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The Rise of Global Work

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Abstract

Globalization represents a set of transformations in the contemporary world that are having profound impacts on the nature of labour markets and work. However, most social scientific analysis in this area has focused on changes to labour markets as emerging consequences of the developing global economy. This paper argues that an analysis of what is happening to work itself as a consequence of globalization has been neglected. It further contends that the nature of work as a practice in the contemporary world can be better understood through a new conceptual framework, centred on the concept of 'global work'. It goes on to lay out a theoretical framework for conceptualizing the emergence of 'global work', based around an analysis of the increasingly distanciated social relations that constitute what work 'is' in today's world. In this respect it contends that working practices, the experience of work, the nature of workplaces and the power relations in which people's working lives are entangled require a theoretical understanding of global-scale interrelationships if they are to be properly understood. This 'global work thesis' is grounded in research into two contrasting forms of work in the contemporary world: transnational legal services in developed post-industrial economies and overseas voluntary work in developing countries.

KEYWORDS: **global work; globalization; actor-network theory; professional legal services; overseas voluntary work;**

1 INTRODUCTION

"*To concede that geography matters is to open up the question of the*
workings of labor markets at all spatial scales"

From the conclusion to Jamie Peck's *Workplace* (1996)

Research into the nature of contemporary globalization processes is becoming an increasingly dominant theme in much human geography. Considerable effort is being expended by economic geographers in seeking to map and theorise the impact of these processes on labour markets (Peck & Theodore 2001; Kelly 2002). Much of this scholarship has shown that the people who collectively form those labour markets are experiencing dramatic changes related to global economic restructuring and the reorganization of economic activity by transnational corporations whose production operations increasingly extend to the planetary scale (Hudson 2000; Jessop 2001). Globalization is thus a phenomenon, or set of phenomena, that are transforming regional economies and the nature of employment itself (Theodore & Salmon 1999; Dicken 2007).

Within the geographical literature, three theoretical approaches can be identified that seek to conceptualise the relationship between labour, work and globalization. In the first of these approaches, labour is understood as a 'sticky' factor of production. With the development of an increasingly integrated global capitalist economy, labour is argued to be 'the most place-based of the factors of production' (Hudson 2001: 122). People live and work in regions and, as Massey's landmark

(1984) study examined, production can be much more easily relocated than labour. Much of the literature examining deindustrialization has thus examined how local labour markets have struggled to adjust as people are left in places when production moves away (Wills 1998; Waddington 1999; Herod 2000). More recently, this process appears to have widened and deepened as economic globalization allows an increasingly complex geography to develop between transnational firms and local labour markets (Beaverstock & Boardwell 2000; Sklair 2001). Second, and following on from this, geographical theorists have argued that places are therefore crucially important in understanding the nature of work in the contemporary world. Production has to occur somewhere and in that sense is deeply place-based. The capitalist production of commodities must occur in physical places and typically this is at fixed sites. Castree *et al* (2004) ground this point concerning the immobility of workers when they state that 'the reality of paid work, even in our shrinking globe, is one of different groups of workers living and labouring in "local worlds"'(ibid.: 8).

Third, as many theorists including both Peck (1996) and Castree *et al* (2004) examine, as capitalism becomes globalized, what happens to workers in one place is incomprehensible without paying heed to inter-relations extending across space. Castree *et al* therefore emphasise that workers and the businesses employing them in specific places are more than ever connected to distant others within a national, international and global space economy. (ibid.: xiii). The literature has thus explored how 'by increasingly intense translocal connections, workers in different parts of the world may be pitched into relations of competition or cooperation depending on circumstances' (ibid.: xiii). A large number of geographical and globalization

theorists have thus sought to examine the feasibility and potential effectiveness of transnational worker solidarity (Wills 1996; Beck 2002). A common argument is that despite the immobility of workers labouring in places, the fact that all workers share a local existence is something that differentiates them geographically. Castree *et al* thus argue that contemporary wage workers need to be understood as existing in a complex landscape of geographical difference and geographical interdependence (the dialectic of space and place).

In this paper, I problematise these existing approaches to theorising labour and work in the context of globalization as a phenomenon. I argue that these theoretical approaches for understanding the relationship between work and globalization have significant limitations for understanding the profound transformations that are occurring to labour processes in the contemporary world. Whilst analysis of regional labour markets is unquestionably valuable, my goal is to shift empirical and theoretical attention to a key aspect of the impact of globalization on employment that has received little attention. This is the issue of how globalization is affecting the nature of *work* itself. Drawing on and developing a wider literature in industrial sociology and management studies (Pahl 1988; Grint & Woolgar 1997; Grint 2003; Amoore 2004), my contention is that a major transformation is occurring in the nature of work which amounts to a sea-change in the spatial and temporal constitution of what work 'is' and what it means to undertake work as an activity in the contemporary world.

This is an incremental transformation. Work is itself *globalizing* as an activity, and this paper will argue that this has profound implications for people employed in

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all kinds of different sectors of the economy. It also argues that this transformation is equally as significant as the meso-level restructuring of labour markets identified by economic geographers because it represents a reconfiguration of how individuals and groups of individuals are empowered (or not) in relation to global capitalism, and the future life chances and opportunities which workers have open to them. In that sense, in seeking to theorise the growing importance of what I term 'global work', the intention is to offer a more powerful explanatory tool for understanding how globalization is affecting individuals and groups of workers than is offered by existing approaches.

These arguments are developed in the next section where I lay out my proposed theoretical framework for understanding the emergence of global work as a conceptually-distinct phenomenon in the contemporary world. The rest of the paper then elaborates these theoretical arguments by presenting research from two contrasting research projects: professional legal service work in advanced economies and overseas volunteering work in low income economies. The third section thus examines the changing nature of work in transnational legal services in globalized cities at the core of the global economy, considering in particular how professional legal service work increasingly exists in a complex spatial form which cannot be easily reduced to practices that occur exclusively in defined material workplaces. In contrast to this well-paid, professional and formal work, the fourth section presents research into informal voluntary work undertaken by pre-university and post-university students on overseas volunteering placements in developing countries. The argument developed is that, whilst nominally very different to professional legal

service work, this voluntary informal work can also be better understood through the conceptual lens of 'global work'. Thus both sets of research findings illustrate how contemporary globalization has, and is continuing, to transform radically the nature of work as a practice, as an experience, the nature of workplaces and the socio-material relations in which workers are entangled.

2   THE 'GLOBAL WORK' THESIS

Within social scientific theorisation, there has been considerable debate as to how work as an activity might be defined (Grint 2003). Keith Grint argues that what counts as work is socially-constructed and varies in time and space. In general it is 'some form of transformative activity', which in the contemporary world is generally associable with an economic outcome (ibid.: 42). It is not just paid, nor necessarily equivalent to a formal pre-defined activity (c.f. Joyce 1987; Taylor 2004). Even the distinction between work and leisure is blurred (Grint 2003: 9-12). Yet within this debate, arguments concerning the impact of globalization and work have been largely confined to a similar epistemological assumption as the geographical literature on labour markets – that work is a practice that individuals or groups 'do' in a material place. As Felstead *et al* (2005) in their assessment of the shifting locations of work argue, work refers to 'the activities involving mental or physical effort for a particular purpose and the *place* [my emphasis] where such activities are carried out'. Thus, 'places of work …have been classified according to the nature of the activities they *contain* [my emphasis] (ibid. 415). Work is a located practice. It is also one which

sociological theorists have pointed out is well-conceived as 'performative' in its nature (Goffman 1990), and situated within specific sets of gender (McDowell 1997; Dean 2005), ethnicity and cultural relations (Mulholland 2004; Stenning 2005).

The central argument of this paper arises from at least four epistemological limitations with these existing theories of work. First, work is largely understood as a practice undertaken by individuals or groups in a physically-proximate material space. This 'micro-space'[1] could be a factory floor, an office or a field, but existing conceptions of work construct it at the epistemological level as a practice within a demarcated material space. Yet in the current era, where greater interconnectedness is 'undoing places' and bringing distant practices to bear in every material space, this assumption is problematic. Contemporary work is becoming less constituted through localised, physically-proximate relations and increasingly constituted through distanciated relations. These multiple spatial associations increasingly extend to the planetary scale. Undoubtedly such a transformation in the spatiality of work has certainly been incremental through human history, and is unevenly applicable across the enormous variety of forms of work. Furthermore, some forms of work have historically always been constituted through global-scale relations (c.f. Hunt 1994; Harvey *et al* 2002)[2]. Nevertheless, the epistemological framework through which work is theorized remains blind to both the spatial and temporal nature of this

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[1] I use the term 'micro' to differentiate the spaces of close physical proximity in which individuals enact and experience work – offices, factories, fields – from the generic use of the 'local' scale.
[2] Harvey *et al* (2002)'s work on the tomato as a product and its production over time is particularly salient in this regard as it uses an approach informed by actor-network theory which illustrates many of the distanciated forms of relationship involved in past and present tomato production at the global scale.

transformation and its far-reaching implications. Work continues to be conceived as a local practice confined to demarcated limited workplaces.

Second, and following on, geographical and other social scientific contributions drawing on an actor-network approach (c.f. Whatmore 2001; Murdoch 2006; Latour 2006) have identified the problematic relationship between conceptions of practice as occurring at a variety of scales – local, regional, national and global. In particular, the literature concerned with global commodity chains (GCCs) (Gereffi & Korzeniewicz 1993; Gereffi 1999; Frenkel 2001) and global production networks (GPNs) have identified and mapped how work occurring in various different locations planet-wide are tied together across different stages of the production process (e.g. Begg *et al* 2003; Coe *et al* 2004). Such ANT-grounded insight has not been directed, however, on the working practices 'behind' these GCCs and GPNs. The outcome is that analyses of the impact of globalization on work have conceptualized work as a spatially-fixed practice with commodities and products being the thing which become 'globalized' through linkages (e.g. Harvey *et al* 2002). To the extent that theorization has addressed the scales at which work takes places, it tends to be based on mono-scalar conception of work as occurring in a given location or place and being 'linked' to work in other places. Yet my contention is that the application of ANT's critique of scalar conceptions to work itself opens up the question of how working practices (and agency) might be better understood as constituted across many scales through associational linkages that cannot be easily conceived as being exclusively contained 'at' one scale (Latour 2006: 219-246).

Third, existing conceptions of work rests on their grounding in a political economic and sociological theoretical lineage back to classical social theories of Marx, Durkheim and Weber (c.f. Grint 2003), or more recently Polanyi (Amoore 2004). Within these approaches, labour is conceived as a (social) factor of production that undertakes 'work'. Work is epistemologically separated from the 'non-social' – be that the 'natural' world or material technology (conceived as machinery in classical approaches to work). Again actor-network theorists point to the limiting basis of this epistemology by failing to adequately appreciate how work (the practice) is constituted through a wide set of associational relations with 'natural' non-human objects (oceans, forests, soils etc) (c.f. Callon 1992; Whatmore, 2001) and that the technologies that facilitate and support the activity of work are themselves inextricably caught up in the 'social' (Grint & Woolgar 1987; Latour 1996; Latour 2006). Work's status as a purely 'social' practice is thus questionable. Moreover, once work is understood as a practice constituted through 'non-social' associations, the assumption that it is a capacity for (economic) action possessed by individuals or groups in specific material places becomes even more problematic. Adopting the epistemological insights of ANT leads to the argument that the human contribution to the practice of work needs to be conceptualized with all of the non-human 'props' which are recruited to the actor-network (Law 1994; Law & Hassard 1999), and these non-human props are increasingly scattered through (increasingly) globally extensive associational networks.

Fourth, theories of work currently assume either an *atemporal* conception of work as an abstract social practice, or construct it in a linear chronology as an activity

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that starts at a point in time (in a specific place), is undertaken for a period, and then ceases. Both actor-network and poststructuralist geographical thinking leads to a questioning of the adequacy of such an epistemological basis. In looking to the multiple associations that constitute work as an event, current theorisations of work conceal multiple spatialities and temporalities (c.f. Massey 2005) intrinsic to the many associations that constitute work and which shape how it is undertaken and how it is practiced. Work does not necessarily occur in periods of linear, contiguous 'chunks' of time, and past practices may discontinuously influence the nature of work practice. To understand work in the contemporary era, it is increasingly difficult to understand it through a linear conception of temporality which is blind to sporadic and temporally disjunctive nature of spatialised practices in a globalized world (c.f. Massey 2005: 87-89).

In light of these limitations, this paper reconceptualises work through an epistemological stance based around the concept of 'global work'. This new approach represents a significant departure from the epistemological underpinnings of existing conceptions of work. It contends that globalization, defined as a complex set of transformations leading to greater social interconnectedness (Giddens 1999), is radically reconfiguring the nature of work in ways that current theories cannot capture. This requires a new epistemological approach to theorizing work which enables a simultaneous reconceptualisation of its spatial, temporal and social-material nature. Rather than understanding work as a practice undertaken by *social* actors *located* in discreet material spaces and framed in a *linear chronology,* work is reconceptualised as a complex set of spatialised practices involving humans and non-

humans (Latour 2006), and which is constituted in relational space with a disjunctive, non-linear chronology (Massey 2005). This is 'global' work because this reconfigured concept captures the qualitative degree to which all work practices are constituted through distanciated (c.f. Held *et al* 1999) socio-material relations. It is not, however, a binary opposite to 'local work'. There is no local 'opposite' version to global work conceptualised in this way. Rather, the prefix 'global' is used to denote how all forms of contemporary work are potentially constituted through relations that exist planet-wide in the same way that 'globalization' is used to denote planet-wide interconnectedness. This does not mean that all (or even many) forms of work are necessarily 'global work' at present, but it provides theoretical traction and conceptual scope to understand *how* and *when* work is being transformed (or not) by distanciated relations, and how that transformation is important to shaping the lives of those who undertake work. The concept thus offers the capacity to understand the degree to which different forms of work are becoming dominated by distanciated relations.

The global work approach is grounded in five major transformations associated with globalization that give traction to the alternative epistemological framework for understanding work. Firstly, there are the transformations to the associations that constitute work as a set of social practices in the contemporary world. Work at the scale of the individual is becoming bound into distanciated sets of relationships (Giddens 1990; Tomlinson 1999; Beck 2002) that are breaking down the conventional and existing conceptions of jobs, firms and labour markets. Work is becoming spatially and temporally reconstituted as a consequence of various

globalization processes which means there is a need to reconsider how it is theorized as an activity. In essence, this means developing a theoretical understanding of how work is a multiply-distanciated form of social practice that is shaped by and also shapes distant entities. We generally conceived of work being undertaken by an individual (the worker) in a specific place (the workplace). Instead, there needs to be a theoretical capacity to understand how the agency to affect change by workers (the activity of work) is constituted through a network of relationships that 'perforate' scales (Amin 2002), and also how the place/ space in which work occurs as an activity (increasingly) exceeds a given physical location. Physical places of work are thus only one space in which work is being 'done' in the contemporary world, and for many forms of work, an increasingly less significant one. Work is occurring in, for example, social, technological, informational spaces that have a very different form to physical workplaces.

Second, and following on, is the scalar transformation in the embodied practices which people undertake when they 'do' work. Workplaces need to be reconceptualised as existing across multiple spatialities, and many forms of work are also involving growing physical mobility of the workers themselves. In many industrial sectors, a growing proportion of the labour force is undertaking new forms of work mobility including substantial increases in work-related travel and long-term working away from their home locality. International business travelers working for transnational firms are the most obvious example, but in fact they represent only a small proportion of workers who are undertaking new forms of mobility associated

with globalization across a diverse range of sectors[3]. Global work is also producing

shifts in work-related personal movements on a daily basis in terms of commuting,

home-working and travel to/form new spaces for work activities (Brown *et al* 2002).

Third, the experience of doing work is changing. In other words, not only

does work exceed physical workplaces and workers are more mobile, but what

workers are *doing* is also changing and represents a different form of spatialised

experience as a consequence of globalization. Little theoretical attention has been

given to how what workers in various sectors have to do on a day-to-day basis in

relation to globalization. The phenomenon is still often constructed as an 'external'

factor that produces economic pressures on firms to change their activities in

response to global markets, competition and global supply chains etc (Sadler 1997;

Harvey, D. 2000). In contrast to this, the concept of global work aims to develop a

theoretical cut at how working practices have also been transformed by the

globalization of production. What car workers *do* on a day-to-day basis, for example,

is being shaped by a variety of influences that increasingly span the global scale. Shift

times, managerial relationships and organizational crises in distant places all impact

on the minutiae and everyday details of working experience in ways that have not

been the subject of theoretical attention (Elger & Smith 2005).

Fourth, the nature of the power relations within which both workers as social

actors and also jobs as abstract organizational tasks are entangled is being

transformed by globalization. Increasing proportions of workers in both the

developed and developing worlds are employed by transnational corporations whose

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[3] For example, see Ehrenreich's (2002) work on nannies and sex workers, Sampson & Schroeder (2006) on marine crew or Pyle (2006) on care work.

management and ownership is organized at the global scale (Dicken 2007). This is producing new and complex sets of power relations in the corporate workplace. Workers in many industrial sectors are no longer accountable to managers in the same geographical locations as they are (Harvey, M. *et al* 1999; Morgan 2001; Jones 2004). Furthermore, even where lines of control are still apparently similar to the existing conception of them occurring relatively discreetly within workplaces, power and control over workers is now increasingly bound into multi-scalar and complex inter- and intra-organizational sets of relations. The increasingly complex geography of corporate ownership has also contributed to a transformation of power relationships between the worker and the employer. More and more workers are thus bound into sets of power relations that can not simply be theorized within a specific location.

Fifth, the nature of work*places* themselves is being transformed. Whilst people always obviously undertake work in given physical place at a certain time, the nature of their work needs to be understood as existing across a variety of spaces and through an actor-network which includes non-human elements. Workplaces can no longer be adequately defined as discreet physical spaces (factories, offices), and in many globalizing industries the actual physical space in which work is undertaken has become increasingly insignificant in terms of affecting the outcome of working practices (c.f. Debrah & Smith 2002; Taylor & Bain 2005). The rise of global work therefore entails paying theoretical attention to the multiple contexts that constitute work itself. These include virtual, organizational and social spaces that shape the outcomes produced by work practices.

These five transformations form the basis for a framework for theorizing how work is changing in the contemporary globalising world. Whilst not necessarily relevant to every kind of work which could be placed under scrutiny, the key goal is to theoretically capture qualitative shifts in the nature of work itself which are invisible to current approaches, and to be able to understand the degree to which globalization is affecting work and workers. However, in order to illustrate the theoretical richness of using this kind of approach, the rest of this paper presents findings from two contrasting research projects.

3   GLOBAL WORK I: TRANSNATIONAL LEGAL SERVICES

"*Things are changing, yes, that's for sure…people travelled*

twenty years ago of course, but the levels of overseas travel now

are much greater…colleagues in this office can expect to be

travelling two or three days a week on average, depending on

their practice area"

(Director of Human Resources, Lawfirm3, London)

The first set of research findings examines the rise of global work in a tertiary level economic sector: transnational legal service firms. Such a sector is indicative of the high-order informational economic activity that many argue is at the forefront of value creation in the global economy (Beaverstock 2004). The research discussed is

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based on the findings of a two year project (2003-2005) that examined the nature of globalization in leading legal service firms based in the UK. The research consisted of around forty-five depth interviews with senior partners, lawyers and managers in the human resources and operations departments of these firms. The largest UK firms were targeted with interviews occurring in around half of the top twenty firms. Figure 1 shows a list of the firms included in the study[4]. The interviews tended to last between forty and ninety minutes and were conducted in the offices of law firms in the City of London[5]. The interview sample represented a rolling snowball of interviews which aimed to include respondents at different layers within the legal service firms' organizational hierarchy.

I draw out three aspects of the nature of work in these legal service firms that provides substance for understanding how lawyers in these firms are engaged in global work. These points are drawn from transcripts and secondary data (corporate reports, websites etc). Firstly, there is the development of distanciated social relationships within and beyond these firms as they seek to transnationalise their businesses and compete in an increasingly global market for legal services. Broadly, in the largest UK firms there was evidence of overseas expansion in both a physical (opening overseas offices) and relational sense (serving foreign-based transational corporate clients). This sector globalization has established by other researchers (Beaverstock 2004; Falconbridge 2005) and to a degree reflects the globalization of other business service activities such as management consultancy and investment

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[4] To preserve anonymity, there is no correspondence between firm numbers attributed to quotations and those in the Figure 1.
[5] For the most part they were recorded and transcribed apart from a small fraction where the respondent declined to be recorded. These are paraphrased from notes.

banking (Jones 2003). The research suggests that the globalization of business

activity in legal services is having a profound transformative impact on the daily

working practices of lawyers in these firms:

> "*The way people work in this firm is changing rapidly…a lot of that*
>
> *is to do with our expansion overseas…ten years ago people spent the*
>
> *majority of their time…well, a lot more of their time with clients here*
>
> [in London]. *Now they are across Europe and farther afield. That*
>
> *has had a big impact on how we work."*
>
> [Senior Partner, Lawfirm4, London]

As other research has shown (Beaverstock 2004), a large proportion of these firms'

business come from large transnational corporate clients in relation to mergers and

acquisitions, finance (in various forms) and intellectual property, litigation and other

legal contracts related to the client's business. In seeking to pitch business to these

client firms, the research demonstrated the continued key significance of social

contact networks and face-to-face interaction between key actors in the law firm and

key actors in the client firm:

> "*Despite globalization, the nature of what we do has not*
>
> *changed….it has become…more difficult I think. Having clients*
>
> *overseas means pretty often you have to go there, or sometimes they*
>
> *come here. But you still have to meet with them. The legal business*

has not changed in that sense but what's different is that if they are

in Warsaw or Rome or somewhere, those meetings become more

costly, more demanding on lawyers when they have to travel…"

[Partner, UKLawfirm1, London]

The globalization of professional legal services is thus producing a

transformation not just in the locational presence of firms in different cities across the

globe, but also in the nature of legal service working practices. The centrality of

social interrelationships and face-to-face interaction in legal services work means that

transnationalisation is producing significant changes in how legal service employees

undertake their work. As both the legal service firms and their clients globalize, the

practices of work undertaken by employees in all divisions of the law firms are being

increasingly shaped by distanciated relationships. Consider this for several key jobs

within the firm. Firstly, (senior) partners act as the principal 'relationship-bearers'

with senior decision makers in client firms and as such have to manage these

relationships on a day-to-day basis. With the globalization of the industry, these key

individuals are increasingly scattered around the globe and are themselves highly

mobile members of the transnational business class:

"We have a growing need for Partners to go overseas on secondment. It

is, to be honest, a problem here because there is a reluctance. People

want to stay in London, they are not keen to move. That is I guess

understandable as many at that level have families, kids in school and so

on…but the firm needs people to go out and lead in new offices. We need

Partners on the ground if we are going to establish ourselves in these

new jurisdictions…"

[Human Resources Director, UK Lawfirm6, London]

Managing these relationships involves senior partners in a complex array of

globalized work practices: using email and ICT to build and maintain discussions

over contracts; gaining an understanding of a key client-side individuals perspective

in what may be a very different firm culture or national cultural environment; and

building an understanding of the power relations that are developing around a clients'

legal service needs in their own firm which may be diffused through a globally

diasporic management network:

 "[ICT] helps with these [lawyer/client relations]*, and we are constantly*

making use of new technologies. Blackberries now seem to be taken for

granted, and you find yourself exchanging comments on a document

while waiting in an airport… In a funny way, everything is happening

everywhere...all the time…There really is no putting down a contract

deal until its done, even if the client is in Paris and you're here."

[Lawyer, UK Lawfirm3, London]

These are just a few examples, but the point is that the day-to-day practice of doing

legal services work is constituted through stretched social relationships. To

understand what is important in succeeding in this job is impossible without an appreciation of the differential significance and interaction of these distanciated relations.

The same issues applies, if differently, to other law firm employees. Beneath the senior partners, qualified lawyers bear the brunt of workload in executing contracts and legal advice to clients. Working under the senior partners, the work that qualified lawyers 'do' is also equally constituted in distanciated relationships although these will differ because of their hierarchical position in the firm. Qualified lawyers have to negotiate the specifics and details of, for example, financing contracts:

> *"Much of the work on a corporate deal, for example, involves drawing*
> *up the documents and them working them through with the client…This is*
> *a team activity and so often we are working with people remotely as well*
> *as traveling to see them…that affects the hours as well. It wasn't*
> *uncommon when I was a trainee to be sitting by the fax waiting for*
> *something from the US into the early hours of the morning when the*
> *deadline is coming…"*
> [Lawyer, (Associate), Lawfirm2]

The 'client-side' employees whom qualified lawyers engage with in transnational corporate client firms are also physically scattered across the globe. However, the pattern of distanciated relationships that constitute working practices for this group

are different to those of the senior partners. Where senior patterns relationships may be dominated by associations with senior management and decision-makes in the client firm, qualified lawyers engage with a wider range of divisions and teams within transnational corporate clients who may be again physically located in different offices and countries depending on how the transnational client firm is structured and operates:

> *"In a big corporate, people from all over the world might be drawn in…*
> *if the client has senior people in the US and Asia who are leading on*
> *something, then we're tied into the kind of , well, global network of*
> *people who all have their say…"*
> [Senior Lawyer, Lawfirm4]

> *"Yes it can be very difficult…intense. Like if someone in New York*
> *doesn't like what the people in Singapore are saying, and we're in the*
> *middle trying to get it* [the contract documentation] *right, then you're tied*
> *in this global-level wrangling."*
> [Lawyer (Associate), UK Lawfirm4]

A second dimension to the emergence of global work in these firms is the development of new patterns of international work travel and mobility. Where fifteen years ago, to quote one partner, 'overseas business trips were a very limited and pretty rare phenomenon' in law firms (Partner, Corporate Finance, LawFirm3), the

last decade has seen a radical growth in national and international travel in these firms. There are two major dimensions to this development of transnational mobility: short-term business travel and overseas secondments. In relation to first, sectoral globalization is driving a transformation in the need for, and function of, short-term business travel. Almost all of the firms in the study reported an increasing volume of short-term trips:

> *"We have seen a dramatic increase in short-haul business travel…so much so many people in the office are in Europe more days a week than they are here…this is client-facing stuff, going to meetings, advising…we've found it especially important as we do more work in Eastern Europe"…*
> [Partner, (Corporate Law), UK Lawfirm3]

This also extended to operational and support employees. With reference to a firm's core workers (the lawyers), lawyers from trainee to partner are increasingly spending more of their work time traveling overseas. Again different patterns reflect the different role that this travel plays in working practices at different levels in the firm. Senior partners travel as team leaders and for the purpose of building relationships with key actors in client firms. They also act as lead deal negotiators and brokers of agreements:

"Partner's travel independently in the earlier stages of gaining work,

and some of that is exploratory sometimes in terms of developing the

client relationship... then in the later phase they will lead the team."

[para-phrased]

[Director, Human Resources, Lawfirm5]

Qualified lawyers form parts of these 'traveling teams' and undertake the writing, as well as tackling the detail, of contracts, legal research and legal advisory services. Sometimes support staff may be involved, either to support the activities of the lawyer teams or to undertake independent support activities in relation to a legal agreement – for example, the collation of reports and data in a client firms' offices.

Equally significant, however, is the implications of the growing prevalence and importance of overseas secondments mentioned above. Again, lawyers at all levels in these firms are being deployed in overseas locations around the globe. At the higher level, senior partners in UK firms are being sent to found and / or develop new offices in Eastern Europe and the Asia-Pacific region. These secondments involve partners relocating to develop host-country networks with existing and potential clients, and also to increase their knowledge of the legal services market in these new centres. However, the research suggests these secondments also involve a considerable amount of regional short-term business travel. For example, a new partner sent to Bangkok in one firm was spending a considerable amount of his working life traveling in south-Asia and south China so he could visit client firms, undertake contracts and develop business relationships:

"[John[6]] *went out to Thailand, what, eighteen months ago now…and that*

is a big move. He is there to develop the contacts across south-east Asia,

build the network and the business there…[and he] *will be there for at*

least four years… He's taken his family and certainly for Partners that

makes things harder – finding people who are willing to take that kind of

step with their family"…[part paraphrased]

[Human Resources Manager, Lawfirm4]

This senior level secondment pattern was also being mirrored lower down the firm with both qualified lawyers and trainees being increasingly expected to undertake overseas secondments. For the qualified lawyers, this follows a similar, if shorter-term pattern to the Partners as they are seconded to teams based in offices overseas. With regard to trainees, the secondment pattern in major UK law firms is becoming more formalized as part of training. As stated above, most of the largest UK firms offered overseas training 'seats' for six months to trainee lawyers as part of their two year 'in-work' process of qualification. Human resources managers and trainee lawyers alike expressed the view that this reflected the future globalized nature of their firms and of the nature of legal services work. Overall, the research indicates that overseas travel in both its short-term and secondment forms was becoming an expected norm in this industry. Those lawyers who resisted this kind of

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[6] The name has been is changed.

global mobility were certainly perceived to be at a career disadvantage according to the interview respondents in most of the largest firms:

> *"I think it could be a problem* [lack of willingness to travel]*… I mean, the firm needs people who are prepared to help us globalize our practice, and that inevitably will feed into people's career progression at the individual level I guess."*
> [Director, Human Resources, Lawfirm1]

> *"There is definitely an expectation here you will go abroad…I wouldn't call it a pressure exactly… but it is certainly I would say an advantage if you are willing…"*
> [Trainee Lawyer, Lawfirm4]

Third, the concept of global work also casts a new light on the transformation occurring in the nature of the material locations that lawyers undertake their work, and how we might better conceptualise their 'workplace'. The research suggests that both the material locations in which lawyers are working, and the spatiality of work practices, have changed significantly as law firms serve increasingly global client firms. Rather than being located in an office in London on a daily basis, much work is being undertaken in 'interim' locations – hotels, business lounges in airports, convention centers, short-term leased office space and client offices. These new business spaces correspond to a spatial reconfiguration of work that is such a

common feature of working life that it undermines the notion that these legal service professions have one material workplace in a specific location. It remains true that they are *based* in an office in the city of London, but a wide variety of core practices (in terms of fulfilling their job specification) are undertaken in an array of other formal and non-formal places. For example, interviewees reported that key activities such as writing contracts or meeting with clients occur in these interim locations:

> *"The way we work is changing I think…we spend more time with clients,*
> *but also in neutral locations. I mean, whether we need offices across*
> *Poland, the Czech Republic or Hungary is doubtful. We make use of*
> *hotel meeting facilities, clients' offices or even at airports. The ICT has*
> *allowed this to some extent, and so the work is much more mobile…many*
> *of the people in this office who would have had their own desk five years*
> *ago now 'hot desk."*
> [Senior Partner, UKfirm3, London]

Developments in ICT are facilitating this transformation in the space in which work occurs as laptops, wireless internet, *Blackberries* and other forms of mobile communication have enable legal service work to be undertaken 'on the move'. The research suggests that in legal services this is a particularly recent innovation insofar as much of the work is confidential and commercially sensitive, and secure ICT systems have become available to these firms in the last couple of years.

Overall, the key argument is that the spatial, temporal and socio-material nature of legal service work is shifting. This includes but exceeds simple transnational mobility. Legal service work is increasingly constituted through distanciated relations with distant actors in client firms and branch offices, perpetuated through social networks that are maintained in new time-frames through new technologies, and where working itself is occurring in new and increasingly diverse physical, virtual and social spaces. The way in which employees exercise and experience power has also shifted as power associations become tied into a complex web of physically scattered agents that straddle law firms, clients, regulatory bodies at the global scale. This is work then that is undertaken in multiple places, managed and regulated by diasporic agents and whose practices cannot be understood as located in a specific material space within a specific chunk of time.

4 GLOBAL WORK II: OVERSEAS VOLUNTARY WORKERS

The second set of research findings examines how the global work framework can advance theoretical understanding of how a very different, less well-researched, form of work is being transformed in the current era by globalization. In this section I discuss primary research into informal voluntary work undertaken by young western people in low-income economies. This kind of work is generally characterized, in what little research exists at present, as short-term 'volunteer tourism' that is considered to be of little wider significance in terms of either facilitating development

or in providing training and an educational experience for the young people undertaking it (Simpson 2004).

Important as they are, I do not wish to engage with these debates here. Instead, I examine how this form of overseas voluntary work exhibits many comparable characteristics with the transformation in work identified within global legal services. In essence, the proposition is that new forms of distanciated social relations are increasingly permeating both the practices and impacts of informal voluntary work in developing countries. Thus, despite the apparent contrast of this form of 'work', similar trends with similar implications are evident amongst informal voluntary workers as with key professionals working at the 'top end' of the global economy. Furthermore, I also argue that the knowledge, skills and process of acculturation that are a consequence of these forms of global work are bound into wider transformations associated with the development of a global workforce in the contemporary global economy (c.f. Heath 2006).

The research from which these arguments draw support is the result of more than two years of ongoing primary and secondary research into international volunteering and 'gap year' activities undertaken by young people (generally 16-25) from the advanced economies of the global North (c.f. Jones 2004). The study followed voluntary workers undertaking work placements offered by two different organization in two low-income countries: Tanzania and Vietnam. The research consisted of a three stage process, with depth interviews and focus groups conducted before, during and after the placements. In total, over 170 interviews and 19 focus

groups[7] have been conducted to date. Project organizers in the UK, Australia, Tanzania and Vietnam were included in the interview sample, as well as key a range of other stakeholders in the organization of these projects – for example, careers advisors, teachers and corporate human resource managers. The scope of the study includes voluntary workers from the UK, the US, France, Germany, Italy, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and Japan, although the bulk of the detailed qualitative research is centred on voluntary workers from the UK, Australia and New Zealand.

Three major arguments emerge in relation to how these kinds of overseas volunteers are engaged in what can be understood as 'global work'. First, these voluntary work placements are constituted through increasingly complex forms of distanciated relationships between a variety of actors at the global scale. The capacity of volunteers to undertake work as an activity in (rural) Tanzania or Vietnam is bound into and constituted through networks of actors spanning the global scale. The 'sending' organizations - in the UK or Australia in this instance - provide logistical support, gather and disseminate information, offer training and ensure the overall functioning of the overseas placement:

> *"The role of* [UKProvider2] *is largely a facilitating one…and there are*
> *lots of aspects to that…in essence we have the existing contacts with*
> *organizations in host countries to set up the placement and make sure it*
> *is effectively organized…we know what is going on and we have people*
> *here and on the ground who know the ins and outs of a given country.*

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[7] The majority of interviews were recorded and transcribed (or in some instances selectively transcribed).

Our project organizers are people who act as the bridge…for a young

volunteer in the UK or Australia they obviously would struggle to find

out about opportunities in many countries we send people to, and they

would certainly find it hard to organize a placement on their own."

[Director, Placement Provider A]

"When they [the volunteers] *are out there* [Vietnam]*, then there are a lot*

of support and back-up systems here. We have a 24 hour manned [sic]

emergency call centre in London, and email and telephone contacts to

address any situation on the ground there, as well as make sure everyone

in the UK who needs to be involved is in the loop…"

[Project Manager, Provider A]

In essence, the work practices undertaken by volunteers are constructed and mediated

through existing relationship and organizational structures that enable work to be

effectively performed. For example, both provider organizations in Tanzania and

Vietnam 'set up' the placement format before the volunteers arrive through a

combination of 'local' employees on the ground in the host country, visiting

representatives from the organization who travel out to the host country from the UK

or Australia to meet with volunteer host organizations and local staff, and employees

in the home country based in the head office (in this case in London or Melbourne

respectively):

"In the case of Tanzania, we have [John[8]] *on the ground who meets the new arrivals, inducts them, get them used to the set up. He is the one who maintains the relations with Headteachers or with the local organizations who offer the placements….it's his call as to which schools or organizations we place in, and which volunteer goes where… so that's obviously one side, but then we have the support team here* [London] *who can deal with everything from health to legal problems…"*

[Senior Project Manager, Placement Provider B]

When volunteers arrive there are thus a complex set of pre-configured arrangements already in existence that enable the work placement to happen. An induction and training course for each cohort group is already organized where a variety of host country advisors provide an introduction and contextualisation for the volunteers to their work placements. Then when the volunteers arrive at the specific place of work (such as a school or orphanage), the work they undertake is the outcome of a negotiated arrangement between the local manager, the in-country liaison from the placement organization, employees in the London or Melbourne office and the volunteer themselves. Thus, the voluntary work undertaken within, for example, the rural schools in Tanzania represent a complex set of hybrid practices that emerge from the interaction of multiple influences: the research and preparation in the global North by the volunteer; the norms and preparatory training given by the provider organization both in the global North and Tanzania; and the local knowledge and

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[8] The name has been changed.

established practices of host community teachers who have hosted young volunteers before:

> *"Before we got here, they* [the provider's training team] *suggested we gather materials and think about what we could bring to the job…so I actually spent time in a school near me* [in the UK] *watching a class with one of teachers…but when we got here, like, the staff here have two placements every year…they helped a lot with things like how to structure a lesson, how to keep control… what the students would expect from a teacher in Tanzania and what would be strange.."*
> [Teaching Assistant Volunteer, 9 month placement, Northern Tanzania, Provider B]

Teaching assistant working practices are thus bound into a complex and evolving set of norms that cannot be simply understood as either a young westerner working in Tanzania in the same way they might in their home country, or as the volunteer adapting to a specific form of teaching that is entirely shaped by normal working practice in the host country. The work represents a hybrid form of globalized working practice that can only be understood in both its form and implication by seeking to map and understand the multitude of distanciated relations that shape what practices are being undertaken. Likewise, the volunteers were both enabled and constrained in the placements by a range of complex (and distanciated) power relations constituted through their relationship as young Westerners with the provider organization, the

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project coordinators in Tanzania and in the global North, the headteacher, other teaching staff and also of course the students:

> *It was…difficult at first. The teachers here were suspicious as we're in a funny position as volunteers from the outside…and we were told a few things by* [John (Project Organiser)] *about how to behave, what not to do…he bollocked* [sic] [Anna and Paula[9]] *at another school for going into town without telling the Head, and I think he has had people sent home in the past…you kind of have to keep in mind all these different people who have a say in this* [the placement].
>
> [Teaching Assistant Volunteer, 9 month placement, northern Tanzania, Provider B]

Second, the practices undertaken by the volunteers are themselves shaped by and involved in actively shaping economic outcomes in these low income countries. Volunteers contribute labour that itself has an economic value in those low income areas, but their presence as volunteers from the global North has a fundamentally different set of impacts than if that work were undertaken by local labour. For example, the research suggests that those working as a classroom teaching assistant in secondary schools in Tanzania were contributing to a wider transformation of teaching practices and rationales for teaching in the schools. As foreign members of school staff rooms, volunteers in some instances acted as lead examples of

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[9] The names have been changed.

'innovative practice' and provided the opportunity to share knowledge of teaching experiences in their origin countries in the global North:

> *"We have learnt a lot from the staff here* [School, suburban Ho Chi
> Minh]*, but it is also good because we can help them…because after a*
> *couple of months I think I felt confident enough to make suggestions*
> *about homework for practicing pronunciation which is something from*
> *my experience but which isn't really done here…they were cautious at*
> *first but one or two teachers have really got into it…"*
> [Secondary School Teaching Assistant volunteer {English Language},
> Vietnam, Provider A]

Whilst many of these young volunteers were not qualified teachers[10] in their home countries, and it is important not to imply that this learning was one-way, the demonstration effect of volunteers adopting practices they had experienced (usually as pupils) in Britain was identifiable. Headteachers in a number of Tanzanian schools reported, for example, discussions amongst staff about the value of these volunteers and some of the ideas and practices:

> *"Volunteers here are beneficial…they are young, yes, but have valuable*
> *experience and have brought new techniques…several of my teachers*
> *have discussed this with me…they think the placements are very useful*

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[10] The host provider included a basic TEFL course as part of the placement package. Some volunteers had full TEFL certification.

and see the benefit over several years…we have been doing this for at

least six now…" [para-phrased]

[Headteacher, Secondary School, northern Tanzania (nr Moshi), linked to

Provider B]

Another volunteer related how they and their colleague had implemented group-exercises as a teaching technique in classes, and how this had been well-received by local teaching staff:

"We started to do things a bit different to the classes here…they tend to

be very, not exactly old-fashioned but very traditional. You know, the

teacher standing up and talking and then setting work…we just thought a

few more activities for the students would be good … and it went down

well…some of the other staff seem to be interested…"

[Volunteer, Secondary School, northern Tanzania, Provider B]

The research suggested that a similar transformation of working practices is also developing in the Vietnamese case. Again the intermingling of western volunteers with local workers was contributing to a transformation of practices at work in the host country. For example, many of the volunteers in Vietnam reported how Vietnamese teachers that they were working with were beginning to adopt different uses of the internet in their teaching practices as a consequence of their interaction with the western volunteers:

"One of the things here is, well, Vietnam is really into the internet and computers…I found it surprising at first how much computers and technology were around…but they have quite, kind of unexciting ways of teaching it and that's where we [indicates colleague] *had a few ideas about how to make the way technology was taught a bit more interesting…"*

[University Teaching Assistant volunteer, Ho Chi Minh, Provider B]

Whilst the internet is widely available in Vietnam, it was not seen with the working culture of the host country teachers as a teaching tool. Volunteers also pointed to many other ways in which teaching practices were evolving as a consequence of the exchange experience between western volunteers and the Vietnamese teachers.

Again this is not a one-way exchange, but more an example of knowledge transmission feeding into practice. The argument is not that these low incomes countries were simply learning from 'better' western volunteer workers as the evidence also suggested that young, inexperienced western volunteers learnt a range of skills in relation to work from local teachers in the Tanzanian schools:

"I think it is mutual. I do think staff in the Schools value having the volunteers for the most part and gain from it…maybe that is just in small ways, but you know the contact does produce an exchange of ideas…if

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only having people who know about some of the thing going on in the

British education system…"

[Placement Co-Coordinator, northern Tanzania, Provider A]

However, it does illustrate how the global mobility of these volunteers undertaking work *in situ* in low incomes countries ramifies widely into working practices in those countries.

Third, international volunteering is producing a re-imagining of global space and the ability of the voluntary worker to achieve change in that space. Interview respondents commented at length about how the experience of working in east Africa or south Asia had transformed their views of the world and had exposed them what might be termed a (partial) view from the global South. For example, in this respect they highlighted a greater sense of the proximity of people living in Tanzania as a consequence of air travel and global communications:

"Being here has really changed my view of things in so many ways…it's

hard to describe. It's like your whole worldview has changed. I feel that

when I go home, Moshi is, well, really close in a way that before it

seemed on the other side of the world…"

[Primary School Teaching Assistant volunteer, northern Tanzania,

Provider A]

They had previously felt these unknown places to be distant, inaccessible and far-removed from both their daily lives and the western countries (the UK and Australia) in which they lived. The voluntary work experience (and undeniably the broader experience of living in Africa) thus changed perception of global-scale space and also, equally important, their individual capacity to work outside their home country and to have an impact as a worker in this less developed country. Respondents thus reported that their personal view of the nature and possibility of working overseas had changed enormously and that they were much more likely to consider overseas work (in all forms) in their future careers:

"For me I would definitely work in Africa again…or maybe somewhere else. I would love to go to China, is one place…and I think that will affect what I do later in terms of a job…"
[Teaching Assistant volunteer, Primary School, northern Tanzania, Provider A]

Before I came out here I don't think I would have thought about working overseas, and now I definitely would. It's really changed my ideas…
[NGO volunteer, Hanoi, Vietnam, Provider B]

In that sense, the overseas voluntary work experience represented both an important transformation in the predisposition of these individuals to working abroad

in future, as well as their imaginings of 'work' as an activity and the spatial possibilities around it as a central practice in their lives.

In sum, as with the legal service employees, the nature of what work 'is' for these overseas volunteers is also being transforming by globalization. Whilst not historically unprecedented, overseas volunteering in the countries studied has become a form of social practice that is qualitative distinct from earlier forms. If overseas volunteering in Africa or Asia even thirty years ago represented a period of working in relative isolation in a distant and unconnected place for most westerners (Rockcliffe 2005), then this is no longer the case. The practices and experience of undertaking voluntary work by western volunteers in these developing countries are bound into sets of distanciated relations, organizational networks, flows of ideas information and the physical mobility of workers in ways that make it impossible to understand the nature of this work purely in the context of the specific localities where the volunteering occurs. The 'place' of this work is thus destabilized insofar as it cannot satisfactorily be conceptualized in any simplistic way as being located purely in the global South. This overseas voluntary work is constituted as a practice and experience through global-scale influences that likewise cannot be ignored in any theoretical attempt to understand its rationale, implications or outcomes.

5   CONCLUSIONS

As social and psychological theorists have found (Gambles *et al* 2006; Crompton 2006), work is becoming a central feature of more and more people's lives. In

western societies it has become one of the key criteria by which people define their identity and the work experience is bound into a wide range of life circumstances: relationships, social values, cultural behaviours, and even degrees of contentment (Haslam 2003; Jensen & Westenholz 2004). The globalization of work is therefore long overdue as an object of theoretical scrutiny with regard to globalization. The epistemological approach based around the concept of 'global work' thus represents an attempt to better theorise the transformations in the nature of work that have occurred and are continuing to occur in the context of contemporary globalization. It is no longer adequate to conceptualise work as being located in physical local places, as being undertaken in simple chunks of time, or as a purely social practice unaffected by the materiality of the world. Thus, whilst the two sets of research findings illustrate complex transformations in the nature of work in very different cases, this approach identifies qualitatively similar transformations in work as a practice in the context of growing global interconnectedness. These qualitative shifts in the nature of work, to a greater or lesser extent, are present in all forms of work – whether they are formal or informal, professional or manual, legal or illegal. However, the extent to which they are significant will undoubtedly vary between different economic sectors and forms of work.

Finally, it is worth emphasizing that this argument in no way diminishes the significance of the literature that has examined labour market change and the wider impacts of the processes associated with globalization and the development of the global economy. Rather the 'global work' framework intends to complement and extend the remit of these theoretical arguments. Globalization is profoundly shifting

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the spatial nature of what work is, what practices it is constituted through, how people experience work and the impacts it has on others. Hopefully the epistemological arguments developed in this paper will provide a useful template to begin to understand and theorise these changes, and most importantly, the impacts they are having on economies, livelihoods and life circumstances.

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[inserted here]

Figure 1 Top Twenty UK Law Firms (ranked by fee earning, 2006)

Rank	Firm
1	Eversheds
2	**DLA Piper Rudnick Gray Cary***
3	Clifford Chance
4	Allen & Overy
5	**Freshfields Brukchaus Deringer**
6	Linklaters
7	**Pinsent Masons**
8	**Irwin Mitchell**
9	**Herbert Smith**
10	Lovells
11	Beachcroft Wansbroughs
12	Addleshaw Goodard
13	**Slaughter & May**
14	**CMS Cameron McKenna**
15	**Norton Rose**
16	Shoosmiths
17	**Wragge & Co**
18	Hammonds
19	**Denton Wilde Sapte**
20	**Ashurst**

* bold denotes a firm with respondents in the study

(Source: Legal500.com database)

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