United Nations (UN) are more present than ever in public discourse. The need for this engaged supranational body is undeniable. On the one hand, this includes the need for politically independent and bureaucratically efficient UN-related bodies and agencies involved in policy-making for global ‘development’ and peace. On the other hand, these activities are premised on well-trained employees to implement the respective UN cooperation projects with its member states. Thus, the UN aims to be an attractive employer for highly skilled<sup>1</sup> professionals. In recent years and decades, a variety of study programs at universities –from Peace and Conflict Studies, International Cooperation Studies to Global Health Studies or Nonproliferation Studies, just to mention a few– were established to train and specialize graduate students for work in the area of international cooperation. These graduates and other early career professionals are attracted by a variety of privileges UN employees enjoy when holding certain positions. Working for the UN implies an international work environment, travel to ‘exotic’ places and prestige. Ultimately, working at the United Nations is uniquely associated with the promise to contribute to the ideal of building a better world. One of my informants stated in an informal conversation: ‘It’s satisfying and it flatters your ego to work here at an international organization’.<sup>2</sup> Against this background, the charisma of the United Nations system as an attractive employing body that pledges an international area of work is undeniable and will be addressed hereafter.

This piece examines how international civil servants who are still at an early stage of their UN career adapt to the hierarchical organizational

---

1 I am aware of the ongoing debate about a final definition of ‘highly skilled’ individuals. To go more into details would, however, transcend the goal of this article. For further reading cf. NOWICKA, Magdalena: «Migrating skills, skilled migrants and migration skills: The Influence of contexts on the validation of migrants’ skills», *Migration Letters*, 11/2, 2013, pp. 171-186; RAGHURAM, Parvati: «The Difference that Skills Make: Gender, Family Migration Strategies and Regulated Labour Markets», *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 30/2, 2004, pp. 303-321.

2 Informal conversation with junior professional, memory protocol, 23.7.2014.

culture.<sup>3</sup> It addresses their strategies to cope with the new work environment and the required standards UN staff is supposed to fulfill. In other words, it explores what it means to ‘approach [the] dream for a career with the United Nations with a healthy mix of realism and idealism’,<sup>4</sup> as it was expressed in an advertisement published in social media in order to promote a career with the UN.<sup>5</sup> In what follows, the image of an ideal UN employee –allegorized as *homo UN*– is critically contraposed to the actual realities faced by early career professionals employed in the UN headquarters located in two European cities, where ethnographic data was collected. A point to note here is that the dichotomy of ‘idealism’ and ‘realism’ is inherent in both narratives that are discussed hereinafter. *Homo UN* is the ‘ideal employee’ that becomes ‘real’ through the narratives of junior professionals. In this sense, the ideal figure is not only shaped by the organization’s perspective but also by the imaginations and practices of its employees.

## 2. PRELIMINARY INFORMATION ON THE RESEARCH APPROACH

The purpose of this paper is to provide first insights into the ongoing research project on the intertwining of careers and biographies of early career professionals employed in the UN headquarters in Geneva, Switzerland, and Vienna, Austria. The multi-sited research study<sup>6</sup> addresses the aforementioned research topic through the analysis of narrations<sup>7</sup> and strategies of self-positioning of UN staff in junior positions, in UN parlance called entry-level professionals. Further, it includes the study of their self-reflections. For two reasons, the endeavors of the present research project are directed towards professionals at an early stage of their UN career. On one hand, because it was shown that newcomers ponder more frequently on professional

---

3 This mainly includes employees holding a long-term working contract as so-called *entry-level professionals* but also *consultants* who hold short-term working contracts.

4 Facebook site of *United Nations Careers*, accessed 28.1.2017, emphasis in original.

5 In January 2017, several advertisements showing UN staff members with a quote on a UN career were published in social media.

6 MARCUS, George E.: «Ethnography in/of the World System: The Emergence of Multi-Sited Ethnography», *Annual Review Anthropology*, 24, 1995, pp. 95-117.

7 LEHMANN, Albrecht: «Cultural anthropology and narratology», in K. Schriewer & S. Cayuela (eds.), *Anthropological Perspectives. Tools for the analysis of European societies*, Murcia, Münster, New York: Universidad de Murcia, Waxmann, 2014, pp. 70-91.

circumstances and working environment conditions than their colleagues who have been in a particular working environment for a long time and may implicitly accept it.<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, I interviewed junior UN professionals between their late twenties and late thirties because they are not only concerned with their career development. Quite a few also take relevant private decisions such as the choice of their partner who, in many cases, is also highly skilled and potentially highly mobile. Additionally, in this period of their life, my informants start thinking about whether or not they start a family and if this would be reasonable in view of their current working conditions.

In the course of my cultural anthropological research project, I am interested in the transformation of the self and in what I termed 'habitus of international life and work' that eventually emerges when international civil servants work for the United Nations for many years or even decades.<sup>9</sup> In addition to that, I aim to identify what can generally be said about the interdependence of biography and work related decision-making processes of highly skilled professionals such as international civil servants. With my investigation, I seek to understand international civil servants both as individuals and as agents of a large international organization.

This paper is based on a qualitative research approach. First, it builds upon long-term field research on site that was undertaken while I, the researcher, was working as an intern for 13 months in two UN organizations based in the Vienna International Center (VIC), the UN

---

8 GÖTZ, Irene: «Empirische Erhebungen in Industriebetrieben und bürokratischen Organisationen», en S. Götsch & A. Lehmann (eds.), *Methoden der Volkskunde. Positionen, Quellen, Arbeitsweisen der Europäischen Ethnologie*, Berlín: Reimer, 2007, pp. 249-269, p. 258.

9 Other scholars investigated on the 'cosmopolitan identity' of UN professionals (cf. NOWICKA, Magdalena and KAWEH, Ramin: «Looking at the Practice of UN Professionals: Strategies for Managing Differences and the Emergence of a Cosmopolitan Identity», in M. Nowicka y M. Rovisco (eds.): *Cosmopolitanism in Practice*, Ashgate Publishing Company, Farnham, 2009, pp. 51-71; NOWICKA, Magdalena: *Transnational Professionals and their Cosmopolitan Universes*, Frankfurt, New York: Campus Verlag, 2006. See also the publication about the 'cosmopolitan capital' needed in the particular field of international organizations: JANSSON, André: «How to become an «elite cosmopolitan»: The mediatized trajectories of United Nations expatriates», *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 19, (5), 2016, pp. 465-480. Opposed to the approach of the present research project, they followed a comparative approach and included several age cohorts in their research.

headquarters in Vienna. My internships allowed me to conduct participant observation and to explore the lifeworld of the fenced off VIC building complex. Being a participant observant or rather a ‘participant-insider’<sup>10</sup>, conducting an ethnography from ‘inside’ as a young professional meant being involved in project work, as well as actively taking part in the everyday life of my colleagues. During the week, I went for joint coffee and lunch breaks with other young professionals. On weekends, we went on excursions and organized private parties. Second, it includes the evaluation of audio-recorded qualitative interviews with early career UN professionals as well as the analysis of publicly available sources related to the UN’s HR policy-making.

As of this writing, I interviewed twelve men and women aged between 26 and 39 at the time of the audio-recorded interview. I met them after work or on weekends, at home, in parks, in a restaurant or a bar of their choice. This allowed us to have fairly open conversations of trust, which was of particular importance in view of the highly competitive work environment in the UN context that can turn into an atmosphere of highest caution or even mistrust. Alternatively, the interview was conducted during the informants’ spare time in their office or in the organization’s cafeteria. After the introductory small talk in the first language of some of my informants –languages I, the interviewer, am proficient in– the majority of the interviews was conducted in English, the daily working language of the interviewees. The interviews lasted between 45 minutes and approximately three hours.

With this research approach, I aim to address the issue of access to the United Nations as an employing body and the modes of adaptability of international civil servants to the UN’s organizational culture.<sup>11</sup>

---

10 MOSSE, David: «Anti-social Anthropology? Objectivity, Objection, and the Ethnography of Public Policy and Professional Communities», *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute (N.S.)*, 12, 2006, pp. 935-956, p. 935.

11 In 2006, the UN’s Ethics Office was established in order to support ‘an organizational culture that is informed by integrity, accountability, transparency and respect’. This specific organizational culture is defined ‘to describe the social norms and rules of behavior [sic] that express our beliefs about ourselves, how work is accomplished, and how we relate to each other’, <<http://www.un.org/en/ethics/culture.shtml>>, accessed 22.6.2017. From a cultural-anthropological perspective and based on Clifford Geertz (1973: 5), in turn, ‘culture’ is understood as a human created semiotic ‘web of significance’. Consequently, being part of an organization means for the individual to (re-)create the specific work culture.

Comprehending international civil servants both as individuals and as actors of a large international organization, I particularly investigate on how junior staff members make use of their specific capitals<sup>12</sup> (in the competitive work environment of the United Nations).

Subsequently, I address the following issues: First, I elaborate on what, from the organization's point of view, are the explicitly required characteristics and attributes as well as the tacit knowledge together with emotional dispositions and attitudes of the 'ideal' UN employee. Thus, the question is: What image does the UN portray of the allegorized figure *homo UN*?

Second, and in order to understand how men and women at the early stage of their UN career respond to the above-mentioned conception of the corporate subject<sup>13</sup> *homo UN*—both, at the official and formal but also at the implicit personal and emotional level—, I elaborate on how the informants comprehend the own becoming-part-of-the-UN subjectivity vis-à-vis the conception of the 'ideal' UN employee. In view of highly competitive recruitment processes, the question arises: What are the strategies of these mobile highly skilled individuals, who seek to establish themselves as international civil servants, to create 'uniqueness'<sup>14</sup> at the explicit level that would guarantee to follow the approached career path? And focusing on the individual mindset, it has to be asked: What are the informants' strategies to bridge potential sources of friction between the conception of *homo UN* and their individual perceptions and realities? This issue will be approached through the analysis of self-narrations.

---

12 BOURDIEU, Pierre: «The forms of capital», in John G. RICHARDSON (ed.), *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, New York: Greenwood Press, 1986 [1983], pp. 246-258; BOURDIEU, Pierre: *Distinction. A Social Critique of Judgment of Taste*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984 [1979].

13 When referring to human resources (HR) strategies as shown in this paper, it is empirically meaningful to compare the UN with the HR management logics and patterns of large corporations (cf. Moss Kanter, 1993). I therefore use the term 'corporate subject' and not 'organizational subject'.

14 Cf. the inspiring theoretical approach through the so-called 'life-mode analysis': HØRJUP, Thomas: «Life-Mode Analysis – a contextual explanation», in K. Schriewer y S. Cayuela (eds.), *Anthropological Perspectives. Tools for the analysis of European societies*, Murcia, Münster, New York: Universidad de Murcia, Waxmann, 2014, pp. 218-265. Højrup defines the life mode of career professionals: «To be able to reproduce the life mode you need to reproduce your uniqueness, i.e. your ability to produce new unique ideas and solutions», *ibid.*: p. 240).

This paper ultimately postulates that early career professionals need specific competencies and need to develop precise strategies to be able to cope with the organization's conception of the constantly (re-)narrated corporate subject *homo UN*. This has to be understood in connection with the individuals' modes of adaptability to the United Nations and its organizational culture. It thereby provides preliminary responses on how and why early career professionals get access to the United Nations.

### **3. HOMO UN, THE CORPORATE SUBJECT OF THE UNITED NATIONS**

In this section, I aim to address what, from the organization's point of view, could be depicted as the 'ideal' UN employee or *homo UN*.<sup>15</sup> The model or vision of the corporate subject possessing the appropriate competencies and sharing specific values appears in official UN records such as staff regulations and rules and staff manuals. The required characteristics manifest themselves in advertisements and promotional videos calling for a UN career which are published on the organization's official websites and are circulated in social media. They are promoted in career developing workshops provided by the United Nations System Staff College (UNSSC) and at career fairs for graduate students and early career professionals who aim to work in the field of international cooperation. The specific required characteristics of *homo UN* can be found in job descriptions and in instructions on how to successfully apply for a UN position and hold the job in the future.

#### **3.1. International civil servants in the organizational hierarchy**

As preliminary information, the complex recruitment procedure of the United Nations will be outlined here. In my analysis, I focus on individuals employed in professional and higher categories, also known as *professional staff* or just *P staff*. More precisely, I concentrate on entry-level professionals as mentioned in the beginning of this paper. These positions require an advanced university degree and a minimum of two to five years of relevant working experience. Hence, the study is about

---

<sup>15</sup> Notably, this ideal figure is constantly re-negotiated by different actors in the field of research. In this context, a historic comparative analysis would enrich the knowledge about *homo UN* in different times.

highly skilled individuals who are also potentially mobile as they follow UN positions duty stations across the globe. In the UN's staff hierarchy, professional staff members are considered superior in hierarchy compared to their colleagues employed in general service and related categories. The latter, also known as *general staff* or *G staff*, are generally responsible for administrative duties.

UN career aspirants with no or little work experience have the possibility to apply via a competitive recruitment examination, called *Young Professional Programme* (YPP). This recruitment examination addresses 'talented, highly qualified professionals'.<sup>16</sup> The written exam concentrating on a specific professional category chosen by the candidates takes place once a year and can be described as a fierce competition among applicants across the globe. According to official numbers provided by the organization, an average of 40'000 applicants take the YPP exam every year.<sup>17</sup> Yet, only a low number of applicants actually passes the two-stage examination procedure that includes a 4,5-hours hand written exam followed by a personal interview.<sup>18</sup> However, passing the examination process does not guarantee a position in one of the UN affiliated organizations. A rule stipulates that the names of the successful candidates will remain on a so-called 'reserve list' for two years.<sup>19</sup> If the 'reserve' candidates are not offered a position within this period of time but still seek to pursue a UN career, they are obliged to take the YPP exam again –regardless of the successful result in the first turn–.

A second option for junior professionals without work experience is to be hired as *junior professional officers* (JPOs). A small number of governments or partner countries of UN affiliated bodies sponsor these positions. Applicants with the respective nationality or candidates originating from a so-called *un- or under-represented country*<sup>20</sup> are

---

16 UN.careers, *Young Professionals Programme*, <<https://careers.un.org/lbw/home.aspx?viewtype=NCE&lang=en-US>>, accessed 8.7.2016.

17 Humanrightscareers, *UN Entry-Level Hiring Programmes*, <<http://www.humanrightscareers.com/un-entry-level-hiring-programmes/>>, accessed 9.1.2017.

18 To take the YPP examination cycle of 2015 as an example, only 104 candidates successfully passed the exam.

19 UN.careers, *Young Professionals Programme*, accessed 8.7.2017.

20 The continuously adapted list of *un- and under-represented countries* reflects the geographical representation among the UN workforce. Countries from the 'global North' are usually overrepresented.

offered employment contracts from one to two years. Again, there is only a low number of such positions available and they are limited to a short length of time.

The most important entry-level career opportunity is, in my view, what I call the ‘third career path’. This career path is individual, self-initiated and self-made and consists of a long and sometimes precarious period of (unpaid) internships followed by short-term consultancy contracts without any social security. Eventually, the early career professionals are offered a position in the professional and higher categories. However, before being assigned in a P position, junior professionals undergo a long lean period consisting of insecurity and flexibility. With regard to this career path, I quote the US-American Sociologist Richard Sennett. He wrote: ‘In the flexible regime, the difficulties crystallize in a particular act, the act of risk-taking’.<sup>21</sup> In other words, only career aspirants who can afford an (unpaid) internship and are able to take the risk to work as consultants on a short-term basis are able to pursue this alternative and self-initiated career entry. To be precise, the ‘third career path’ best illustrates the flexible work regimes of the New Economy<sup>22</sup> that –at least in the last few decades– became also increasingly notable in the context of the UN employing body. Against this background, it has to be mentioned that consultancies, i.e. positions often serving as an interim appointment in junior professionals’ careers, are actually foreseen for experienced experts –defined as ‘recognized authorit[ies] or specialist[s] in a specific field, engaged by the Organization in an advisory or consultative capacity’–<sup>23</sup> in order to perform short-term project work.

### 3.2. Explicit requirements as the UN’s core

The employing body UN defined eight so-called core competencies, six managerial competencies and, most importantly, three core values,

---

21 SENNETT, Richard: *The Corrosion of Character. The Personal Consequences of Work in the New Capitalism*, New York, London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1998, p. 75.

22 SENNETT, Richard: *The Culture of the New Capitalism*, New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 2006.

23 UN.careers, <<https://careers.un.org/lbw/home.aspx?viewtype=CON>>, accessed 14.4.2017. Similar observations can be made for staff members employed as so-called *individual contractors*.

which should be embraced by the ideal corporate subject and by all international civil servants. The impact of this attempt to determine what could be called a corporate identity allegorized in *homo UN* includes both formal requirements, such as education or professional experience, and indirect requirements, such as mental and emotional predispositions. These partially interconnected characteristics of the *homo UN* will be discussed in this section.

In *The Applicant's Manual*, competencies are defined as 'skills, attributes and behaviors that are directly related to the successful performance on the job'.<sup>24</sup> This leads to the question: What actual competences are considered as essential and are required if one aims to work for the United Nations? Both, *The Applicant's Manual*<sup>25</sup> and UN publicity on the website [career.un.org](http://career.un.org), provide answers regarding the required competencies and attitudes of *homo UN*.

In *The Applicant's Manual* it reads: 'Core competencies [comprise of] communication, teamwork, planning and organizing, accountability, client orientation, creativity, technological awareness and commitment to continuous learning'.<sup>26</sup> In addition to the aforementioned core competencies, the UN defined managerial competencies covering ability categories such as 'vision, leadership, empowering others, managing performance, building trust and judgment/decision making'.<sup>27</sup> The call for these competencies or skills can also be found on the just mentioned UN website on careers. It is where the UN presents staff members who are supposed to serve as role models. They are quoted as follows: 'I am always learning new things and feeling intellectually challenged'.<sup>28</sup> Another quote is: 'It is truly great to work with people from everywhere in the world. It is enriching, and addictive'.<sup>29</sup> Again, the role models' quotes impart that UN employees should align themselves to the role models. When interviewing early career professionals, it becomes clear that they actually reproduce these patterns.

---

24 *The Applicant's Manual*, p. 157.

25 The companion manual is titled *The Recruiter's Manual. Instructional Manual for the Recruiter on the Staff Selection System*, 2015.

26 *The Applicant's Manual. Instructional Manual for the Applicant on the Staff Selection System*, 2015, pp. 156-157.

27 *Ibidem*.

28 Facebook site of *UN Careers*, accessed 28.1.2017, emphasis in original.

29 *Ibidem*.

Nonetheless, core values as they were defined by the United Nations seem to be the most important of the explicit and formal requirements of *homo UN*. These values can be found in each employment advertisement and are part of the job description. UN core values are defined by ‘integrity, professionalism and respect for diversity’<sup>30</sup> and are, in my view, strongly interconnected with the implicit requirements of *homo UN*, as shown further down the line.

Defining core values for a coherent UN was an initiative taken by the former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan. In March 1998, he called upon to ‘build the future’.<sup>31</sup> Only in 2006, the General Assembly finalized a report that called for a UN ‘Delivering as One’.<sup>32</sup> This includes the corporate identity, namely ‘United Nations competencies for the Future’<sup>33</sup> that are described in HR reference material provided by the organization’s *HR portal*.

Persons, who apply for positions under recruitment in the United Nations, need to demonstrate the above-mentioned competencies and sharing specific values. At any stage of the complex, time-consuming and highly competitive assessment procedure that is supposed to ensure finding (and hiring) the best possible professionals for a specific position, candidates must be able to perform like the ideal corporate subject *homo UN*. After Erving Goffman, performance is defined as ‘all the activity of a given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way any of the other participants’.<sup>34</sup> Based on this assumption, the candidates influence their counterparts, as Goffman puts it. In other words, candidates must convince the HR personnel and hiring managers to be able to explicitly –and implicitly, as discussed later– fit into the United Nations.

---

30 Ibidem.

31 United Nations, Secretary-General’s Bulletin ‘Building the Future’, ST/SGB/1998/6, 31.3.1998.

32 UN GA, A/61/583, *Note by the Secretary General*, 20.11.2006, <[http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view\\_doc.asp?symbol=A/61/583](http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/61/583)>, accessed: 13.4.2017.

33 <<https://hr.un.org/materials/united-nations-competencies-future>>, <[https://careers.un.org/lbw/attachments/competencies\\_booklet\\_en.pdf](https://careers.un.org/lbw/attachments/competencies_booklet_en.pdf)>, accessed: 24.3.2017. Date of record is unknown.

34 GOFFMAN, Erving: *The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life*, New York: Anchor Books, 1959, p. 15.

For UN career aspirants, the process of adaptability (*Passfähigkeit*)<sup>35</sup> starts with providing information about themselves and their family members in a standardized personal record referred to as *personal history forms* (PHF). In the curriculum vitae formal requirements such as education and professional experience need to be fulfilled. Then, the applicants have to pass the assessment exercise (or knowledge-based test) and a so-called competency-based interview<sup>36</sup> in front of an assessment panel. This panel consists of the hiring manager, the HR recruiter and further staff members.<sup>37</sup> As one reads on the official website of the UN which deals with the topic ‘career’, this specific form of job interview is based on the assumption that ‘[the] history [of the interviewed job applicant] tells a story about [them]: [their] talents, skills, abilities, knowledge and actual experience in handling a variety of situations’. For instance, the interviewed person has to respond to questions like: ‘Tell us about a situation when you went above and beyond your manager’s expectations’.<sup>38</sup> Evidently, the candidate under recruitment then aims to perform as expected.<sup>39</sup>

One of my informants recalls the situation of her competency-based interview: ‘It was a panel. It was super intimidating. A big room. The [organization’s] flag in the background, a camera and a table of like five people. My boss, an HR person, and super interestingly enough, a girl who I had worked with in [organizatim Y]’.<sup>40</sup> This informant recounts how she had carefully prepared for her competency-based interview. She had asked colleagues who have been interviewed before and she trained how she would perform in front of the interview panel. Thus, apparently, there are moments of solidarity among peers, even though junior professionals face constant competition. The informant I just

---

35 AUGUSTYNEK, Marta: *Arbeitskulturen im Grosskonzern. Eine kulturanthropologische Analyse organisatorischer Transformationsdynamik in Mitarbeiterperspektive*, Münster: Waxmann, 2010, p. 13.

36 The so-called ‘competency-based interview’ is also known as ‘behavioral interview’ or ‘criterion based interview’.

37 *The Applicant’s Manual*, p. 156.

38 <<https://careers.un.org/lbw/home.aspx?viewtype=AYI>>, accessed 21.3.2017, my emphasis.

39 Notably, one could observe these patterns of performance and adaptability also in other fields of employment.

40 Interview with informant D (f, 26), 21.5.2016.

quoted could draw on her friends' experience. A similar moment of solidarity experienced another informant who passed the YPP exam.<sup>41</sup> This person was in contact with other people who aimed to take the YPP examination. Exam participants had connected via social media (Facebook and LinkedIn) and shared experiences and material during the preparation period.<sup>42</sup>

According to an HR staff member the complete hiring process for a position in the professional and higher categories takes eight to nine months.<sup>43</sup> Thus, the process of recruitment performance takes several months and eventually turns into a routine.<sup>44</sup> It is suspected that a well-practiced candidate will convince better compared to someone who is not quite familiar with how *homo UN* is supposed to act and to be.

It holds true that the UN, which as an employing body and organization gets its legitimacy through the internationally representative composition of its staff, since the recent decades, at least officially, seeks to achieve gender balance and a geographical distribution among its staff members. Unfortunately, this balance is not yet achieved, as it was stated by the Joint Inspection Unit (JIU), which assures to be 'the only independent external oversight body of the United Nations system'.<sup>45</sup> A job applicant still meets several obstacles or, as described in a workshop paper offered by the UN: 'Developing transferable skills is not enough. You must be able to use them to become a highly attractive job candidate as well as a valued member of a team'.<sup>46</sup> Notably, this is strongly connected to how candidates can reactivate their capitals in the Bourdieusian sense.<sup>47</sup> When I asked a recruitment officer, if it is difficult to achieve this balance, he responded that he as a recruiter is responsible

---

41 Interview with informant N (f, 32), 2.3.2017.

42 In recent years, the UN itself made an effort to provide more preparation material for YPP candidates. This includes not only 'best practices' but also samples of former examination cycles, <<https://careers.un.org/lbw/home.aspx?viewtype=nces>>, accessed: 7.6.2017.

43 Interview with informant K (m, 36), *ad hoc* protocol, 12.12.2016.

44 GOFFMAN, Erving: *The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life*, New York: Anchor Books, 1959, p. 16.

45 <<https://www.unjiu.org/en/about-us/Pages/default.aspx>>, accessed: 21.3.2017. Cf. also: Joint Inspection Unit JIU/NOTE/2012/3.

46 <[47 Cf. BORDIEU, Pierre: «The forms of capital...», 1986 \[1983\], pp. 246-258.](https://www.google.ch/search?q=united+nations+taking+control+of+your+career&ie=utf8&oe=utf8&gws_rd=cr&ei=1d_TWN6vEsir6ATlgb7gBA#safe=off&q=united+nations+taking+control+of+your+career&*></a>>, accessed: 23.3.2017.</p>
</div>
<div data-bbox=)

to ‘shortlist’ female candidates and candidates from under-represented countries. Then, he laconically said: ‘The best candidate is the best candidate. The issue is the short list, because it will be kept as a record. If there are two hundred candidates for a job and only two females, we say “consider them”. But it finally depends on the performance and if they fulfill the requirements’.<sup>48</sup> In the perspective of the organization this HR officer is representing, it depends on the performance of the candidates. But not all candidates are familiar with the recruitment practices of international organizations. As the HR officer admits later in the interview: ‘People from developing countries do not have the same chances to grow in the field, even if they might have a good education’.<sup>49</sup> At this point, it ought to be mentioned that some UN organizations started an initiative to reach out for these people. At least from the outside perspective, the unfair recruitment process implicitly favoring candidates with occidental education and work experience might appear fair. There are, as shown in the subsequent session of this paper, markers of uniqueness that are needed to pursue a UN career.

To sum up this first section, the characteristics of the ‘ideal’ UN employee are based on occidental ideals of the *New Economy*.<sup>50</sup> It was shown that the corporate subject *homo UN* is aimed to be outstanding and successful. *Homo UN* is highly flexible and mobile, resilient and always open to learn new things. The ‘ideal’ figure of an international civil servant is cooperative and a self-less team player, honest, upright, professional (and not an emotional or private individual) and respects diversity. The life of *homo UN* is shaped by its profession. Thus, from the organization’s perspective, there is little room for private life even though the UN financially supports spouses and children of its employees. The requirement of always being available for the organizations’ needs –and therefore mobile– might be seen in close connection to the ideal of standing back as an individual and instead being an intrinsically motivated professional.

---

48 Interview with informant K (m, 36), *ad hoc* protocol, 12.12.2016.

49 *Ibidem*.

50 SENNETT, Richard: *The Culture of the New Capitalism*, New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 2006.

#### 4. RESPONSES TO IMPLICIT REQUIREMENTS: CREATING UNIQUENESS

As outlined above, the competition among applicants who aim to pursue a UN career remains high. How is this additional obstacle perceived by the organization? To approach this question, I quote again the recruitment manager: ‘In the UN there is a lot of competition. For a P2 position, for instance, there are four hundred people applying. There are always many candidates who offer more than only the basic skills for a P2 position and a minimum of two years of experience. There are people applying with ten years of experience. That’s the line. [...] For an intern, it’s hard to compete. I ask you: Which performance is better?’<sup>51</sup> His last rhetoric question, namely whether and how junior professionals could hold against more experienced competitors who mostly apply from ‘outside’, leads to my interest on junior professionals’ individual responses of adaptability to the explicit and formal requirements (*core competencies*, *managerial competencies* and *core values*) as well as implicit and informal requirements for UN employees that are implicitly conveyed through the recruitment practices of the UN and are, as shown in this section, at least partially integrated in organizational processes.

It is particularly the individual’s readiness to respond to these implicit requirements that would make a difference when approaching the ideal of *homo UN*. The individual disposition is manifested in different modes to become a unique junior employee. As shown, during the recruitment procedure UN career aspirants need to prove that they possess the required knowledge and competencies and that they share corporate values of the future employer. The competitive HR assessment process suggests the assumption that the recruitment process is objective and offers equal opportunities for all the candidates. I claim, however, that an additional competency is necessary to become an international civil servant: The ability to ‘create uniqueness’. Thus, the following question arises: How do early career professionals –many of them pursue the third career path– create uniqueness in order to not only compete with peers but also with candidates who push into the UN field of employment?

Creating uniqueness involves manifold aspects and is part of the process of adaptability towards the UN and its working culture. Creating

---

51 Interview with informant K (m, 36), *ad hoc* protocol, 12.12.2016.

uniqueness is shaped by the way UN professionals respond to requirements and values demanded by the organization.

First, creating uniqueness includes availability. Particularly, those junior professionals who pursue a third career path, try to stay in the respective city due to professional reasons. A residency permit or visa decides if UN career aspirants are able to stay ‘on site’ –meaning the geographic location of respective the country, city or UN headquarters but also the UN environment in a broader sense–, in order to (re-)activate the social network they have created during the stay in the UN from outside. It is important to keep regular contact with other peers who might have heard of a new open position. Staying ‘on site’ allows junior employees to be available on demand or, as experienced by some of my interviewees, to receive a phone call on a Wednesday and being offered an internship ‘[in case] you wanna start next Monday’.<sup>52</sup> This is exactly what the just quoted informant did. He moved from a third country where he was finishing his studies directly to Vienna and started working in the new position immediately. This anecdote about the importance to stay ‘on site’ stands for numerous similar narrations I came across during my research. For early career professionals applying for internships and consultancies, the commitment to constant readiness seems to be commonly accepted. They are ready to drop everything for a job with the UN. I claim that the implicit message the UN signalizes is that particularly early career professionals have to be always available and ready to start working in a new position. Notably, in the case of the UN headquarters in the European cities Geneva and Vienna, this availability strategy can be more easily followed by persons with a EU/EFTA citizenship. Career aspirants with other, for this purpose less privileged citizenships find their individual strategies. This includes marriage but also the matriculation as a student at the local university in order to receive a student visa. Especially during the flexible and unstable period of consultancies, student visas permit to stay ‘on site’. Additionally, the availability through staying ‘on site’ thanks to legal citizenship that allows fast and flexible travels has to be enhanced through financial resources (*economic capital*)<sup>53</sup> that would enable to pay the living in the respective site during periods without employment.

---

52 Cf. interview with informant E (m, 30), 22.5.2016.

53 Cf. BOURDIEU, Pierre: «The forms of capital...», 1986 [1983], pp. 253-255.

The crucial ability to stay ‘on site’ is linked to capitals in the Bourdieusian sense that are seen as additional crucial factors needed to create uniqueness. Staying on site enables UN career aspirants to use and (re-)activate their social capital, after Bourdieu defined as ‘the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition’.<sup>54</sup> Given the premise of ‘indissolubly material and symbolic exchanges’ for a well-established and sustained social network, Bourdieu underlined the importance of ‘objective relations of proximity and physical (geographical) space or even in economic and social space’, as it was shown above.

Bourdieu further emphasizes that ‘the volume of the social capital possessed by a given agent thus depends on the size of the network of connections he can effectively mobilize and on the volume of the capital (economic, cultural or symbolic) possessed in his own right by each of those whom he is connected’.<sup>55</sup> Accordingly, and this can be observed in my field of research, to establish a network with peers –via social media or LinkedIn but more importantly in the offline world– is not sufficient. Rather, and in terms of creating uniqueness, it seems to be more recommendable to find a senior professional who would encourage and support a junior professional at the early stage of their career. This is of course, not a generally valid experience and depends on personal sympathies between individuals. However, it is remarkable that not only several informants mentioned natural and friendly relationships with a mentor supporting their career but that the UN semi-officially incorporated this concept to the HR portal ‘as an informal learning option for staff to avail of as they wish’.<sup>56</sup> According to the HR Portal website, a mentor-mentee relationship would benefit both parties: Senior staff members are told that ‘supporting a mentee in their career development and aspirations can be personally and professionally rewarding; developing [their own] mentoring skills can help [senior staff members] to become a better manager/leader [...]’.<sup>57</sup> Junior professionals, in turn, read that ‘receive career support and feedback from a more experienced staff member

---

54 Ibidem, p. 51.

55 Ibidem.

56 HR Portal.Mentoring, <<https://hr.un.org/page/mentoring>>, accessed: 30.1.2017.

57 Ibidem.

[facilitates to] build a relationship that can help with career development'.<sup>58</sup> Again, the organization implicitly recommends career aspirants to find 'their mentor'.

Informant E was lucky to find a mentor: '[...] I was talking to my supervisor, to my boss, and I was asking... Well, he took a personal interest in knowing me, or to get to know me, in the sense of "Why are you here? What are your plans?" [...] He was coaching me, he was mentoring me, too, which is really good. This was an opportunity. What I am saying [is], if your boss, when you are starting, if your supervisor, your boss, doesn't take the time to coach you, to mentor you, to help you, you know, take decisions or put you in a potential path, then things would have been completely different'.<sup>59</sup> This crucial conversation informant E had with his supervisor towards the end of his internship in one organization headquartered in the VIC. The supervisor suggested his mentee, informant E, to apply for an internship in another UN organization headquartered in Vienna: '[...] and that he would use his connections, contacts, so my application would be noticed. [...] And this is when I saw how things often work. [...] Afterwards I was told, because they had so many applications [...], that they do [it] often [like this], somebody tells somebody: "take a look at this application", and if it's good, go for it'.<sup>60</sup> Even if in this specific situation, informant E was lucky to have his supervisor's support who put in a good word for informant E, the latter expresses this anecdote as a moment of disillusionment: 'I think, the system [...] has changed ever since, but at the beginning it was a bit discouraging to know that the networking factor was as important as [...] working hard, you know, [having a] good CV. [...] This was hardly discouraging'.<sup>61</sup>

The value of the mentor's sympathetic support interlinked with the *cultural capital*<sup>62</sup> the junior professionals are able to acquire. This is shown by the subsequent quote extracted from one of my interviews. Informant A recalls the learning experience he made when being sent for a short professional visit, in UN parlance called 'mission', to one of the projects his unit was implementing in an African UN member state: 'They sent me on a mission as an intern. [...] Which allowed me to learn a lot,

---

58 Ibid.

59 Interview with informant E (m, 30), Vienna, 22.5.2016.

60 Ibid.

61 Ibid.

62 BOURDIEU, Pierre: «The forms of capital...», pp. 247-251.

to kind of learn faster, you know. And I was lucky because at that time my boss was not only my boss but mentoring me. He was really taking the time and kind of allowing me to grow and transpose myself into a lot- and allowed me to do things that I thought I would never be able to'.<sup>63</sup> Thanks to this working experience enabled by his supervisor, informant A could learn 'on the job' how to interact with stakeholders and cooperation partners. In a nutshell, he acquired embodied cultural capital through practical experience.

Another strategy to enhance one's *institutionalized cultural capital* includes the continuous participation in courses, trainings and workshops that might be offered both on- and offline either by the UN and its HR services or by other education institutions. This includes a broad range of language courses but also training on (self-) management, data processing programs, but also training on particular areas of operation (human rights, migration, sustainability etc.) where the UN needs expertise. Moreover, some of my informants employed full time in the UN also work on a PhD project or are enrolled in graduate programs. The appeal is to acquire 'expert knowledge' through specializing in a particular field. This would enable the aspirants to apply for specific positions in specific UN organization. This pattern of international organizations' needs to hire so-called 'experts' is reflected by the arising offer of studies that will enable graduates to be employed in the field of international cooperation –as mentioned in the beginning of this paper. However, the strategy of specialization involves a challenging balancing act. Particularly junior professionals must verify their specialization, but still be open enough to be hired as generalists.

When Bourdieu writes that the 'work of acquisition [of capitals] is work on oneself (self-improvement) [...]'<sup>64</sup> that is a premise for the agents to enter and stay in the field, the research field of governmentality studies addresses this phenomena as the governmentality<sup>65</sup> of the (contemporary) entrepreneurial self (*das unternehmerische Selbst*).<sup>66</sup> They

---

63 Interview with informant A (m, 30), Vienna, 27.4.2016, emphasis in original. For better readability, the grammatical structure of the sentence was slightly modified.

64 BOURDIEU, Pierre: «The forms of capital...», 1986 [1983], p. 248

65 See: FOUCAULT, Michel: «Die 'Gouvernementalität' [La 'gouvernementalité', 1977-78]», en Bröckling et al. (eds.): *Gouvernementalität der Gegenwart. Studien zur Ökonomisierung des Sozialen*, Frankfurt am Main: Surkamp, 2000, pp. 41-67.

66 BRÖCKLING, Ulrich et al. (eds.): *Gouvernementalität der Gegenwart...*, 2000.

argue that this technology of the self is, in times of neoliberalism, a means to ‘economize the social’. The individuals exploit themselves and are, by this, useful to economizing logics. To illustrate why combining these concepts –Bourdieu’s concept of capitals and Foucault’s concept of governmentality– might be fruitful, I introduce another quote from the collected data. The candidate who successfully passed the above-mentioned YPP examination in 2011 shared her experiences with the general public. In her experience report she gives advises and explains how she, thanks to diligence and persuasion, managed to pass the preparation period –‘a relentless marathon (supported by surreal amounts of coffee...)’<sup>67</sup>. She presents ‘best practices’ that apparently involve self-exploitation –at least to a certain extent–. The strong commitment that might turn into self-exploitation is connected with the willingness to achieve a position in the UN is, at the same time, received as a positive characteristic of *homo UN*. This, and other experience reports circulating in the internet shape and contribute to the scaling and the standardization of the discourse around *homo UN*.

To sum up, uniqueness comprises of various modes of adaptability. On the one hand, there is the capacity of availability that is associated with economic capital and residence permits that would allow ‘on site’ stays. The latter can –in case of lacking economic capitals or residence permits– turn into precarious living situations. On the other hand, being a ‘unique’ or rather outstanding and indispensable junior employee also means building upon the social capital and the network created during the time of employment. Permanent contact to mentors and peers facilitates the pursuit of a career within the UN. The way junior professionals are able to activate their predispositions and capitals in the Bourdieusian sense is essential. As is how they being able to absorb, embody and eventually reproduce the UN’s values, such as investing in their cultural capital through continuous training offered by the UN and other education institutions.

Yet, what if the individual’s experiences jar with the image of *homo UN*? In what follows, I draw attention to the narratives of early career professionals that are needed to build identity and create meaning when being part of the UN workforce and suddenly belonging to a global bureaucratic elite. I claim that there is a further attitude needed when working in the UN: ‘balanced modesty’.

---

67 Unis.unvienna, *The YPP Road*, <[http://www.unis.unvienna.org/pdf/2012/YPP/The\\_YPP\\_Road\\_Szilvia-Petkov.pdf](http://www.unis.unvienna.org/pdf/2012/YPP/The_YPP_Road_Szilvia-Petkov.pdf)>, accessed 20.12.2016.

## 5. 'BALANCED MODESTY': BRIDGING FRICTIONS THROUGH SELF-NARRATION

In this section, I identify how early career professionals employed in the two UN headquarters in Geneva and in Vienna recognize and understand their own becoming-part-of-the-United Nations *vis-à-vis* this 'ideal' UN employee, *homo UN*. Where are the potential sources of friction and where do individual perspectives clash with the organizational vision of an international civil servant? And, to pick up again the initial quote by one of the UN role models that was published in social media, the question arises: Does a 'healthy mix of realism and idealism' exist? This issue is approached by looking more closely at my informants' self-narratives that enable them to bridge the frictions between 'the ideal' and 'the real' they encounter in the UN lifeworld.

According to Lehmann, '[...] the act of speaking – a correlation between thought and speech, [is seen as] a prerequisite for an empirical analysis of consciousness out of [sic] autobiographical contexts'.<sup>68</sup> Lehmann assumes that the narrated stories, or more precisely, the informants' narrations echo 'self-reflection and self-thematization'<sup>69</sup> of the individual. Examining discursive practices does not only facilitate to reveal the narrator's rhetorical skills, which are well elaborated among UN professionals as they are used to presenting not only their work but also themselves as demonstrated in the previous sections of this paper. In particular, focusing on discursive practices enables a scientific approach to 'the moral claims of those doing identity work in personal storytelling'.<sup>70</sup>

When interviewing international civil servants at an early stage of their UN career, differences and frictions between the informants' perspectives ('the real') and the normed *homo UN* ('the ideal') become evident. On the surface, organizational culture appears harmonious. Yet,

---

68 LEHMANN, Albrecht: «Anthropology and narratología», in K. Schriewer y S. Cayuela (eds.), *Anthropological Perspectives...*, 2014, pp. 70-91, p. 84.

69 Ibidem.

70 LUCIUS-HOENE, Gabriele: «Constructing perspectives as positioning resources in stories of the self», en Claudia Holler & Martin Klepper (eds.), *Rethinking Narrative Identity: Persona and Perspective*, Amsterdam, Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2013, pp. 85-101, p. 86.

there are ‘many conflicts, many layers’<sup>71</sup>, as a senior professional with several years of UN experience once framed it. He assumed that the UN ‘family’, once founded to keep peace cannot allow internal conflicts, not even constructive criticism towards its’ own organizational culture, as ‘this would be against their own principles’.<sup>72</sup> Even if the organizational culture of the UN is clearly occidentally oriented, the organization is rather reluctant to define its’ ‘international’ part. Consequently, the individuals deal with their frictions. This is condensed in the notion of ‘balanced modesty’ and my informants’ narration regarding this attitude.

In many interviews, the auto-confirmation shows that these international professionals are still rooted in their places of origin –although they belong to an international bureaucratic elite– is striking. This affirmation is at odds with the challenge faced particularly by UN employees working in the headquarters to keep up with target groups and local stakeholders in places where UN projects are implemented. Even if my informants are sent ‘on mission’ once in a while to visit the locally implemented projects all over the globe, it seems hard to imagine and meet the local challenges.

The narrative construction of a rooted self is transformed into symbolic capital in the Bourdieusian sense that makes these informants ‘special’ compared to those ‘other’ employees with a more international or cosmopolitan identity. Before joining the UN, informant A said, ‘I thought, I would be the least interesting person [...]’<sup>73</sup> referring to his lacking international experience. He continued: ‘Then I realized that having such strong roots with a place would make me more interesting to others than [...] living here and there. [...] So, when I compare this to my other colleagues [who] live here and there and their friends [who] are also from international environments, I feel like that they are a little bit [...], not lost but [...] they have no strings. I do have strings [laughing]... very strong ones’.<sup>74</sup> Accordingly, being rooted makes him an international civil servant who better understands local realities. This assumption is also shared with another informant who underlines how lonesome and

---

71 Informal interview with senior staff member, memory protocol, 16.4.2015. Also, including the following quote.

72 Ibidem.

73 Interview with informant A (m, 30), 27.9.2016.

74 Ibidem.

fenced off the UN world can be: '[It] can be very harmful. If there are no other options, you do anything to not lose your job', she said and then continued talking about 'the VIC people' to who she as a UN employee actually belongs, yet insists on being different: 'They admire it. They know I am integrated. I speak German. I have Austrian fiends. Most of them stick to the UN so much, they even live around the UN. I live in [another] district. I am separated – on purpose'.<sup>75</sup> Closely linked to the idea of rootedness is that of adhering to those ethical working codes which the UN defines for its staff. Nevertheless, informants particularly underline how professionals they were compared to their colleagues.

A further aspect of this 'balanced modesty' is the narrative of belonging to a 'middle class'.<sup>76</sup> In some cases, this might be true; in others, it seems to be a strategy of understatement. Such understatement underlines the efforts the aspiring individuals and social climbers went through. It also legitimizes the award: a UN work contract. The UN tends to attract ambitious individuals who are willing to work hard in order to accomplish their goals but who also want to be recognized for their efforts and sacrifices. Central amongst the latter, are accepting the flexibility and insecurity caused by short termed contracts. With their narrative of 'middle class' origin and membership, these young professionals are able to underline both their achievements and their modest commitment to the organization.

Additionally, this narrative underlines the promise of mediocracy inherent in the UN's hiring practices and discourse proclaiming that everyone is able to achieve a position in this prestigious international organization. As empirical data show, UN career paths are shaped both the individual adaptability and coincidences such as for instance find a mentor.

To conclude, the informants' self-interpretation or attitude of 'balanced modesty' is linked to emotional adaptability, which in turn is connected to self-imagination. For early career professionals, narratives of 'balanced modesty' are a strategy to bridge the gaps and address the

---

75 Interviewee B (f, 31), *ad hoc* protocol, 2.5.2016.

76 I am aware of the ongoing discussion about the concept of 'middle class' and the need for further research on this issue. At this stage of my research, I understand this term more as a concept than as a social group that can be defined according to the annual income per capita. For more details cf. BREMER, Helmut and LANGE-VESTER, Andrea (eds.): *Soziale Milieus und Wandel der Sozialstruktur. Die gesellschaftlichen Herausforderungen und die Strategien der sozialen Gruppen*, Wiesbaden: Springer Fachmedien, 2014.

resulting frictions between their own identities and the identity of the ‘ideal UN employee’. In a nutshell, creating the image of ‘balanced modesty’ is a means to self-narrate the own, individual subjectivity into the UN context.

## 6. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The quote from the UN’s social media website, that ‘the dream’ of pursuing a UN career has to be approached ‘with a healthy mix of realism and idealism’ sparked the present inquiry into early career professionals in the organization. This aim was approached by reflecting on and juxtaposing the corporate subject, *homo UN*, with the actual experiences of UN junior professionals working in the UN headquarters in Geneva and Vienna. To be precise, *homo UN* is an idealized employee associated with idealized expectations of life and work in the UN environment that is out of sync with the real experiences. To address this disjunction, early career professionals who aim to enter the UN and pursue a career in the area of international cooperation in particular must find strategies to cope with the UN environment and adapt to its organizational culture.

To sum up, the three sections of this paper highlighted the complexity of this arc of suspense between idealism, which served as a starting point for my analysis and the realism, which comprises of the actual strategies of early career professionals to respond to the organizational structures.

(1) ***Homo UN*, the ‘ideal’ UN employee and corporate subject:** As outlined in the first section of this paper, the UN defined so-called core competencies, managerial competencies and core values for its employees. Thus, by job description, international civil servants have to prove their ability in specific competencies and skills as well as their commitment to particular values defined by the international organization. This, together with explicit and implicit requirements transmitted by the UN recruitment processes, shape the corporate subject that has been identified as *homo UN*. Especially, early career professionals who are appointed to their positions after a long and competitive recruitment process –for higher positions the mode of appointment is more political–, must show their ability and commitment during the recruitment and also later, after the appointment and along their career. Their ability to adapt to the organizational culture is thus crucial for a successful UN career.

(2) **Adaptability through ‘creating uniqueness’:** Even if the recruitment process nowadays is supposed to be fair, several obstacles remain. The rigidly structured Personal History Forms erase personalities and it is difficult to fit the requirements described in job announcements. To counter this neutralization, aspiring employees have to craft a unique identity. This is chiefly done through various modes of adaptability. One such a mode of adaptability is to be on call and always available (creating uniqueness through availability and staying ‘on site’).

This is why many of my informants opted for an alternative route, the self-initiated path through internships and consultancies until they were eventually given a professional position. It is evident that capitals in the Bourdieusian sense are a crucial element for a junior UN professional (creating uniqueness through capitals). In particular, maintaining a social network with peers and senior staff members perceived as mentors could be recognized as social capital. The latter, together with cultural capital accumulated by the individual’s impetus for ‘self-improvement’,<sup>77</sup> also described as technologies of the (contemporary) entrepreneurial self (*das unternehmerische Selbst*),<sup>78</sup> and financial resources build another manner to create uniqueness. These modes of adaptability that are typical in junior professionals clearly show that the United Nations organization follows a neoliberal employment regime.

(3) **Bridging frictions through the self-narration of a ‘balanced modesty’:** In their constant reflections on their own position within the UN, my informants display clear awareness that they belong to an international bureaucratic elite enshrined in the UN’s founding principles. A central tenet of these principles is that the ‘developed world’ has to support the ‘undeveloped’ part of the globe. The ideal figure of *homo UN* shows that early career professionals have to embody certain qualities: *homo UN* is committed, efficient and outstanding. Yet, my informants’ narratives of the self rather highlight the importance of ‘being rooted’ and of sharing specific UN ideals and ethical working attitudes. This, so their assumption and argumentation, would distinguish them from ‘the other’ UN employees who do not share their ethical codes. In line with this, I argue that the attitude of ‘balanced

---

77 BOURDIEU, Pierre: «The forms of the capital...», 1986 [1983], p. 248.

78 BRÖCKLING, Ulrich et al. (eds.): *Gouvernementalität der Gegenwart...*, 2000.

modesty' is not only a response to the idealistic promise of mediocrity but, more importantly, a premise for the early career professional's a successful adaptation to the UN environment.

To conclude, the issue of access to the UN as an employing body is based on how potential career aspirants are able to show their adaptability to the organizational structures. Accordingly, it favors candidates with certain attitudes and attributes and eventually leads to a homogenization of UN staff. This may have serious repercussions for an organization who prizes its international representativeness and reach and whose success with a global agenda depends on inclusiveness and real diversity.

## SOURCES

- AUGUSTYNEK, Marta: *Arbeitskulturen im Grosskonzern. Eine kultur-anthropologische Analyse organisatorischer Transformationsdynamik in Mitarbeiterperspektive*, Münster: Waxmann, 2010.
- BOURDIEU, Pierre: «The forms of capital», in John G. Richardson (ed.), *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, Greenwood Press, New York 1986 [1983], pp. 246-258.
- BOURDIEU, Pierre: *Distinction. A Social Critique of Judgment of Taste*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984 [1979].
- BOURDIEU, Pierre: *Homo Academicus*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988.
- BRÖCKLING, Ulrich, KRASMANN, Susanne & LEMKE, Thomas (eds.): *Gouvernementalität der Gegenwart. Studien zur Ökonomisierung des Sozialen*, Frankfurt am Main: Surkamp, 2000.
- GEERTZ, Clifford: *The Interpretation of Culture. Selected Essays by Clifford Geertz*, New York: Basic Books, 1973.
- GOFFMAN, Erving: *The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life*, New York: Anchor Books, 1959.
- GÖTZ, Irene: «Empirische Erhebungen in Industriebetrieben und bürokratischen Organisationen», in Silke Göttisch & Albrecht Lehmann (eds.), *Methoden der Volkskunde. Positionen, Quellen, Arbeitsweisen der Europäischen Ethnologie*, Berlin: Reimer, 2007, pp. 249-269.
- FOUCAULT, Michel: «Die "Gouvernementalität" [La 'gouvernementalité', 1977-78]», in Bröckling et al. (eds.): *Gouvernementalität der Gegenwart. Studien zur Ökonomisierung des Sozialen*, Frankfurt am Main: Surkamp, 2000, pp. 41-67.

- HØRJUP, Thomas: «Análisis de los modos de vida. Una explicación contextual», in Klaus Schriewer & Salvador Cayuela (eds.), *Perspectivas antropológicas. Herramientas para el análisis de las sociedades europeas*, Murcia: Universidad de Murcia, Waxmann, 2014, pp. 218-265.
- JANSSON, André: «How to become an 'elite Cosmopolitan': The mediatized trajectories of United Nations expatriates», *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 19 (5), 2016, pp. 465-480.
- KANTER, Rosabeth Moss: *Men and Women of the Corporation*, New York: Basic Books, 1993 [1977].
- LEHMANN, Albrecht: «Antropología cultural y narratología», in Klaus Schriewer & Salvador Cayuela (eds.), *Perspectivas antropológicas. Herramientas para el análisis de las sociedades europeas*, Murcia: Universidad de Murcia, Waxmann, 2014, pp. 70-91.
- LUCIUS-HOENE, Gabriele: «Constructing perspectives as positioning resources in stories of the self», in Claudia Holler & Martin Klepper (eds.), *Rethinking Narrative Identity: Persona and Perspective*, Amsterdam, Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2013, pp. 85-101.
- MARCUS, George E.: «Ethnography in/of the World System: The Emergence of Multi-Sited Ethnography», *Annual Review Anthropology*, 24, 1995, pp. 95-117.
- MOSSE, David: «Anti-social Anthropology? Objectivity, Objection, and the Ethnography of Public Policy and Professional Communities», *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute (N.S.)*, 12, 2006, pp. 935-956.
- NOWICKA, Magdalena: *Transnational Professionals and their Cosmopolitan Universes*, Frankfurt, New York: Campus Verlag, 2006.
- NOWICKA, Magdalena & KAWEH, Ramin: «Looking at the Practice of UN Professionals: Strategies for Managing Differences and the Emergence of a Cosmopolitan Identity», in Magdalena Nowicka & Maria Rovisco (eds.), *Cosmopolitanism in Practice*, Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2009, pp. 51-71.
- NOWICKA, Magdalena: «Migrating skills, skilled migrants and migration skills: The Influence of contexts on the validation of migrants' skills», *Migration Letters*, 11/2, 2013, pp. 171-186.
- RAGHURAM, Parvati: «The Difference that Skills Make: Gender, Family Migration Strategies and Regulated Labour Markets», *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 30/2, 2004, pp. 303-321.

SENNETT, Richard: *The Culture of the New Capitalism*, New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 2006.

SENNETT, Richard: *The Corrosion of Character. The Personal Consequences of Work in the New Capitalism*, New York, London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1998.